I now turn from situating perversion in the Romantic period within the context of the rise of function in the biological sciences. The growing importance of function made it difficult to conceive of a perverted identity, and this transformation made the absence of the pervert a calculated absence. Thomas Laqueur’s claim that the Romantic period was one in which a two-sex model based on complementarity between the sexes begins to replace a one-sex model of hierarchy, whereby the female was simply an inferior or inverted version of the male, has important implications for this argument. Not only does the instability of sex allows writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson to drive a wedge in between the two ways of thinking about sex and to use this gap to pry apart sexual difference and political inequality, but also the relation between sexual desire and sexed bodies in Romanticism was much more complex than either the gap between acts and identities or modern notions of sexual orientation would have it. Combined, the two models make it difficult for human beings to turn to sex for coherence and intelligible identities and undermine any single stable sexed norm against which one can measure perversion. Personal bodily experience, moreover, resists co-optation into political systems, and this made perversion especially rife for deployment.
The unrationalized coexistence of contradictory models of sex has key consequences for both the Romantic period and the concept of perversion. Under the one-sex model, differences between the sexes are of degree, not kind. Under complementarity, differences are of kind, not degree. That difference hovers between kind and degree suggests that, far from being a given, the meanings based on sexual difference are open to debate. The very presence of a one-sex model mandated skepticism about complementarity. Two, to the extent that two incommensurate sexes are founded upon a one-sexed body, difference is erected upon the ground of similitude. Because the French Revolution made it possible to question any naturalized hierarchies, the one-sex model no longer could deliver hierarchy as nature; indeed, the revolutionary ideal of equality called into question fundamental notions of family organization and relations between the sexes (Offen 50). Whereas the one-sex model used sex to represent gender, the two-sex model enabled sex to become the foundation for gender. In either case, the legacy of the one-sex theory meant that scientists still very commonly bridged the sexes and gender through analogy; the figure of analogy haunts sexual difference even when the sexes are understood as categorically different. Hence, Coleridge frames sexual difference in terms of “opposites & correspondences” (SW 1:286), a framing that explicitly places difference and similitude in dialogue with one another. It is thus not surprising that the Romantics reimagined social relations from the ground up. They had to. The two models of sex do not allow it to reach the critical mass of a stable essence.

It is unclear, moreover, under a model that recognized only one sex what homosexuality would mean. In this view, women were inverted men—men with genitals turned inward as opposed to outward. How does the fact that inversion originates as a way to think about women’s anatomical relation to men complicate the use of inversion as a way to make human sexual desire essentially heterosexual? That is, inversion now usually describes the way in which some forms of sexual deviance are conflated with gender deviance; a lesbian woman desires another because she is really a masculinized female. But if women are thought of as inverted men to begin with, how can one tell whether deviance resides in sex or in gender? Nor is it clear how inversion moved from a normative way of thinking about men and women as one sex to a dominant pathological model for framing homosexuality. Bearing the full legacy of the idea of inversion in mind, it would seem that homosexual inversion was indebted to heterosexual inversion and that the drive to explain sodomy or homosexuality in terms of gender inversion obscures an earlier sexual inversion. Rather than seeing a
great paradigm shift from gender difference in the one-sex model to sexual difference in the two-sex model, we should be alert to how sex and gender work simultaneously to make difference and inferiority open to debate. Because sex and gender are confused from the outset, perversion has considerable leverage as a result of its incoherence.

Finally, the charge of perversion is only as strong as its rhetorical persuasiveness or its ability to manage incoherence. The key here is to mobilize features of identity (a taste for luxury, effeminacy, violations of certain gender norms) to make the charge of perversion stick. Until perversion sticks, acts will not cohere with identity and the idea of orientation becomes difficult to imagine. This incoherence nonetheless could be politically useful insofar as one could manipulate perversion to work for rather than against oneself.

The simultaneous presence of the one-sex and two-sex models further explains the complicated understanding of puberty in the period. In brief, in Romanticism scientists considered that there was only one feminized sex until the moment of puberty, whereas after puberty full sexual differentiation was achieved. One sex became two in puberty as males gained strength and departed from their original feminized bodies: sexual difference unfolds diachronically, and thus both sexes are grounded upon one. Genitals did not stand in for difference in the way they do now, and this meant that biological sex was more elastic and thus could become a ground for liberation. If one sex became two, difference itself became even more vexed. Hence the period’s fascination with a common nervous system, hermaphrodites, and men and women who failed to develop properly. Together, these concerns made it necessary to both question whether difference could be grounded in the body and disrupt essentializing claims of sex and gender.

Although the fairly recent turn to gender in Romantic studies has had a profound impact upon Romantic criticism, we still have few nuanced reevaluations of how biological sex was understood in this period. If sex indeed hovered between essence and representation, it was rife for political deployment. On the one hand, the shift from representation to essence meant that one could challenge representation and question essence; on the other hand, one could turn to biology’s newfound essence to ground political differences in the body. Such a reevaluation will help us to see why sex could become the basis for liberation and why perversions of the sexual appetite could be understood as natural. Two ways of reading sex not only pertain generally, but also within one single body there was a metamorphosis from one sex into two during puberty. This meant
that the materiality of the body and of sex were quite elastic. The body could both endow Romantic idealism with consequence as well as negotiate those consequences within limits.

This point further refutes Arnold Davidson’s claim that sex was exhausted by anatomy before the advent of psychology because such a claim blinds us to the complexities of sex and science in the Romantic period. That eighteenth-century physicians increasingly understood sex and its relation to the nerves and the nervous system, the organs of pleasure, made it impossible to conceive of sex as being exhausted by anatomy, because sexuality now encompassed the entire essentially nervous body, which in turn, under William Cullen’s nosology, encompassed “almost the whole of the diseases of the human body” (1786 3:121). By making the basis for all diseases nervous disorders, Cullen and his followers “were, in effect, suspending judgment about their origins” (Oppenheim 8) because an anatomical basis for disease in the nerves had not yet been located. Thomas Trotter, the famous nerve doctor, boasted that “nothing could be discovered by the knife” (194). Nonetheless, his entire framework for understanding disease was grounded in the organs of pleasure. The brain further made anatomy seemingly inexhaustible; not even Gall and Spurzheim’s new midline brain dissection techniques could reveal all of the brain’s depths. The claim that sex could be exhausted by anatomy is belied by anatomy’s ability to function as a black box; because one knew only the output but not the workings of the body, one could ground claims within a body without having to specify how exactly it worked.6

The fact that there was only one feminized sex before puberty and two complementary sexes afterward means that biological sex was fluid, developmental, and that anatomy itself was not a destiny but a process. Because puberty reminded the Romantics of the gap between anatomical part and desire, desire could neither be limited to the genitals nor be intrinsically heterosexual. After all, the presence of genitalia could not predict object choice. The shift from one sex to two during puberty meant that one could account for same-sex desire as a form of natural desire because during the window of puberty, one feminized male could certainly be attracted to or by another. Puberty allows for a universalizing narrative about perverse desires, rendering perversity proximate to the norm, even as it pathologizes that desire. Homophobia thereby acquires enormous leverage since sameness as well as difference lurks within. At the same time, those who never developed heterosexual desire could be explained in terms of arrested development, immaturity. This accounts for the proximity of effeminacy to sodomy in this period: all males begin as effeminate males and thus have
sodomitic potential. Sodomy and effeminacy are really sexual states that are supposed to remain suspended between childhood and adulthood, but it was the perversity of nature herself that was so traumatic for British medicine: the problem was that, because sex was a process and because everyone went through puberty, everyone was vulnerable to missteps on the way to heterosexuality. The Romantics can also remind us of the steep price we have paid to have sex subsume existence. As Arnold Davidson puts it, post-1869, existence has become “sexistence.” That is, we have forgotten how sex is a complex biological process, one that resists the neat binary opposition between male and female. That women are the original inverts, too, suggests that homosexuality and heterosexuality have more common ground than usually acknowledged.

But there is more to this story. Like Jonathan Dollimore, I want to recover the lost histories of subversion within perversion. The inextricability of perversion from nature meant that perversion was central to the maintenance of culture; moreover, because perversion—“turning the wrong way” (OED)—requires one stable ground of nature against which to measure the wrongness of the turn and because competing models of understanding sex meant that there was no such stability, perversion and political subversion were inseparable. Studying Romanticism through the lens of perversion, then, allows us to grasp the politics of Romanticism, how Romantic artists went after the nature of biological sex itself, not just culture. They could do so because sexual complementarity was open to debate, particularly because neurology sought to heal the Cartesian divide between mind and body and all bodies made the transition from one to two sexes. To put the case more forcefully, I argue that, without paying attention to the various perversions within the period, one cannot truly grasp the politics of Romanticism since writers such as Robinson, Blake, and the Shelleys knew that the battle had to be fought on the slippery ground of nature. Only our need to separate nature and culture so that one can be the enemy of the other has kept apart the common histories of perversion—turning the wrong way—and of subversion—turning upside down. I want, by contrast, to value both kinds of turning and to insist upon the etymological and historical connections between the two. Such revaluing of perversion will help restore a more radical Romanticism to our view.

The Nervous Body and Sexual Difference

The Romantic period was dominated by a neurological understanding of the body. Neurology replaced a vascular approach to the body, one solidified by William Harvey’s work on the circulation of the blood: Harvey’s Romantic
legacy is seen in the theory that the nerves were hollow and therefore worked like blood vessels, circulating fluids or animal spirits. This essentially neurolog-
cal body, a body which stressed sympathy and consent between an increasingly vast and intricate system of neural networks, offered the possibility of bridging the Cartesian divide between mind and body, and connection potentially had enormous positive implications for gender. It also offered a republican model of body politics insofar as the nerves lack any clear unitary command center. No royalty needed apply. Even the brain was broken into separate organs. At very least, with its mind-body reciprocity, neurology undermined any absolute gap between male and female because men and women alike had both minds and bodies. Gall, we recall, considered sex a difference of degree, not kind. Without an absolute gap, the idea of complementarity between the sexes threatened to become a perverse fiction.

Whereas Thomas Laqueur rushes to connect neurology with a newly discov-
ered difference between men’s and women’s genitals (MS 157), I explore the positive implications of neurology for gender because this science at least initially suggested that the differences between men and women—different genitals aside—were essentially differences of degree, not kind. That nervous diseases began as a sign of class distinction rather than as a mode of gender differentiation reminds us why neurology was and could be exploited for feminist causes. Although we tend to think of genital difference as an insurmountable differ-
ence, the Romantic period did not view it as such because it relied much more heavily on what we would call secondary sexual differentiation to police the borders between the sexes. Common ground between the sexes or sex meant that sexual equality could take on a life of its own.

It is because neurology had the potential to emphasize an essential similarity of men and women that so many doctors and scientists would later start to look for and emphasize differences. Difference grows out of commonness. Indeed, alienists themselves eventually began to locate female weakness in the lack of tonic vigor or delicacy in women’s nerves, or in the fact that women menstru-
ated and therefore were weakened by the loss of blood. Furthermore, craniolo-
gists later tried to prove that women had smaller brains. Yet, because so many earlier medical writers on nerves linked weakened nerves to such ubiquitous causes as urbanization, weather, climate, a sedentary lifestyle, heightened sensibility, a taste for luxuries, an addiction to pleasure, and too much thinking, many of the gendered distinctions between male and female nervous systems were the product of culture, not nature, and this meant that later gendered distinc-
tions could be undone.9 Both Wollstonecraft and Robinson were alert to
how urbanization, luxury, and a sedentary lifestyle could disfigure the nervous systems of men and women alike.

Neurology’s potential to break down and not reify gender distinctions can be seen even in works that ostensibly support them. Peter Logan’s perceptive comment that “although the predisposition [to nervous diseases] is hidden, those conditions that create it are accessible to the physician” (22) is helpful to understanding why. Although predispositions can be grounded in nature, the problem is that the nerves are not yet localizable anatomical signs of disease: the differences between diseased nerves and healthy ones were invisible. For this reason, physicians of the time emphasize conditions, hoping that visible conditions can substitute for the body’s invisible nervous ground. To emphasize conditions, of course, is to make culture the ground of biology, even if one admits some connection between condition and predisposition. Once again, the ontology of perversion hovers between nature and culture, not to mention between male and female, and paying attention to it helps identify the gaps between them. These gaps could be and were exploited to further the cause of equality, even gender equality. Logan underestimates the implications of the fact that Trotter’s predispositions are both hereditary and acquired. If both men and women acquire the disease, women are not essentially the only sex predisposed to disease.

Because we now tend simply to accept the feminization of nervous diseases, I will now offer numerous examples to make my case that nerves did not necessarily contribute to the idea of sexual complementarity. George Cheyne’s *English Malady* ([1784] first published in 1733) aligned nervous diseases with England’s wealth and trade, which gave the English an unfortunate taste for “French cookery” and “Eastern pickles and sauces” (51). Neither sex was immune to luxury, and all the English of a certain class were predisposed to nervous diseases. Cheyne shrewdly claimed that the only classes he could not reach were the “unthinking” and the “voluptuous” (xii). With the exception of diseases of men of genius and men of gluttony, John Hill’s *The Construction of the Nerves, and Causes of Nervous Disorders* (1758) allows nerves to speak to a common humanity that transcends gender. That nervous diseases “attended with an over exquisite sensibility” (37) do not yet refer to women, points to the fact that neurologists were not necessary hell-bent on refining sexual difference. The famous Swiss doctor Samuel Tissot, moreover, emphasized in his *Three Essays* (1773) that all people of rank were disposed to nervous disorders. Even when he discussed women’s nerves specifically, he placed equal emphasis on the social
and biological causes of women’s nervous illnesses. On the one hand, miscarriages, difficult labors, and the overflow of milk weakened women’s nerves. On the other hand, “high life” explained the violent, irregular, and “white menstruations” of the upper classes (57). Tissot implies that, at least until pregnancy, there is simply no biological basis for women’s essential nervousness and that luxury had a larger role in shaping the nerves than did gender.

Like Cheyne and Tissot, the Methodist preacher John Wesley singled out neither gender in his *Primitive Physic* (1820), recommending the medical use of electricity, good air, thyme tea, a diet sparing of vegetables, and cold bathing as remedies for nervous diseases (61). And T. M. Caton, surgeon, argued in 1815 that even women’s “hysterical diseases” were “attributable to their abstraction from active pursuits [rather] than [to] any organic delicacy of structure” (25). Although Caton does accept the necessary restriction upon the range of women’s actions (38), he laments the fact that the absence of activity in women leads their minds to “doubt [their] own resources, [and] becom[e] the slave of every imaginary phantom that moves around it” (38), so he attributes hysteria not to any “organic delicacy of structure” but to cultural notions that make it necessary for women to be inactive. Grounded in neither a wandering uterus nor in the nerves themselves, hysteria has become a disease of acculturation, and the danger is that both sexes might fall victim to it. In fact, men had their own special brand of hysteria, hypochondria.

A close look at works on nervous disease like Tissot’s or Caton’s reminds us that the connections between weak nerves and femininity are more tenuous and more complex than we tend to remember. William Cullen, an extremely influential medical teacher of the period, in his *Treatise of the Materia Medica* (1789), also argued that strength of body depends on the state of the nervous system (1:76) and that this force depends upon the “force with which the energy of the brain can be exerted” (1:77). Cullen here anchors strength in something as tenuously gendered as the force of brain energy. In 1788, Joseph Johnson published John Brown’s *Elements of Medicine*, a work which became the talk of the town (Todd 131). *Elements of Medicine* sought to synergize body and mind and ascribed debility to a sedentary middle-class lifestyle, not to women’s nerves (Todd 131–32). In 1796, Sayer Walker published *A Treatise on Nervous Diseases*, in which he, on the one hand, claimed that women’s delicacy and habits made them especially vulnerable to nervous diseases (91). On the other hand, “those of the other sex, who approach the nearest to the temperament of females, are the most liable to them [nervous diseases],” thus allowing the nerves to blur the
lines between sexual difference rather than refine them (92). If “other sex” walls one sex off from the other, males “with female temperaments” blurs the categories. More to the point, Walker rehearses the medical commonplace that menstruation caused nervousness only to reverse cause and effect. He argues, by contrast, that irregular menstruation is the effect of nervousness, not its cause, and this important reversal makes gender ancillary to nervous diseases rather than an explanation for it. He then proceeds to connect nervous diseases with both sexes and with every class of life. “These diseases,” he writes, “are not the exclusive evil of the rich: they visit the cottage as well as the mansion” (96). Who could blame him? And why should a medical man restrict his pool of patients to only one sex or class?

Some doubt concerning the validity of complementarity crops up even in Trotter’s View of the Nervous Temperament (1807), a work usually construed as hardening differences. Trotter is one of the authors Percy Shelley requests Thomas Hookham to send (Ruston 88). Although Peter Logan insists that in Trotter “the nervous temperament is thus indivisible from the female body” (24), Trotter’s complicated etiology of nervousness—heredity, poor air, a lack of exercise, rich food, inappropriate clothing [sic], novel reading, a passion for drugs, passions of mind, climate, medicine, and a general effeminacy of custom (151)—unravels the already tenuous connections between the female body and this disease. Thus, Trotter lists “literary men” and “men of business” as the top two classes of urban inhabitants who will likely fall prey to nervous illness (37), whereas the female sex is confined to the seventh and last class. And while Logan claims that the “nervous temperament forms a constituent part of Trotter’s gender construct” because of women’s more delicate nerves (24), the fact that Trotter dwells on the societal conditions that make men and women delicate blurs the line between predisposition and condition. Thus, women’s essential nervousness, not to mention Logan’s claim that they are given narratives where the bodies of healthy men are not, seem like fictions. True, Trotter does state that the female body is “furnished by nature with peculiar delicacy and feeling” (51) and that “the diseases of which we now treat are in a manner the inheritance of the fair sex” (51–52). But his phrase “in a manner” points to how “inheritance” is really a figure of speech, not a biological marker. His emphasis throughout on environment threatens to overwhelm any innate predisposition. Logan further presumes a necessary gap between male and female bodies—female bodies can only constitute nervous disease to the extent that male bodies and female bodies can be separated—a gap that nervousness forecloses with its emphasis upon
“degrees of delicacy” (Trotter 49) as opposed to kinds. With the rise of nervous diseases came a resurgence of the one-sex model.

Trotter would later explicitly describe some predispositions as hereditary and others as acquired (166–75). The predispositions of “literary men” certainly show these confusions, confusions that once again undermine any essential connection between women’s bodies and nervousness. “Literary men’s” bodies constitute disease as much as women’s bodies. Because of sedentary lives, literary men’s lungs lose their vigor. Trotter thereby sought to explain why literary men were predisposed for consumption (38). He elaborates, “All men who possess genius, and those mental qualifications which prompt them to literary attainments and pursuits are endued by nature with more than the usual sensibility of the nervous system” (39). If some men have greater sensibility, why must women have sole purchase on delicacy and nervous weakness? Hence, he extends the category “literary men” to include “all the learned professions; and all those who cultivate the fine arts” (40). That Trotter goes after lower-class wet nurses who infect others with nervous weakness through their milk (96, 172–74) supports Logan’s argument that nervous temperament was a female contagion. At the same time, however, it raises the issue of class as contagion. “Few mothers, among the decent orders of women, can be supposed to leave their offspring without regret” (95), he admonishes. Due to the general decline of physical labor, everyone was open to nervous disease. Because men were thought to be able to lose their manhood through excessive devotion to pleasure, or “unlawful pleasure,” and because the specter of male impotence loomed large in this period, even healthy men had narratives to tell.11 When Trotter mentions that “persons returned from the colonies . . . bring with them to Britain, indelible marks of the effect of the [hot] climates they have lived in” (48), he makes colonization as well potentially a constitutive factor in nervous disease.

Especially because of its emphasis on sympathy and consent, neurology had the potential to heal the rift between body and mind—a rift that metonymically rehearses the differences between the sexes—and writers such as Wollstonecraft and Robinson took advantage of this potential. Tissot insisted that “so close is the connection between mind and body, that we cannot well conceive the operations of the one independent of some correspondence with the other” (Essay 2, 13). In his Nervous System of the Human Body, the influential neurologist Charles Bell emphasized that “[bodily] sensation and [mental] volition are combined in every action of the frame” and that these actions are “conjoined” and “in union” (239). If the body could not be sundered from the mind, how could the mind be
gendered as masculine and the body remain feminine? Hence, Mary Robinson pointedly asks, “Is woman not a human being, gifted with all the feelings that inhabit the bosom of man? Has not woman affections, susceptibility, fortitude, and an acute sense of injuries received?” (8). Of course, the very integration of mind and body had its price: as Alan Richardson argues, integration could undermine the stability of the self, which changed with changes in the body and its brain (2001 22).

This fundamentally neurological understanding of the body, one that insisted upon a mind/brain reciprocity, helps explain how both Mary Wollstonecraft in the *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Mary Robinson in *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799) could redefine strength from mere physical strength to a kind of strength that was both bodily and mental.12 Wollstonecraft asked whether men really did have both superior mental and bodily strength.13 Because superior masculine bodily strength was the very basis for the social contract, the stakes of this redefinition were the ground of patriarchy itself. By redefining the constitution of the female body in terms of intelligence, she seeks to redefine the British Constitution, which is “founded on the nature of man” (92). Wollstonecraft’s pun on “constitution” reminds us that the English have no written document even as it makes the political stakes of her notions of the female nervous body clear. If one constitution is the ground for the other, female mental strength demands full political participation, full citizenship.

Whereas feminist critics like Janet Todd have argued that Wollstonecraft underestimated the power of complementarity and “physical difference” (186), I argue that she contested the ground of physical difference and that she did so partly because neurology had the potential to undermine sexual difference. Perversion requires a stable grounding of nature and thus, unsurprisingly, sexologists would later confine sexual desire to identity. More to the point, because complementarity was itself in flux in the period, Wollstonecraft cannot logically be seen as “underestimating” it. She likely was impressed by Brown’s work (Todd 132) because it undermined sexual complementarity. Neurology so cemented the connectedness of body and mind that Wollstonecraft’s redefinition of strength seems perfectly logical. Wollstonecraft in fact reminded her readers of the “nerveless limbs” of royalty (96), precisely to delegitimize their right to rule. In much the same way as pleasure made kings effeminate, society acculturates women to be weak and slaves to pleasure. Wollstonecraft thus takes advantage of the nascent illegitimacy of royal absolute authority to bolster her arguments against female subordination. As society had wrongly given too much
power to royalty and made them weak, it now subjects women, making them useless. Her insistent parallel between the plight of women and royalty further implies that just as royalty must “return to nature and equality” (103), so too must women be made equal.

Not wanting to appear to be arguing for the “invert[ed] order of things” (109), Wollstonecraft grants that “from the constitution of their bodies, men seemed to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue” (109). She looks as if she accepts as fact that “nature has given women a weaker frame than man” (112). “Virtue,” with its etymological links to manly strength, grounds itself in nerves. Her choice of “seems,” however, hints that appearances aside, Wollstonecraft wants to redefine the ground of difference. That “virtue” had already begun to slide into a female province of morality begins to contest the connections of gender to the sexed body. So too does her choice of “degree,” which insinuates the falsity of complementarity. She again emphasizes “seems” when she claims, “I will allow that bodily strength seems to give man a natural superiority over woman; and this is the only solid basis on which the superiority of the sex can be built” (124). To the extent that solidity is based on appearance, male strength becomes a Lacanian lack.

If Wollstonecraft gives with one hand, she takes away with the other. Her seeming concession to superior masculine physical strength is undermined by the fact that she wonders what will happen to women’s bodies if they are permitted exercise. The “most perfect education,” Wollstonecraft opines, “is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart” (103). More to the point, she urges that mothers and wives be “allowed [their] constitution[s] to retain [their] natural strength” and “her nerves a healthy tone” (112). By underscoring a causal connection between mental weakness and bodily weakness—“dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind” (130)—she insinuates that if women are mentally inferior, they were made so by men. Immediately following her alleged concession to superior male physical strength, she writes, “but I still insist that not only the virtue but the knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral but rational creatures, ought to endeavour to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men” (124). Her insistence that virtue and knowledge “should be the same in nature” begins to redefine sexual difference in terms of degree, not kind. Because complementarity demanded that sexual difference be a difference of kind and not degree, this redefinition must be seen as a challenge to the idea of complementarity, not an underestima-
tion of it. To wit, she insists on human virtues and introduces the category of knowledge precisely to suggest that virtue is epistemological not ontological. Thus, she lumps together soldiers and women so that she can ask, “Where is then the sexual difference, when the education has been the same” (105)? The only difference she can “discern” stems from the greater liberty afforded to soldiers (106).

Her concession seems even less of one when she speculates “how much superior mental is to bodily strength” (133). She also wonders, “Should it be proved that woman is naturally weaker than man” (127). She not only doubts his superior physical strength, but also never concedes superior masculine mental strength. Quite the contrary; in fact, she lambastes men for denying women the possibility of “genius and judgment” (141–42).

Once she has unsexed strength, she sets her sights against the gendering of spirit itself as masculine: “I have been led to imagine that the few extraordinary women who have rushed in eccentrical directions out of the orbit prescribed to their sex, were male spirits, confined by mistake in female frames” (119). “Spirit” here obliquely refers to the animal spirits, the agents of nervous action. Where some neurologists had emphasized an essentially spermatic economy, whereby there was a homology between the penis and brain, Wollstonecraft sunders any natural or necessary connection between spirit, intellect, and masculinity. Her astronomical metaphor reminds us that “eccentric” can only be gauged by where one locates the proper center. (The OED highlights the fact that eccentricity shifts as Ptolemaic gives way to Copernican astronomy.) Moreover, her use of “prescribed” hints at her skepticism at this outdated astronomical view of the world where men are the center and women must orbit around them. This implication is made more explicit when she points out that men fail to see “intellectual beauty” in women, because they want to gratify their libidinal appetites (134). Perhaps Percy Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” has its origins in Wollstonecraft, his mother-in-law, a source that enables him to refute Plato’s claim that only men can embody intellectual beauty. Not lost on Wollstonecraft is the fact that male lasciviousness and devotion to pleasure actually weakens them physically, a theory that she would have gleaned from nerve doctors of the time. Adding insult to injury, where fathers have the luxury of “forgetting” the “purpose for which . . . the call of appetite was implanted” (6), women have no such luxury. Nonetheless, whatever superior strength men may have had is now merely an illusion: “thanks to debauchery, [men are] scarcely men in their outward form” (104). Women, by contrast, are “more chaste than
men” (231), so they will not be so disfigured. Although “more chaste” would seem to push Wollstonecraft into sexual complementarity, it is a statement of difference in terms of degree rather than kind.

Wollstonecraft’s enemy is not the nervous body, but rather the cultural construction of women’s bodies in terms of nervous sensibility. For Wollstonecraft, female nerves are not ontologically different than men’s. In fact, she makes it clear that, “whilst boys frolic in the open air, women are made sedentary and this “weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves” (128). She implores that women be allowed to maintain their nerves in a healthy tone (112). Simply changing the ways in which girls are raised will begin to change any seemingly inherent differences of sex. Hence, women do not have weaker nerves; rather, their nerves are insistently “enervated” by a lack of exercise, pleasure (156), luxury and sloth (131), education (219), voluptuousness (249), and false notions of modesty and confinement (105), and female sensibility. “Wealth enervates men” too, she reminds us (253). When she refers to the “enervating indulgences” of luxury (130), she demonstrates that she has absorbed the teachings of such nerve experts as Brown and Tissot. Her preference for the verbal form—enervate—rather than the noun, nerves, deftly transforms any biological ground into cultural process. As she writes, “That woman is naturally weak or degraded by circumstances,” her “or” becomes the pivot around which biology slides into culture (141; emphasis mine). And hence she repeatedly unhooks sensibility from any biological basis and makes it clear what men have to gain from encouraging sensibility as women’s highest ambition. As she says about Dr. Gregory’s advice to daughters, “it is not natural; but arises . . . from a love of power” (111). Her skepticism about the biological bases of feminine sensibility is all the more remarkable because she herself was subject to nervous spasms, and as a governess, saw her employer’s physician to treat them (see Todd 100). Yet perhaps this skepticism is what would lead her to implore that “women might certainly study the art of healing and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwi[ves]” (261).

In the end, Wollstonecraft is not content to harness the nerves in order to undermine the notion of sexual complementarity. She will settle for nothing less than overturning what Rousseau called the “perverseness and ill nature of women” (cited in VRW 180), arguing implicitly that male encouragement of female sensibility is the true origin of the perverse. Where Rousseau means to pathologize an unobliging wife by noting her “perverseness,” the author of the Vindications insists that it is Rousseau who has “debauched his imagination” (189). His licentiousness has made him the pervert, an effeminate male. “Nature never
dictated such insincerity,” she wryly retorts. Hence, she remarks that “the patient endurance of injustice” will result in the “inability to judge right from wrong” (180). Having dispatched Rousseau, and having also insinuated that heterosexual passion is “corrupt beyond recovery,” Wollstonecraft takes on the “perversity of self love” of parental affection (264), maintaining that such affection is really an excuse for tyranny. But perhaps her real coup de grace occurs when she comments that an “unhappy marriage is often very advantageous to a family, and that the neglected wife is, in general, the best mother” (114). At once undermining the sacredness of the middle-class family and the idea that motherhood is compatible with being a wife, Wollstonecraft places adulterous sex right in the heart of the middle-class family. She also blames male licentiousness for it and then perversely insists that it makes women better mothers.

Wollstonecraft considers the extent to which motherhood can be compatible with being a wife, and this line of questioning has potentially devastating implications for normative notions of the family and the denial of women’s political citizenship. Both roles are based on biological sex, yet, whereas wifehood could be and was used to deny women citizenship, motherhood “offered an incontrovertible basis for claiming the right to intervene in public affairs” (Offen 60). This split between women’s supposed natural roles revealed an incoherence in notions of sex; this incoherence was starting to be addressed in France during the early years of the Revolution, when unwed mothers were no longer to be shamed and divorce was to be easily and sensibly arranged (Tomalin 168). It is therefore not surprising that Wollstonecraft splits the two roles, insisting instead that friendship between the sexes provides a firmer basis for societal happiness. Wollstonecraft’s reading of parental love as tyranny further threatens the norm with the taint of the perverse. In the same way she calls attention to how one cannot gauge eccentricity without thinking about what counts as the center, Wollstonecraft takes advantage of the shifting ground of nature to reorient perversion/normalcy so that men are using sensibility to pervert women into their objects of lust. Her tendency to triangulate desire between two women and one man in her novels, moreover, allows her to elevate “purposive, kindred affection between two mothers” over the crude purpose of reproduction (Johnson “Radical Maternity” 170). When she lists female geniuses who have had a masculine education and includes such women as Sappho, famous for loving other women, along with Madame d’Eon, a male-to-female transvestite (VRW 172), we can see more fully how she equates genius with sexual and gender de-
viance (perversion) and thereby argues that one must contest societal notions of sex and gender when they operate to the detriment of women.\textsuperscript{20}

In much the same way as her mother sought to undermine the legitimacy of patriarchy through the nerves, Mary Shelley shows in \textit{Frankenstein} that, claims to superior male strength aside, Victor not only succumbs to nervous disease, but also uses his newfound victimhood to excuse his inaction. Just as the nerve doctor Thomas Trotter predicted, Victor begins to suffer from nervousness the moment he concentrates on thought, the discovery of the animating principle of life. “Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree; <a disease that I regretted the more because I hitherto had enjoyed most excellent health, and had always boasted of my firmness of nerves.>” (Rieger 51). Too much focus on a single pursuit leads Frankenstein to lose all other “soul or sensation” (50), so much so that once firm and manly nerves soften into girlishness. “I became as timid as a love-sick girl” (51), Victor confesses. When confined to a Scottish hut so that he can make a female monster, Victor again becomes “nervous” (162). Nervous fevers strip his powers of invention, activity, and even language, reducing Victor to victim. He sees himself in terms of a conventional passive and silent woman. Fear that he will be perceived as mad or hysterical enables him to justify doing nothing, as when he explains his silence at the trial of Justine. On seeing Elizabeth’s lifeless body, he faints (193). Nervous sensibility not only feminizes men, but also turns what sensitivity they have completely inward as when Victor hears the monster’s threat that he will be with him on his wedding night. Despite the monster’s pattern to the contrary, Victor interprets this to mean a threat to his own life. Even worse, he sends Elizabeth to bed and, ultimately, to her death because he imagines the future impact that his combat with the monster will have on her (192).

Unlike Victor who “wishe[s] to fly from reflection” (64), Shelley herself turned to “literary labor and the improvement of my mind,” as a cure from nervous depression. Thinking was not the cause of her disease but rather its incipient cure (\textit{Journals} 431). And although Victor sees himself as a girl, Shelley insists that the girls in the novel are far more capable than Victor. Whereas he is rendered mute at Justine’s trial, Justine offers what defense she can of herself. And whereas Victor sheds tears at the prospect of his own death, Elizabeth’s last thoughts are about him. “What is it that agitates you, my dear Victor?” she inquires (192).

Like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, Mary Robinson too concedes that “in some instances, but not always,” women are inferior in “corporeal
strength” (17). Indeed, Robinson invokes the “genius” of Wollstonecraft in her opening pages (2). Also like Wollstonecraft, Robinson refuses to cede any superiority of mental strength because “in activity of mind, she is his equal” (17). If the former insisted that the mind has no sex, the latter argued that the “immortality of the soul springs from causes that are not merely sexual” (15). Alluding to the common nervous system in both sexes, Robinson points to “a resisting nerve in the heart of both man and woman, which repels compulsion” (70). It is this “resisting nerve” linking body and mind that “will establish her claims to the participation of power, mentally and corporeally” (2). Moreover, it is “custom” that has “decreed her passive,” not nature (8).

Warning, however, that one cannot “pretend to estimate mental by corporeal powers,” Robinson argues that “if strength or weakness are not allowed to originate in the faculty of thought, Charles Fox, or William Pitt, labouring under the debilitating ravages of a fever, is a weaker animal than the thrice-essenced poppinjay” (54). Robinson could not have chosen better examples: Fox was known as a libertine and thus was—and Tissot, Cullen, Brown, and Wollstonecraft among others would insist—weakened by his love of pleasure, and Pitt, because “he never married or had affairs,” was considered by many to be a sodomite (A. Clark Scandal 72). Her choice of “poppinjay”—uniting “poppin,” a word that refers to a pretty little woman or doll, and “jay,” which can suggest a “showy or flashy woman” (OED)—thus twice insinuates that, fever or no fever, Fox and Pitt, are really the effeminate “shadows of mankind.” Noteworthy too is the fact that Robinson transforms the noun “essence” into an adjectival verb, a syntactical disfiguration that mirrors their sexual disfiguration. That the “Lord of the Creation” was now whittled down to a “puny frame” because of luxury enables her to mock the necessary obedience of women to men, who were now mere “shadows of mankind who exhibit the effeminacy of women” (17–18). As did Wollstonecraft, Robinson recognizes that nervous debility worked against men and the fact that both the manly libertine and the effeminate sodomite were now really only shadows meant that male strength was a chimera. How could there be real male strength if the gamut from the gallant Fox to the sodomitic Pitt led to the same puniness? Robinson’s ability to collapse gallantry—conspicuous male heterosexuality effeminized by pleasure—with sodomy was a legacy of a one-sex model that envisioned women as an inferior version of a man.

Yet Robinson will have her cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, she uses a common nervous body to undermine complementarity from within. She thus
asks if it is just that a woman strong in “all the powers of the intellect” must be the “obedient slave” of a weaker man (4). This slavery means that she will be “perverted, and debased, by such a help-mate” (4). For Robinson and Wollstonecraft, the seemingly natural argument of woman’s weakness was the true perversion of nature, since it valued physical over mental strength, and since it altered women’s very bodies for the worse. She also asks whether vice can have a sex (10), only to reply that, “till the passions of the mind in man and woman are separate and distinct, till the sex of vital animation, denominated soul, be ascertained, on what pretext is woman deprived of those amusements which man is permitted to enjoy?” (10). Here she insists that the nervous body has no sex insofar as the nerves are the seat of vital animation, and the passions of the mind must be connected to the body by that common nervous system.

On the other hand, Robinson ascribes to women a superior sensibility: “she is by nature organized to feel every wrong more” (8). And when Robinson insists that “the passions of men originate in sensuality; those of women, in sentiment: man loves corporeally, women mentally: which is the nobler creature?” (10), she thereby endows men with sex (their sexual desire does not transcend mere bodily desire or anatomy) and women with sexuality (sex as personality and taste, and therefore part of the mind). Given neurology’s emphasis on the reciprocity between body and mind, she implies that men are perverting sex by limiting its influence to the body.

Whereas Wollstonecraft tries to level the distinctions between men and women, pointing out that sensibility falsely makes women into the complement of the man, Robinson suggests that women have a kind of fortitude that men will never have. She argues, as we have seen, that while men are unsexed by luxury, “education cannot unsex a woman” (55). And she displays her own fortitude when she makes Madame Du Barry and Marie Antoinette heroes for their “Spartan fortitude,” “genuine strength of soul,” and “sublime effort of heroism” (27). Refuting Burke’s rendering of Marie Antoinette into a victim of French revolutionary violence—and thus the poster girl for the return of male chivalry—Robinson urges instead that we “let the strength of her mind, [and] the intrepidity of her soul, put to shame the vaunted superiority of man” (27). Robinson’s concluding list of “British Female Literary Characters Living in the Eighteenth Century” made it clear that women artists like Macaulay, More, Hays, painter in miniatures, Cosway, and the sculptor Damer were gaining considerable strength: with it, she hoped to “silence the tongue of prejudice” and to “excite emulation” (96).
Wandering Testicles: Castration, Eunuchs, and the Descent of the Testicle

I have highlighted how neurology could be used to further feminist causes because it potentially undermined the ground of sexual complementarity even from within. This undermining of complementarity worked insofar as it could persuade readers that sensibility was itself a perversion of nature because it emphasized differences between men and women rather than a common ground. I now turn to the enormous medical fascination with castration, eunuchs, and the descent of the testicle. I do so because they too paradoxically chip away at the notion of absolute difference between two incommensurate sexes by showing bodily sex to be either unstable or a mobile essence. This mobility allowed perversion to be in the eye of the beholder. In the Romantic period, it was not so much the wandering uterus that was the object of medical attention (the wandering uterus was no longer understood to be the given ground of hysteria), but it was the wandering testicle. In addition, the popular medical belief that unused sperm was absorbed back into the body and was necessary to maintain the outward signs of masculinity (beard, strength) meant that sex itself was far from a stable essence: the problem was that men especially could lose their sex. Far from being a fixed essence, then, sex could be harnessed to liberating and repressive ends.

Surgery manuals in the Romantic period regularly described the operation of castration, implying that castration was quite common. The fact that castration was sometimes applicable to both men and women further indicates the lasting power of the one-sex model, even as castration itself returned men to their original feminized bodies. Coleridge, for instance, in his review of two books on uterine disorders casually mentions “the castration of women,” meaning the extirpation of their ovaries, but he crossed out this phrase, cloaking it in Latin: de feminis castratis (Shorter Works 2:880). For the removal of the ovaries to be considered castration, the ovaries have to be thought of as female stones, or testicles.25 Whereas the doctor he was reviewing thought it immoral to extirpate the female womb even if it was cancerous, Coleridge was in favor of this operation if it could save the life of the woman. The prevalence of castration perhaps then helps explain how sex could be considered a mobile essence, how anatomy could not fully explain sex.

Samuel Sharpe devotes a chapter of his Treatise on the Operations of Surgery (1769) to castration, describing it as “one of the most melancholy Operations in the Practice of Surgery” (51). Sharpe’s exact language is echoed in the 1771 En-
*cyclopedia Britannica* entry under “Surgery.” Sharpe sought to restrict the operation of castration, noting that, “although others think it is a necessary operation for Hydrocele, Abcess of the Testis, and Sarcocele,” “it is absolutely improper to perform the operation for those diseases” (s.v. Surgery 3:655). Surgeon to the King and the most eminent one of his time, Astley Cooper likewise admitted that a “multitude of testes have been unnecessarily and precipitately removed” (*Observations on the Structure and Diseases of the Testis* 5). John Hunter in 1784–85 opened his surgical lectures by informing his students that he had watched a man die from castration (National Library of Medicine MS 1:3). In his published writings, Hunter comments that the testicles “are so often concerned in some of the most important diseases and operations of surgery” (*Observations* 14). Cooper agreed, urging his students to learn the anatomy of the male organs “more so than any other part of the body” because “nine tenths of surgical diseases we meet with, are in the Male Organs of Generation” (Wellcome Library MS 7096, 6). Women, by contrast, “sometimes render themselves the subjects of lithotomy from perverse and unnatural propensities. I have known a woman put a pebble into the meatus urinanus” (*Lectures* 2:299). One might ask why Cooper doesn’t explain male diseases in terms of perverse propensities, especially since he knew that venereal disease was a major cause of testicular diseases. Henry Cline, appointed lecturer in anatomy at St. Thomas’s Hospital in London in 1781 and connected through John Thelwall to a radical Paris medical circle (Almeida 6), devoted almost 10 percent of his lectures on surgery to castration, noting that “the diseases of the Testes are very various” (National Library of Medicine MS B400, n.p.). Benjamin Gooch, moreover, describes six cases of castration in his *Chirurgical Lectures* and mentions that cases of castration of chimney sweeps are frequent in London (2:236). The *New Medical Dictionary* quotes a doctor saying that out of a hundred patients, only three survive three years after surgery. Buffon, in fact, argued that castration could be accomplished without surgery, using only hot water and various plant concoctions, though he did not specify which (*HN* 2:483). Buffon did not think castration was terribly dangerous.

Medical writers of the period were fascinated by eunuchs, castrati, partly because they had the potential to reveal the secrets of biological sex, the role that the testicles and ovaries play in secondary sexual differentiation. Castrati in the Romantic period proved that men and women were one sex, since males deprived of testicles became feminized. In a section of his *Essays and Observations on Natural History* entitled “Of the effects that Castration and Spaying have
on Animals,” John Hunter wrote, “The testes in the male and ovaria in the female . . . influence the whole body and also the mind” (235). Males deprived of testicles when young not only grow like females, but in fact “exceed her in many particulars. . . . And if the male has arrived at full age before the testes are removed, he remains nearly in that state, and does not fall back into the female [state or form]” (235). Two points are of interest here. First, what does it mean that castrated men can exceed the female? It is as if testicles transform the essentially feminine human body into masculinity: how else to explain how castrated males can become more female than females? Second, Hunter expects castrated males to fall back into the “female state”: falling back reminds us of a reversion to a single feminized sex. They don’t so long as they were past puberty when castrated. Hunter elaborates, “In the human species the shape of the whole body is altered, or rather takes another form, when the male is deprived of the testes he becomes larger in body; a greater quantity of fat is spread over the surface of the body under the skin. The muscles do not swell so much, which produces a softness and delicacy of look” (235–36).

Despite Hunter’s claim that the eunuch “takes another form,” the castrated male is virtually the same feminized male before puberty. Hence, Hunter catalogues the fact that “the shoulders do not spread out so broadly” and “the voice continues soft and sweet, [and] does not break at the time of puberty” (236). To the extent that the sexes originate as one, sexual difference and the gendered uses to which they are put threaten to collapse.

Hunter offers important clues as to why secondary sexual differentiation had as much, if not more, resonance than genital difference. Because the mind has consciousness over bodily superiority, the failure to gain corporeal strength in puberty means that the male mind will fail to develop superiority as well. Here’s how Hunter puts it: “The mind, like the body, has a superiority; as the body is capable of greater execution, so the mind seems to be conscious of the superiority that the body has, by which means its views become more extensive” (234–35). Although he claims “consciousness . . . makes heroes of them all,” and although that consciousness is predicated upon the superior strength of the body that develops in puberty only in males, Hunter concludes that bodily superiority “is most likely an original formation of mind, but is capable of being improved or increased by this consciousness” (235). The problem, of course, is that without puberty, one cannot have consciousness of physical superiority, and so it is not clear how the mind could intrinsically have that consciousness. Nor is it clear what the relationship is between original formation of mind and con-
sciousness. The localization of sexual difference between the testicles and ovaria and consciousness, and the fact that consciousness could either be intrinsically different or made different in puberty, meant that the ground of sexual difference was highly volatile, so much so that one had to be very careful when attempting to correlate gender to sex.

Surgeon and friend to the Shelleys, William Lawrence, wrote that “an imperfect original formation of the sexual organs, or the removal of some of them modifies the whole character of the individual, changes the physical constitution in a very remarkable manner, and influences in a no less striking degree the moral habits and dispositions” (s.v. “Generation,” n.p.). In Lawrence, biological sex is taking on the essence of the person: his or her habits, dispositions, and very character. Yet as we shall see below, puberty meant that absolute difference had to be at least at the outset, relative. T. Bell wrote in Kalogynomia; Or, the Laws of Female Beauty (1821) that eunuchs were capable of erections and coition (144–45). “Perfect eunuchism induces immense changes in the human constitution. The beard and hair of the pubis do not grow: . . . the feminine form is, in some measure assumed. . . . Narses is almost the only eunuch who, in ancient times, exhibited great energy of mind” (146). Bell’s point that eunuchs were capable of coition, for example, meant that although literally unsexed, they could assume the role of virility nonetheless. Because virility was at some distance from anatomy, just exactly what was it based upon?

Even when men had their testicles intact, there could be problems. Just because one had testicles did not mean they worked or were in the right place. In 1756, John Hunter made the “exciting anatomical discovery” (Moore 115) while treating patients with congenital hernias that the original seat of the male testicle was in the abdominal cavity and that the testicle usually descends into the scrotum sometime in between the seventh and ninth month of gestation (Observations 1786 9). Haller had erroneously concluded that the testicles dropped when the baby took his first breath. My use of “male testicle” reflects the fairly recent shift from seeing the ovaries as the female testicles: we can again see the imprint of the one-sex model when Hunter, for example, lumped the testicle and ovarium together because they are parts “whose uses are equally similar” (Observations 47). “Until the approach of birth, the testes of the foetus are lodged within the cavity of the abdomen, and may therefore be reckoned among the abdominal viscera,” Hunter notes (Observations 2).

Because he knew that the “sex characters” depend “upon the effects that the ovaria and testicles have upon the constitution” (EO 1:184), and that the failure
PLATE I.

The first figure represents the testes within the abdomen, in an abortive fetus of about six months. All the intestines, except the rectum, are removed; and the peritoneum in most places is left upon the surfaces which it covers, so that the parts have not that sharpness and distinct appearance which might have been given to them by dissection.

A The upper part of the object, covered with a cloth.
BB The thighs.
C The penis.
D The scrotum.
E The flap of the integuments, abdominal muscles, and peritoneum, turned back over the right os ilium to bring the testis into view.
F The flap of the skin and cellular membrane of the left side disposed in the same manner.
G The flap of the abdominal muscles and of the peritoneum of the left side turned back over the spine of the os ilium. The lower part of this flap is cut away, in order to shew the ligament of the testis passing down through the ring into the scrotum.
HH The lower part of each kidney.
I The projection formed by the lower vertebrae lumborum, and by the bifurcation of the aorta and vena cava.
K The rectum filled with meconium, and tied at its upper part where the colon was cut away.
L That branch of the inferior mesenteric artery which was going to the colon.
M The lower branch of the same artery, which went down into the pelvis behind the rectum.
N The lower part of the bladder, that part of it which is higher than the osa pubis in so young a fetus being cut away.
OO The hypogastric or umbilical arteries cut through, where they were turning up by the sides of the bladder in their way to the navel.
PP The ureter of each side passing down before the psoas muscle and iliac vessels, in its course to the lower part of the bladder.

D 2

QQ The
of the testicles to descend might lead to effeminacy, what Hunter calls a “tendency towards an hermaphrodite, the testicle seldom being well formed” (Observations 18). This discovery implied that sex itself was an unfolding biological process, an implication strengthened by Hunter’s admission that the location of the testis may be “variable” (Observations 3). By “hermaphrodite,” Hunter means a person of ambiguous genitalia. Hunter warns that “sometimes in the human body, . . . the testes do not descend from the cavity of the abdomen until late in life, or never at all” (Observations 7). In William Cruickshank’s and Matthew Baillie’s “Lectures on the Male Organs of Generation,” these anatomists worried about the beholdeness of the testicles to gravity. “Gravity can have its share in bringing the testicles from the loins into the scrotum,” they lectured, “as it happens before birth, when the head being downward, consequently the testicles must ascend” (National Library of Medicine MS B967 vol. 1). Hunter knew that their descent was sometimes after birth. When both testicles fail to descend, this can have devastating effects upon the manifestations of biological sex. Such deviations were not uncommon: “We see more men who have one testis, or both, lodged immediately within the tendon of that muscle [oblique],” Hunter writes (Observations 9). It was perhaps this article on the testicle’s descent that led him to remove a testis from a cock and transplant it back into the abdomen of a hen, “where it has adhered and nourished” (cited in Jorgensen 16). Certainly experiments like this one proved that culture could manipulate bodies, that nature and culture were far from mutually exclusive categories.

In his lavishly illustrated Observations on the Structure and Diseases of the Testis (1830), Cooper informed his readers that sometimes the testicle waits until puberty to descend, and sometimes that descent can take until the age of twenty-one or even longer (44). After apologizing for the expense of this book and expressing the hope that in future editions readers would be able to purchase groups of plates if they couldn’t afford the whole thing, Cooper elaborates on the testicle’s descent: “When the testis remains in the abdomen, it makes a strong impression upon the patient’s mind, as a suspicion arises that his virility is lessened or destroyed. In a case of this kind I have known the unfortunate subject committed suicide” (45).

Cooper then reassures his readers that although “a testis late in its descent . . . is often lessened in its bulk,” “the testis on the other side, with this diminished organ, is sufficient for the procreation of children” (46). I raise this example to show that a psychological understanding of one’s anatomy is at odds with the physiological fact of one’s actual virility, despite the fact that Cooper tries to
correlate the static testicle with a mental impression. The problem is that, even if the testicle’s failure to descend causes the mind’s impression of diminished virility, the actual fact of the matter is that the man’s virility is not necessarily thus compromised. Thus, anatomy is here caught between a foundational explanation of the man’s psychological state and the error of that state: the static testicle does not explain the man’s psychological error. This developing gap between anatomical fact and the mind’s apprehension of one’s anatomy makes sex the potential groundwork of liberation in that sex can be about choices rather than destiny. Of course, for this to happen, the gap between anatomy and psychology must not seem threatening.

Cooper moved immediately from the testicle’s failure to descend to a description of what happened to a man who had both testicles removed. What is especially interesting about his account of a castrated male is that, even after the operation in 1801, the man “still ha[d] emissions at night” and would continue to do so for one full year. Once again, anatomical fact fails to capture what Cooper thinks is the biological reality of sex. “For nearly the first twelve months, he stated he had emissions in coitu, or that he had sensations of emission. That then he had erections and coitus at distinct intervals,” Cooper writes, “but without the sensation of emission. After two years he had erections very rarely and very imperfectly” (53). He does not speculate as to the causes of the time lag between the loss of virility and the operation, but the fact that almost two years went by before the man lost his powers of erection meant once again that there was no one-to-one correlation between anatomy and sexual desire. Of course, Cooper attempts to close this lag by pointedly suggesting that he may have sensed emission but did not necessarily have an emission. Even this finessing, however, doesn’t quite work because the sensation has no clear origin. What is the empirical basis for this sensation? Cooper ends his treatment of this man’s case by the simple statement that “imperfect erectile power remained for . . . months” (53). Not only did the presence of erectile power in spite of castration undermine anatomy’s ability to explain sex, but this also meant that virility did not necessarily have a function.

The removal of the testicles was particularly traumatic in light of the widely accepted medical theory that reabsorption of sperm from the testicles was necessary to maintain male secondary sexual characteristics. Writers inveighing against masturbation, for example, regularly warned boys that the practice of onanism would ruin their constitutions. And writers on male impotence warned that too much loss of semen would cause the “impossibility of exercising the
venereal act” (Ryan 6). But even more respected medical doctors such as William Cullen believed that without the regular stimulus from the genitals during puberty “flaccidity takes place” in the male body (Wellcome MS 6036).\textsuperscript{31} T. Bell held fast to the idea that “when the liquid which in man is secreted in certain vessels for the purposes of generation, is re-absorbed into the system, it communicates a general excitement and activity to the character” (Kalogynomia 66). Robert Couper went so far as to marvel that, if the reabsorption of semen into the male body at puberty could authorize such profound changes, imagine what its effects on the female body must be: “How powerful must it be when suddenly mingled . . . with the circulating fluids of the delicate female!” (152). William Hunter, however, disagreed, stating, “I cannot think Semen can be absorbed for any useful purpose, and that anything is naturally absorbed without its being useful is a folly to conceive” (Wellcome MS 7062 2:70). Notwithstanding their differences, these medical writers together anticipate the localization of sex onto the endocrine system, a localization that introduces another important variable in the mapping of sex onto the body. The line between sex and destiny was more convoluted than the genitals alone suggested.

When Is the Clitoris a Penis?

If castration implied an original and universal feminine body for both sexes—indeed, we now know the masculine Y chromosome to be an add-on to an otherwise female body—the homology between the clitoris and penis provoked a crisis in sexual complementarity. In “An Account of the Free-Martin” (freemartins are sterile cows that are born alongside a bull-calf), published originally in the Royal Society’s Philosophical Transactions in 1779, John Hunter further showed how a one-sex model and two-sex model could inhabit the same body. Hunter argued, “There is one part common to both the male and female organs of generation in all animals which have the sexes distinct; in the one sex it is called the penis, in the other the clitoris; its specific use in both is to continue, by its sensibility, the action excited in coition till the paroxysm alters the sensation. In the female it probably answers no other purpose; but in the male it is more complicated to adapt it for the purpose of expelling and conducting the semen that has been secreted in consequence of the actions so excited” (Observations 46).

Hunter refers to the penis and clitoris in all animals as one part with two different names—they are essentially similar but are named differently. Sexual difference begins as mere nominalism. Yet this tension between similitude and
difference, between one sex and two sexes, grows more vexed as function enters the picture. Whereas the penis functions as both an organ of sensibility and an organ of function (it expels the semen), the only function of the clitoris is sensibility or pleasure. This again raises the question: is pleasure connected to function? Hunter seems to suggest it is by having pleasure “continue the action excited in coition,” though he never specifies what that action accomplishes.

Because the science of physiology mandated that form betoken function, something which the clitoris seems to violate because it looks like a penis but doesn’t fully function like one, the difference of name threatens to take on real functional difference. Under anatomy, the visual similarity between the clitoris and penis was enough to cement their analogousness. Haunting analogy was the legacy of the one-sex model. This violation, I suggest, helps explain how the clitoris gets demonized in medical discourse of the period in terms of the uterine furor, lesbianism, racial difference, and pathology. Either the physiological law that form correlates to function must be wrong or the clitoris must be made monstrous. Hence, Blumenbach referred to the clitoris as an “obscene organ of brute pleasure . . . given to beasts” (Anthropological Treatises 90). John’s brother, William, the famous anatomist and man-midwife, worried so much about the similarity of the penis to the clitoris that he felt compelled in a medical lecture to state that “it is impossible for a woman with a large clitoris can copulate with another, because the skin does not go around the clitoris as it does around the penis, but ties it down so that it can never be detached like the penis.” Alluding to the theory that Sapphic women had large clitoris that made them want to penetrate other women, William Hunter denies that female-female penetration is even possible. As a supplement to the penis that is not quite a supplement, the clitoris threatens the very notion of a visible sign of sexual difference in that it makes some women look like, if not act like, men. If even a large clitoris cannot penetrate like a penis, this leaves open the question why some women want to have erotic relations with other women. To the extent that “penis” and “clitoris” could stand in for the same organ, just how much actual difference was there between the sexes?

Yet the clitoris could also provide an opportunity for the man-midwife to assert his superior professional scientific knowledge over that of the (female) midwife. Professionalization was widely held to be a serious concern in the various branches of medicine, as standards for training and licensing bodies were codified and expanded. In On the Generative System (1817), John Roberton sniggers, “It is by no means uncommon for a midwife to be in doubt to which of the
sexes the child, at birth, belongs, but this is completely removed when, on ex-
amination, we find whether or not there is a urethra—in the clitoris there is
none” (44). Coleridge too catalogued the “frightful blunder of an ignorant mid-
wife” in one of his reviews of medical literature (Shorter Works 2:887), and he
castigated women medical practitioners as being “often notorious poisoners”
(Shorter Works 2:1088). Because the man-midwife hovered between the two
sexes, the stakes of his superior scientific and professional knowledge could not
have been higher.33 This superior knowledge would have to justify his need to
manage women in labor, and his management was legitimated by figuring preg-
nancy as a disease (see Denham 169–70) and women’s natural labors as “imper-
fect actions” (Denham 168). Of course, it was those “imperfect actions” that
sometimes mandated the masculine intrusion of technology in terms of forceps,
vectis, and other obstetrical implements as well as male scientific knowledge. In-
deed, William Osborn went so far as to insist that God had ordained human
labor to be difficult—the human pelvis, he insisted was not designed for labor
and delivery, and thus “inevitable but superior difficulty” and necessary “danger”
lurked behind human parturition as opposed to the easy births of animals—and
it was this difficulty that “rescued the art of midwifery from the charge of inutil-
ity” (3).34 Not only were both his professional status and right to manage
women at stake, but also, because his very sex was ambiguous, the man-midwife
could not afford not to know how to distinguish a large clitoris from a penis.
The man-midwife Thomas Denham admitted on the one hand that the “clitoris
is little concerned with the practice of midwifery, on account of its size and sit-
uation” (45). On the other hand, this did not prevent him from unceremoni-
ously stating, “Should the clitoris increase to such a size as to occasion much in-
convenience, it may be extirpated either with a knife or ligature” (45).35 Perhaps
the most influential man-midwife, William Hunter, agreed: “The clitoris be-
comes so much elongated as to be obliged to be cut off” (Glasgow MS Gen 775,
39–40). Mutilation thus was preferable to ambiguity: the clitoris becomes the
object of cathexis because it undermines complementarity at the same time as it
becomes the severed badge of the man-midwife’s masculinity (his professional
knowledge). In sum, because the clitoris threatened to the very idea of comple-
mentarity, it had to go when its elongation obscured the differences. Perhaps
this is what led Blake to remark, “And while the Sons of Albion by severe War
and Judgment bonify/The Hermaphroditic Condensations are divided by the
Knife/The obdurate Forms are cut asunder by Jealousy and Pity” (Jerusalem
58:10–12 E 207). The knife was the anatomist’s weapon of choice.
Romantic Puberty

If a common neurological body, castration, and the clitoris all together suggest fundamental doubts about the two sexes, the problem was exacerbated by puberty. Until this point, the problem has been historical in that the Roman period was a key moment of transition in thinking about sex. With puberty, however, the historical problem becomes even more coextensive with the body insofar as the body literally undergoes a transition from one feminized sex to two. Now that both models of sex inhered in the body, the crises could not be ignored. Given that puberty so often went awry, not even the basic facts about sex were unarguable.

First, a legal definition of puberty as it was understood in the Romantic period. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1771) puberty is defined as the age when a child is capable of procreation (3:517). Immediately following this terse definition, the writer of this entry sends the reader to the entry under law. Legally, puberty is designated the age of minority, and this was from the age of fourteen, if male, and the age of twelve, if female, until the age of twenty-one. Because puberty then lasted at least seven years—Buffon’s claim that males did not arrive at perfection until thirty made puberty an astounding sixteen years long—puberty was a significant period of transition in the Romantic period. William Cullen bested Buffon, arguing that full manhood was not achieved until thirty-five years of age. This meant that puberty lasted for twenty-one years (*Materia Medica* 16)! The legal stakes of this transition were that minors were ineligible for political rights. If it were true that women did not really undergo secondary sexual differentiation as Hunter claimed, women could not, in fact, participate in politics. Of course to make this claim, one had to ignore menstruation and the growth of breasts during puberty.

I focus on puberty because it shows how sex was considered a biological process in Romanticism, a lengthy process that could go dreadfully wrong. Once again, the body provides a kind of materiality that is open to change. Premature puberty could be particularly traumatic, especially when it frustrated both the one-sex and two-sex theories. Dr. Cookson, of Lincoln, described the case of Charlotte Mawer, a girl who at age three and a half menstruated and had breasts and pubic hair. Cookson remarked that she was a “strong-built womanly kind of child,” and he did “not find this girl has exhibited any particular marks of attachment to the other sex; but I have thought it right to caution the mother on this head; though I am apprehensive she will not survive many years. It may be
a matter of curious speculation, whether this child can be impregnated, con-
ceive, and produce her kind—I am inclined to think in the affirmative” (118).
Because her body bore the signs of being ready to reproduce, yet she did not ex-
perience sexual desire, Cookson attempts to close the gap between anatomy and
desire through speculation. In Keatsian fashion, he imagines her to be a rav-
ished bride. Astley Cooper writes in the Medico-Chirurgical Transactions a year
later that at four and a half Mawer “is quite a little woman in her appearance,
except as to her countenance, which is childish. [She] does not seem to have any
sexual feelings, or an uncommon degree of modesty.” Not quite a believer,
Cooper went to the parish register to confirm her age and he reported that she
was indeed the age reported. By April 1812, Cooper notes that she has “become
modest.” Mawer again shows a gap between desire and anatomy: though she is
anatomically sexually mature, she seems to have no desires. Cooper tries to cor-
relate modesty with puberty, and with that he has more success.

Not just women were vulnerable to errors of puberty. John Hunter cites five
cases of men whose breasts enlarged during puberty; moreover, in one of these
cases the father “applied his left nipple to the infant’s mouth, who sucked and
drew milk from it in such quantity as to be nursed by it in perfect good health”
(EO 238). These cases attest to what sexual dimorphism attempts to finesse: the
gaps between bodies and sexual dimorphism. His genitals were inspected and
not found to be any different from any other man’s (EO 238). John Flint South
considered another case of premature puberty in John Sparrow, who was five
years of age, muscular, and had seminal emissions at night. According to his
mother’s narrative, the boy’s linen was stained two or three times a week. Because
her son was faint and pallid on the next morning, “she was induced to watch him,
and thus ascertained the real cause, which, alarming her very much, she applied
to her medical attendant, who recommended cold bathing of the whole body,
three times a day” (78). His nocturnal emissions then became less frequent (once
a week). Writing in his own voice, the doctor then meticulously catalogued the
boy’s size, including the length and width of his erect penis, and he noted that
his “occiput [was] extremely prominent” (79). Dr. South tried to pin the cause
of it on “the enormous size of the cerebellum, which Drs. Gall and Spurzheim
state is always the case when the genital organs are developed in a great degree”
(80). Here, the body’s sex is explained by the brain, an explanation that under-
mines the need to make his erect penis an object of medical knowledge.

Sparrow later captured the attention of John Gordon Smith, who added in
the London Medical Repository, “I was assured that he is an entire stranger to sex-
ual ideas and impression; the company of females exerting no influence upon
him” (358). Yet perhaps the most interesting feature of Smith’s account of Sparrow is that he feels the need to begin the article with a long disquisition concerning “the regularity of bodies”—human and planetary (353–56). He then introduces the case as an anomaly, bringing it to a close by remarking upon the “peculiarities of this monstrosity, to account for which would perplex the most intelligent among philosophers” (358). He concludes with a highly unscientific observation that “while such as are distinguished by exceptions, analogous to those in the present instance, must be objects of curiosity to the naturalist, but, in all probability, of pity, at the best, to those who are socially connected with them” (358). This startling and uneasy conclusion more than undermines the equanimity of Smith’s opening pages, leaving Smith unable to account for deviation and monstrosity in the midst of all the supposed regularity he initially celebrates. These valiant attempts to frame this case within the argument from design wind up frustrating that argument, forcing Smith to turn from science to pity.

While the descent of the testicle and premature puberty begin to complicate the ontological solidity of sex, suggesting that the work of sexual differentiation was an ongoing biological process sometimes uncompleted until thirteen years of age or not at all, Hunter’s work on secondary sexual characteristics undermines the unquestioned priority of the genitals as the marker of sex. Hunter lays out the distinction between primary and secondary sexual characteristics in his “Account of an Extraordinary Pheasant” (originally published in the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions*) when he claims,

> It is well known, that there are many orders of animals which have the two parts designed for the purpose of generation different in the same species, by which they are distinguished into male and female: but this is not the only mark of distinction in many genera of animals; in the greatest part the male being distinguished from the female by various marks. The differences which are found in the parts of generation themselves, I shall call the first, or principle; and all others depending upon these I shall call secondary. The first belong equally to both; but the secondary will be found principally, although not entirely, in the male. (4:73)

Although this passage insists upon sexual differentiation and the importance of genital difference, I highlight ambiguities that begin to undermine the solidity of sex and the primacy of genital difference. Especially curious is that Hunter would call attention to a sex change in birds as “extraordinary” when this was a known scientific fact (Quist 97). Once again, both one-sex and two-sex models compete for attention. Hunter makes genital difference one of the many “marks
of distinction” of sex: note how “mark” becomes “marks” in the above passage. Elsewhere, Hunter gives more definition to these marks when he writes that, “the male may be always distinguished from the female by his noble, masculine, and beautiful figure” (EO 1:184). Hunter claims, moreover, that secondary sexual differentiation is largely confined to males: it is “principally” in the male. This suggests that until secondary differentiation takes place in puberty, the sexes are more alike than they are different and that both sexes are feminine until puberty. After all, at puberty, the male “los[es] that resemblance he had to the female in various secondary properties” (Observations 65): “he . . . leaves the female state and undergoes a kind of change or metamorphosis like the moth” (EO 184). Lest we imagine that Hunter’s remarks on sex do not so much pertain to human beings, at the end of his essay on female pheasants, Hunter draws attention to how “even in the human species, . . . that increase of hair observable on the faces of many women in advanced life, is an approach towards the beard, which is one of the most distinguishing secondary properties of man” (Observations 68). If males before puberty are feminized, and if females after menopause were masculinized, the biology of sexual difference refused to provide much of a foundation for complementarity and gave precious little stability for cultural notions of difference. Wollstonecraft and Robinson show how this instability could prove liberatory even for women.

We can witness the legacy of the one-sex model along with the diminished role of genital difference in a key anatomical text of the period, Andrew Bell’s 1798 Anatomia Britannica. Bell was engraver to the Prince of Wales. The first two parts of Bell’s work ignore sexual differentiation: even the depicted penis does not need to refer to difference if women have an analogous clitoris or if women’s organs were simply inside the body, not outside. That the first two parts contain plates taken from Albinus (1697–1770) perhaps explains the absence of attention to sexual differentiation. For Albinus, there was clearly one sex, not two. Bell does not feel the need to update these images; his reproduction of them in an emphatically British anatomy insists that they still embody knowledge good enough for the British Empire. That is to say, the idea of incommensurate sexual difference did not hold so much sway as to make these plates seem like misinformation or error or even antiquarian knowledge.

The third part of Bell’s grand Anatomia Britannica, however, foregrounds sexual difference but emphasizes difference of proportions between the sexes, showcasing the proportions as understood by the Ancient Greeks, before turning to anatomy itself. These engravings are adapted from the famous anatomist William Cowper. Cowper’s drawings may have influenced Blake (Connolly 46–
Of course, proportional differences only became truly visible post-puberty. Bell uses statues of Apollo and Venus to prove that men have larger shoulders, longer sternums, and smaller pelvises (3:12–16). Three pages of tables list all of the proportional differences. Accordingly, the texts to the anatomical plates of man and woman emphasize proportional differences rather than different genitals. The illustrations depict difference in such a way as to allow the genitals to be swallowed up by proportion. To wit, the engraving of the man insists on the proportions between various features, labeled from a to v along with y and z, leaving his dwarfed penis and testicles the letters w and x. Of course, the man’s genitals are placed at the very center of his body and thus prefigure Blake’s rendering of Orc’s genitals.

The textual commentary for the illustration of woman states, “Woman, in whom the symmetry or proportion differs from that of a man . . . nor will any action, in which a woman uses her utmost strength, occasion such a swelling or rising of the muscles and other parts to appear as is the case in men; the great quantity of fat placed under the skin of Women, covering their muscles, &c, so as to prevent any such appearance” (part 3, plate 43). Her breasts and genitals are dwarfed by proportional difference (part 3, plate 43). Again proportional changes and muscular development are the result of puberty: genitals are neither a clear nor persuasive marker of difference, but, in this case, her proportions are not inscribed onto the body: the only two features on her body that are labeled are her mammae and pudendum. Her pudendum, however, is engulfed by the width of her large hips, and the drapery she holds draws our attention away from her breasts. Whereas the other two books allowed the male skeleton to stand in for both genders, the third part has engravings of both male and female skeletons.

Hunter and Bell were by far not the only medical adherents to this notion of one-sex before puberty, two sexes thereafter. We can see it in John Bostock’s Elementary System of Physiology:

The generative organs . . . exercise a peculiar and specific influence over the system at large, affecting its general form and its powers, both mental and corporeal, causing the growth and development of particular parts, and giving to the individual, in a more remarkable degree, those characters which constitute the peculiarity of sex. The constitutional difference of the two sexes during infancy is not very considerable, but at the period of puberty, when the generative organs are developed and their functions established, the difference is very much increased, and continues during the remainder of life. (1824 3:22)
THE
First Anatomical Table
OF THE
HUMAN BODY
EXPLAINED.

BEFORE we enter upon the Anatomical Description of the Human Body, it may not be improper to take a view of the Proportions of the different Parts of a well-formed Man, and of the relative Proportions of the Male and Female, in the living State.

From the crown of the head, which is covered with the hair, to the upper part of the forehead, is the third part of a face.

The face begins at the roots of the lowest hairs, which are upon the forehead, and ends at the bottom of the chin.

The face is divided into three proportionable parts; the first contains the forehead; the second, the nose; and the third, the mouth and the chin.

From the chin to the upper part of the sternum, or breast-bone, are two lengths of a foot.

From the top of the sternum to the bottom of the breast, is the rib-cage, one face.

From the pit of the stomach to the umbilicus, or navel, is one face;—the Apollo has half a face more.

From the umbilicus to the pubes, one face.

From the upper part of the knee to the small of the thigh above the patella, or knee-pan, two faces.

From the lower part of the knee to the small of the leg above the ankle, two faces.

From the ankle to the malleolus internus, to the bottom of the heel, half a face.

A man, when his arms are stretched out, is from the extremity of the longest finger of his right hand to the extremity of the longest of his left, as bread is; he is long.

From one side of the breast to the other below the nipples, two faces.

From the pit of the throat to the top of the shoulder, or extremity of the spine of the scapula, one face; from thence to the bending of the cubit or elbow, one face and a half; thence again to the wrist, one face and a note. The hand with the fingers extended, contains one face. So that four faces, a note, and half a face, is the distance between the pit of the throat and extremity of the middle finger; which, upon extension of the whole arm, &c., will amount to five faces, rather more than six.

The foot, a face and a note in length.

As to the breadth of the limbs, no precise measure can be given, because the measures themselves not only vary according to the quality of the person, but according to the motion of the muscles.

PART III.

A

THE
Andrew Bell, *Anatomia Britannica*, “First Anatomical Table of the Human Body.” Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.
REPRESENTS the fore-part of a Woman, in whom the symmetry or proportion differs from that of a Man: First, Most remarkably in this, that the shoulders are narrower; the Man having two lengths or faces in the breadth of his shoulders, and one and a half in his hips; whereas a Woman, on the contrary, has but one face and a half in her shoulders, and two in her hips. Secondly, The clavicles, or collar-bones, and muscles in general, do not appear in Women as in Men; whence it is that the outline of the one, as painters express it, differs very much from that of the other. Nor will any action, in which a Woman uses her utmost strength, occasion such a swelling or rising of the muscles and other parts to appear, as is the case in Men; the great quantity of fat placed under the skin of Women, covering their muscles, &c., so as to prevent any such appearance.

A A The mammae: B The pudendum.
Andrew Bell, *Anatomia Britannica*, “Second Anatomical Table of the Human Body.” Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.
Like Hunter, Bostock downplays genital difference—there is not a great difference between infants of both sexes—preferring instead to read the “characters which constitute the peculiarity of sex” at puberty. Bostock then localizes sexual difference in “the anatomical structure of the body” and in the body’s “chemical constitution” (2:22). The movement of body from anatomy to chemistry allowed chemistry’s newfound explanations for the attractions of one particle over others to replace the visible body as explanation. Speaking of boys and girls, John Roberton, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, wrote in his *Observations on the Mortality and Physical Management of Children* (1827) that “if the sexes differ but little in their physical structure: if they breathe the same air, digest the same food, have duties and difficulties before them equally arduous, how comes it that, while the one is encouraged to strengthen the frame by exposure and exercise, the other is trained in seclusion, stigmatized as a romp for every exhibition of vivacity; . . . her occupations and amusements tending to produce indolence and muscular debility” (244). Because he so limits the differences of physical structure between boys and girls, Roberton questions how cultural differences can be based on so little.

The French approach to puberty provides a startling contrast to the English. Montpellier physician P. M. Ferrier wrote in “De la puberté considérer comme crise des maladies de l’enfance” (“Of Puberty Considered as a Crisis of Illness”) that “the signs particular to puberty are more characterized by men than women. His limbs up till then have been soft and delicate, begin to become pronounced, his chin becomes covered with hair, his voice changes, and the seminal liquor secretes itself, and his body presents the complete energy that characterizes the male” (7, translation mine). On the subject of puberty in women, Ferrier defers to Rousseau, citing that their eyes, the organs of the soul, find their language of expression, they learn how to blush (6). Insofar as Rousseau’s fictions are taken to bolster scientific fact, Wollstonecraft was right to go after him. Unlike his English counterparts, however, Ferrier described puberty as a natural revolution: “the revolution of puberty is a work of nature” (23). If Ferrier sought thereby to naturalize revolution, to give it a historical precedent in every (mostly male) human body, he also helped to pathologize revolution insofar as he connected puberty with a health crisis. If puberty were a revolution that required the careful management of doctors, it nonetheless helped to naturalize revolution.41

Wollstonecraft supports the notion of one sex before puberty when she argues that “girls and boys, in short, would play harmlessly together, if the distinc-
tion of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference” (VRW 129). She insists that societal notions of sexual difference inscribe themselves onto bodies long before nature can conform to what we now call gender. The fact that there was originally only one sex means that all claims grounded upon nature—especially Rousseau’s attempt to give the mind a sex and to naturalize female sensibility—must be given especial scrutiny. To the extent that, as Hunter argues, primary sexual difference (genitals) are the cause of secondary difference and differences in the sex organs do not lead to further sexual differentiation in women, sexual differentiation becomes contingent upon both an absence and a presence, with women’s genitals as presence causing a secondary absence of differentiation. Because Romantic medicine did not simply accept the primacy of genital difference, sex itself was a precarious ground of difference, a terra in fīrma rendered even more unstable because it is tied to both presence and absence. Read in this light, Wollstonecraft harnesses the idea of one original sex to undermine the legitimacy of complementary constructions of gender while rejecting the necessary hierarchy of the one-sex model. Of course, Hunter’s inability to see female sexual differentiation in puberty, especially his blindness to menstruation, points to how the male puberty could stand in for female puberty.

In fact, Wollstonecraft alludes to the work of naturalists and their work on puberty when she argues,

> It has also been asserted, by some naturalists, that men do not attain their full growth and strength till thirty; but that women arrive at maturity by twenty. I apprehend that they reason on false ground, led astray by the male prejudice, which deems beauty the perfection of woman—mere beauty of features and complexion, the vulgar acceptation of the word, whilst male beauty is allowed to have some connection with the mind. Strength of body and that character of countenance which the French term physionomie, women do not acquire before thirty, any more than men. (162–63)

It was Buffon who insisted in his famous discussion of puberty in Histoire Naturelle that men did not arrive at the state of perfection until thirty, since their strength required more intense work on the part of nature. Women, by contrast, were rendered perfect by age twenty (518). By refuting Buffon, and by calling attention to the sexism inherent in a female notion of beauty that did not include the mind, Wollstonecraft once again downplays the role of physical strength and refuses to accept an inferior notion of maturity for women.
Women’s beauty, like men’s, is essentially an intellectual beauty. Her reference to physiognomy, which she would have gotten from her reading of Lavater and Buffon, further cemented the body/soul connection insofar as features of the face were read as windows into the soul/mind. And because both men and women come to maturity at the same time, Wollstonecraft insinuates, one cannot deny women political rights on the basis of immaturity without also denying men’s.

Buffon, however, was not entirely an enemy to Wollstonecraft’s cause. His bold statement that the hymen and caruncles were merely imaginary signs of virginity (HN 490–92) might have been what emboldened Wollstonecraft to “throw down the gauntlet and deny the existence of sexual virtues, not excepting modesty” (139). If there is no physical sign of virginity, the morals that are grounded upon it also evaporate.43 Blumenbach would agree, commenting that “this little appendage to the female body is all the more remarkable, because I cannot imagine any physical utility attaches to it” (Anthropological Treatises 170).

Hunter elaborates on the relative insignificance of genital difference, “Thus we see the sexes which at an early period had little to distinguish them from each other . . . . The male at this time [puberty] recedes from the female, and assumes the secondary properties of his sex” (Observations 68). Elsewhere he comments that “the distinction of the sex, exclusive of the parts of generation, is but very small in childhood and youth. Boys and girls are very similar in all their features when first formed; even the parts peculiar to each are similar to one another [in the embryo]; both seeming to shoot out from one point, but each on a different plan; therefore they become very different by the time they arrive at perfection” (EO 1:186). Again, I note Hunter’s insistence that the sexes become different and in so doing he downplays the role of genital difference. These secondary characteristics show that sex is not an achieved state, a fact all the more compelling once we recall that the average life span in the 1750s was thirty-six (Porter 1995, 440). Indeed, if the male “recedes from the female” in puberty, then sex is, at least for roughly the first third of life, less an opposition than a continuum, a fact that once again suggests the one-sex model has much truth to it. To make matters worse, women in menopause begin to acquire some secondary characteristics of men: namely, facial hair. By figuring even mature women as children—as arrested males—Hunter makes it virtually impossible for women to acquire the maturity that is so necessary for poetic authorship in this period (Ross 155–60). As we have seen, Wollstonecraft vehemently contested the separation of male maturity from female maturity.
When Hunter remarks that “there is often a change of the secondary properties of one sex into those of the other” (*Observations* 64), he underscores the fluidity of biological sex. He adds, “The female, at a much later time of life, when the powers of propagation cease, loses many of her peculiar properties; and may be said, except from mere structure of parts, to be of no sex; and even recedes from the original character of the animal, approaching in appearance towards the male, or perhaps more properly towards the hermaphrodite” (*Observations* 49). In no way then is sex in the living human being a stable essence. And, when Hunter marvels that the “testicles [are] the cause of the inclinations, yet they do not direct these inclinations: the inclinations become an operation of the mind, after the mind is once stimulated by the testicle” (*EO* 1:19), he adds still another gap between anatomy and sexual desire, although he does insist that the testicle must stimulate the mind to take over. The fact that this anatomical cause does not direct the inclinations introduces a potentially insurmountable gap between sexual aim and sexual object, opening the door to the universality of perversion.

All of this instability in sexual differentiation is further troubling, given the fact that Hunter ascribes congenital malformations to the existing primordial germ. Hunter frames his essay on the extraordinary pheasant with the remark that “every deviation from that original form and structure which gives the distinguishing character to the productions of nature, may not improperly be called monstrous. . . . As far as my knowledge has extended, there is not one species of animals, nay there is not one single part of an animal body which is not subject to extraordinary formation. Nor does this appear to be a matter of mere chance; for it may be observed, that every one has a disposition to deviate from nature in a manner peculiar to itself. . . . Each part of each species ha[s] its monstrous form, as it were, originally impressed on it by the hand of nature” (*Observations* 63). If every species has a disposition to monstrosity, and if each part has its “monstrous form originally impressed on it,” monstrosity is eradicable from nature herself. To make matters worse, nature directs the progress of monstrosity. If nature herself is at once normal and monstrous, and if nature has a disposition to the monstrous, then the distinctions between the norm and the perverted will not hold up; nor will the social distinctions that are based on them stand. By logical extension, sexual complementarity is thus rendered perverse because it partakes in an innate propensity to monstrosity.

John Hunter was so fascinated by the role played by the testicles in puberty that he went so far as to transplant a cock testis to a hen. The operation was a
qualified success in that the transplant took. Hunter did “in all probability con-
sider the possible effect of the cock testis, transplanted to the hen, on second-
ary sex characters and on sex behavior” (Jorgensen 15). Because Hunter did not
detail these remarkable experiments himself, we must turn to the notes of his
students to get a sense of what Hunter thought he was doing. The student
writes, “Here is the testicle of a cock, separated from the animal, and put through
a wound, made for that purpose, into the belly of a hen; which mode of turning
hens into cocks is much such an improvement for utility as that of Dean Swift
when he proposed to obtain a breed of sheep without wool” (cited in Jorgensen
15–16). Two points can be made here: one, Hunter imagines the possibility of a
sex-change; and two, he fantasizes biological sex can bend easily to the will of a
surgeon. In fact, hens bearing functional testicular grafts develop combs and
wattles like a normal cock, but retain their female plumage and spurs (Jor-
gensen 15). This is perhaps why Hunter claimed that his experiment did not at-
tain perfection.

In his Physiological Lectures of 1817, John Abernethy, president of London’s
Royal College of Surgeons and Hunter’s former pupil, was still mulling over
Hunter’s pheasant, even though thirty-seven years had elapsed since Hunter’s
first publication of the essay in the Royal Society’s Philosophical Transactions.
Abernethy dwelled on the fact that Hunter had observed the “sexual character
to have been annulled by age, the appropriate external signs were not only dis-
continued, but some times opposite ones were exhibited” (77–78). Sex, it would
seem, refuses to become an essence. Abernethy continued, “He really seems in-
terested in observing, that old women sometimes are bearded, and the old hen
pheasant forms and displays the beautiful plumage of the male bird” (77). What
Hunter discovered, though he did not know it, was that human beings have both
“sex” hormones—testosterone and estrogen—and the balance of the two can
shift as we age. Hunter’s pupil concludes, “According to Mr. Hunter’s notions
of life, those occurrences which denote sexual character are to be considered as
the effects of sympathies existing between remote parts of the body; which, like
other instances of sympathy, are liable to occasional failure and considerable
variation” (78–79). Abernethy’s insistence that sexual character is the effect of
sympathy between remote parts of the body highlights the centrality of sex to
the body as well as its essentially fluid and variable nature. It is this variability
that allows it to support arguments for equality and democracy. Once again,
anatomy does not imply destiny.

This tenuousness of sexual differentiation thus is captured in the phrase that
William Lawrence, the surgeon, friend, and physician of the Shelleys, used to describe the sexes before puberty: an “equivocal state” (“Generation,” n.p.). Lawrence’s emphasis on the tenuousness of puberty is especially surprising in light of the fact that Lawrence ascribes to the two-sex model: the “generative organs [of men and women] are different in kind; and their whole constitution has in each its particular type.” Consequently, he dismisses out of hand unfounded analogies between the clitoris and penis. Nonetheless when he broaches the subject of puberty, Lawrence remarks, “it is however only at the epocha of puberty, . . . that the assemblage of all the sexual traits is exhibited to our observation . . . the particular differences . . . are not equally remarkable, and at one time cannot be distinctly traced.” He continues, man’s “equivocal state does not last long: man speedily assumes the features and character which mark his destination; his limbs lose their softness and the gentle forms which he partook with the female.” Although it is true that Lawrence allows for the fact that the differences could have been there from the start—the problem is that we cannot see or recognize them—his attention to perceptual difference goes away when he describes the “equivocal state” of the male. These features are unequivocally grounded in his gentle limbs and originary softness. Once again, before puberty, the male is imagined as a feminized male, and, once again, biology will not quite underwrite complementarity. If the two sexes were originally one, sexual difference is potentially bridgeable, relational rather than incommensurate, and if the state of puberty could last as long as twenty-one years, the differences between ontological beings and states begin to evaporate. Conceiving of ontology both in terms of being and states allows ontology material plasticity, and perhaps explains Blake’s interest in states of being.

This is not to say that the medical understanding of puberty was always necessarily helpful to equality. William Lawrence uses female puberty as evidence of her inferiority. Woman, by contrast to man, “departs from her primitive constitution less sensibly than man” (“Generation,” n.p.). Lawrence’s choice of “primitive” relegates women to an earlier evolutionary state even as it denies and discounts the actual transformations in women during puberty. If that weren’t bad enough, Lawrence adds, “delicate and tender, she even retains something of the temperament belonging to children. The texture of her organs does not lose all its original softness.” Yet the idea that the two sexes were originally one undermines the complementarity that he upholds. Likewise, if he, on the one hand, claims that the influence of “education and habits . . . is not sufficiently powerful to induce us to overlook the existence of a radical innate
difference in the physical structure of the sexes,” he, on the other hand, insists that “the influence of education, habits and customs, is so extensive, that it is difficult to distinguish between the results of these causes, and of the supposed original distinctions in organization.” His emphasis on “supposed” undermines the radical innateness he sought to essentialize, as does his lack of clarity in the difference between what is innate and what belongs to culture.

Nonetheless, I want to develop the positive implications of Lawrence’s term for capturing puberty, “equivocal state,” particularly because “equivocal” itself slides from normality to perversion. Claudia Johnson has helped us to see the nuances of this term in *Equivocal Beings*, calling attention to how Wollstonecraft especially employed this term to distinguish real republican manhood over acculturated sentimentalized foppery, but Johnson misses the fact that “equivocal” referred both to a natural biological state, a state before puberty, and a kind of perverted being, a castrated male or hermaphrodite. That is to say, if prepubescent males are naturally effeminate, republican manhood is not so much an embodied ideal as it is a useful rhetorical device. Certainly, I am suggesting that Wollstonecraft was more aware of the costs of promoting republican manhood than Johnson credits her as being; indeed, Wollstonecraft’s systematic unhooking of gender and strength, along with her collapse of mental and bodily strength, indicates the extent to which she sought to undermine the very foundation of patriarchy. Lawrence himself moves from the “equivocal state of puberty” to describing “equivocal individuals,” beings who “have an acute voice, weak muscles, [and] a softness and laxity in the general organization.” This missed fact of “equivocal’s” slide from normal to pathological accounts for the rampant homophobia of the period: all men went through puberty, so all men had the potential to stay in the “equivocal state.” “Equivocal state,” moreover, threatens to collapse difference between the sexes, especially if there were a connection between “equivocal states” and “equivocal beings.” If both sexes went through the “equivocal state” of puberty, the sexed body could serve as a ground of similitude and difference, an instability that could prove useful to the discrediting of complementarity.

“Equivocal” further threatens the normative claims of heterosexual desire insofar as it destabilizes the sexed body itself. What would prevent, for example, one equivocal being for having desire for another equivocal being? This threat is especially dire given that Cullen suggested puberty could last as long as twenty-one years. The fine line between the effeminate sodomite and the prepubescent male not only underscores Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s point that ho-
mophobia in the eighteenth century was not so much about the oppression of homosexual men as a means of organizing the entire spectrum of male relations (Between Men 88–91), but it also implies that perverse desires have their origins in normality. Indeed, perverse desires begin with a general skepticism in the very idea of absolute sexual difference, itself a contested site of normality.

In the context of these widespread medical debates about sexual difference, William Blake’s ambiguously sexed figures, his muscular females, become a means of interrogating human relationships generally, rather than, as Anne Mellor suggests, a stylistic tic taken from Michelangelo. Just as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson suggest, superior male strength can no longer ground patriarchy; nor can male activeness justify male domination over female passivity. And just as these women ground their assertions of female strength in a common nervous body, Blake’s poetry teems with allusions to nerves and nervous fibers. Against a cultural backdrop that envisioned the human body as feminine at least before puberty, Blake masculinizes the human body and one outcome of this masculinization is that strength can no longer ground patriarchy. In the poet’s most feminist work, Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Blake not only echoes Wollstonecraft’s Vindications of the Rights of Women in his very title, suggesting that an echo does not have to be feeble, but also Oothoon refuses to accept a mind/body split and is open to the “moment of desire” (7:3 E 50). Blake scholars have long wrestled over identifying the sex of such figures as in Blake’s Jerusalem, plate 28, copy D, not to mention various figures in the Four Zoas manuscript. The male and female chained together in the frontispiece to the Visions are depicted in such a way as to emphasize their anatomical similarities, not differences. By making it difficult for his readers to correlate gender and sex to his drawn bodies, Blake demands a reexamination of how gender/sex get mapped onto bodies.

And if Blake saw sex not as an essence but as a biological process, the moths on the title-page to Jerusalem thus potentially refer to the bodily transformation into puberty—recalling John Hunter’s likening of puberty to a mothlike metamorphosis. Hunter also pointed out that moths “are a long time in copulation. The large moth is some days” (EO 224), making them Blakean symbols of gratified desire. If the body could undergo such major changes as puberty and sexual differentiation, then the dynamic body could serve as a basis for the overall awakening into liberty that Blake’s Jerusalem demands. That is to say, utopia can be grounded in a flexible and changeable body, one that does not restrain desire. To underscore this potential, Blake depicts the large female moth at the
bottom of the title page in such a way as to suggest her wings already contain Los’s globe of light found on the frontispiece to *Jerusalem* (notice the two orange circles around both sides of the moth’s hair [Paley, plate 2]). The globes within her left wings are, at least in the Yale copy, the same color as Los’s globe. This link between the moth and Los’s light is heightened when the poet depicts the moth as translucent, rendering it with a light watercolor wash (plate 14) underneath God’s rainbow. Moreover, by having “a moth of gold & silver mock[es] [Los’s] anxious grasp” (*Jerusalem* 91:49), Blake puts bodily metamorphosis at odds with Los’s “Ratio of Reason” (ibid.).

This makes all the more sense given that the goal of *Jerusalem* is to unite the fallen human body into the divine, a unification that cannot take place without a revolution in the ways in which people think about sexuality. Blake, of course, would have no truck with chastity as a virtue, and getting rid of fallen sexuality was critical to the human attainment of the divine. When we can see Los even in the wings of a moth, Blake suggests that we are steps closer to liberty. John Hunter’s and William Lawrence’s references to biological sex in terms of a state as opposed to in terms of being would also have been suggestive to the poet, whose figures insistently shift between states, classes, and beings.

In the *Book of Urizen*, Blake perhaps further questioned sex as an essence when he depicted the globe of life blood developing nervous fibers first. Only after “eternity on eternity,” “At length in tears & cries im bodied/A female form trembling and pale/Waves before hid deadly face” (Plate 18:6–8 E 78). In the poet’s view, nerves would seem to be the essential groundwork of the human body and only much later does he depict the “imbodiment” into female form. The poet’s acute awareness of how sexual difference prevented fourfold vision opens the door to the possibility of his skeptical examination of sexual complementarity.

**From Puberty to Pederasty**

Thus far I have shown how two ways of thinking about sex helped to make perversion an especially powerful form of leverage. It is because we have lost sight of the volatility of biological sex in the Romantic period that we have yet to understand fully how and why Voltaire, Jeremy Bentham, and Percy Shelley linked pederasty with puberty. Bentham in his manuscript “On Paederasty” sought to explain the “prevalence” of the homoerotic “taste”: he did so by first ascribing it to “not an indifference to the proper object but of the difficulty of
coming to the proper object” (92). Homoeroticism was the consequence of a homosocial boarding-school culture that made heterosexual relations difficult, but Bentham then proceeds to quote Voltaire, linking such desire with puberty. As did Bentham, Shelley very probably got the connection between puberty and pederasty initially from Voltaire’s very popular *Dictionnaire Philosophique*, a book that Shelley owned. In the entry entitled “Amour Socratique,” Voltaire wrote, “Young males of our species, raised together, and feeling the force of nature begin in them, and not finding any natural object for their instinct, fall back on what resembles them. Often a young boy, resembles for two or three years a beautiful girl, with the freshness of his complexion, the brilliance of his coloring, and the sweetness of his eyes; if he is loved it is because nature makes a mistake; one pays homage to the fair sex by attachment to one who owns its beauties, and when the years of resemblance disappear, the mistake ends” (17:180; translation mine). Crompton notes that “the earliest version of this essay began by asking, ‘how did it come about that a vice which would destroy mankind if it were general, that a sordid outrage against nature, is still so natural? It seems the highest degree of deliberate corruption, and yet it is the ordinary lot of those who have not yet had the time to be corrupted”’ (*Homosexuality and Civilization* 516).

Voltaire here raises a number of important issues for us to consider. He cannot avail himself of the excuse that boys who profess Socratic love are corrupted; consequently, he is forced into pitting nature against nature. But how can an “outrage against nature” be natural? The origin of perversion is thus in nature herself, a collapse that means deviation comes from within, and one that destabilizes the binary oppositions that legitimate social order. Voltaire’s point that boys in puberty “fall back on resemblance” runs the danger of making desire itself homoerotic: sameness is the ground for desire as puberty shifts one sex into two. In fact, the very slipperiness of “resemblance,” which after all contains difference within similitude, helps to insinuate homoeroticism into the natural process of puberty. Although the passage above makes clear that “resemblance” refers to the similarity of one feminized male to a female, resemblance can also refer to the resemblance of one feminized male to another feminized male. If homoeroticism is veiled by the feminization of the male—his androgynousness makes it possible to believe that desire is still intrinsically heterosexual—the ability of resemblance to straddle the homo/hetero divide hints that desire itself may not be based completely on difference. The kind of thinking that understood the clitoris to be an analogous penis meant that resemblance could ac-
tually bridge the two sexes. In theory, then, heterosexual desire could resemble same-sex desire. Such instability is further heightened by the fact that biological sex moves from sameness to difference in puberty. For this reason, Voltaire insists that resemblance is merely a fallback position. Nonetheless, as the fallback position, resemblance as same-sex desire becomes ontologically prior to heterosexuality, a positioning that undermines the very naturalness of heterosexual desire.

“Homage is paid to the sex by attachment to one who owns its beauties,” continues Voltaire. The original French reads: “On rend hommage au sèxe, en s’attachant à ce qui en à les beautés” (17:180). Lost in the translation is the reflexive verb, which implies that the work of attachment is being done by itself. (Imagine the denials that would be possible if English had reflexive verbs!) The problem, of course, is that at puberty females have no necessary monopoly on beauty, and sèxe here resists stabilization into biological sex. If males are feminine, then they can be beautiful, too. Here, we should recall Percy Shelley’s insistence in his preface to his translation of Plato’s *Symposium* that objects of erotic interest be first and foremost “as perfect and beautiful as possible” (D. Clark 222); almost as an afterthought, he will insist that erotic objects be natural. That the object of erotic attraction be natural comes in third, following temperance, hints that nature may be Shelley’s afterthought.

The transition into puberty makes the materiality of the body no less slippery than language is; textualization refuses to liberate materiality into language just as materialization does so much more than constrain. Recognition of this problem perhaps accounts for Voltaire’s syntax: his stretching of pronouns and prepositions in à ce qui en à harnesses syntactical circumlocution to distance the objects, which passively become attached to each other. Voltaire’s pronouns refer to ambiguous referents. Compounding the sexual confusions, Voltaire refers to this as cette méprise de nature, a phrase that either means a mistake by human beings about nature or the mistake (feminine gender) of (female) nature. In French, the feminine gender of nature and of mistake elides the two into one. To the extent that even nature may herself make this mistake, how are humans supposed to avoid it? Linguistic nuances coupled with nature’s mistake further the naturalness of perversion.

All is not lost, however. At the end of puberty, which Voltaire limits to only a few years, “the resemblance disappears and the mistake ends” (17:180). Here, naturalizing the mistake complicates the ontology of mistake and, thus, the consequences for it. The resemblance of the feminized male to the female is so
strong that even nature herself allows herself to be fooled. If even nature loses track of sex, how can man be blamed for same sex desire?

In his “Discourse on the Manners of the Antient Greeks,” Percy Shelley, too, connects homoeroticism with puberty. Shelley cannot imagine sex between a man and an adolescent to be consensual, and thus he refers to it in terms of “so detestable a violation” (D. Clark 222). That sodomy is a crime punished by hanging in this period perhaps explains why Shelley’s makes a show of his disgust. The fact that he cannot imagine anal intercourse to be pleasurable—recall Erasmus Darwin’s linking of the nerves of the anus with the penis—intensifies his disgust. Like Voltaire, Shelley figures homoeroticism in men as a particularly passive form of desire: the agent of sexuality is not really an agent. Here, however, is Shelley’s reference to puberty:

> If we consider the facility with which certain phenomena connected with sleep, at the age of puberty, associate themselves with those images which are the objects of our waking desires; and even that in some persons of an exalted state of sensibility that a similar process can take place in reverie, it will not be difficult to conceive the almost involuntary consequences of a state of abandonment in the society of a person of surpassing attractions, when the sexual connection cannot exist, to be such as to preclude the necessity of so operose and diabolical machination as that usually described. (222)

Until now, critics have not understood why Shelley would connect pederasty to puberty. Shelley seems to do so because he can thus understand homoeroticism as a prepubescent form of desire, and he can make that desire seem passive rather than active. In making homoeroticism essentially passive, Shelley asks why it results in the death penalty. Much in the same way that sexologists like Iwan Bloch, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld made homosexuality a congenital form of identity to excuse it from criminal punishment, Shelley, Voltaire, and Bentham intimate that homosexual acts are involuntary and are, therefore, implicitly natural. Hence how can they be punished?

Like Voltaire, who took refuge in language that displaced the agent behind the desire, Shelley connects sodomitic desire with nocturnal emissions, a natural—if perverse—wasting of sperm. Shelley’s choice of “associate themselves” mirrors the work of Voltaire’s French reflexive verb. Shelley needs to make this desire “involuntary,” and to do so he obliquely refers to the fact that males before puberty are feminized males. What would prevent a female from seeking erotic relations with another female if the ground of difference were so vulner-
able? But to align homoeroticism/pederasty with the natural process of puberty is to insist that such desire is part and parcel of a natural biological process and that the purported waste of sperm is likewise natural. If this is the case, Shelley’s main point that homoeroticism would never have gained ground in Ancient Greece if women could have been considered objects of beauty, not to mention his claim that such male-male desire is “unnatural,” falls away. The fact that Shelley finds contemporary Italian women no less ugly than Ancient Greek women potentially explains the prevalence of sodomy in current Venice.

Lending even further weight to this universalizing narrative about perverse desires is the fact that Shelley includes “persons of an exalted state of sensibility” like himself in the group of those who might have been led astray. Although Shelley in this essay tries to insulate contemporary Britain from pederasty, his connection of it to puberty, a connection that he could have gotten as well from his friend, William Lawrence, insists on a universalizing narrative of sodomitic desire. That universalizing narrative was further strengthened by the poet’s later admission in his prose fragment on friendship that male-male friendship must be “wholly divested of the smallest alloy of sensuality” (D. Clark 338). His choice of “divest” leaves open the possibility that male-male friendships are inherently sensual: after all, one cannot divest a thing of what it does not have. The fact that this desire is passive—that the subject never actively seeks it—heightens a universalizing vulnerability to it. Such universal vulnerability suggests that Shelley is thinking in terms of homoeroticism generally and that he is not limiting homosexual desire to a specific kind of relations between a boy and a man. Perhaps for this reason, the poet refers to pederasty as an “operose and diabolical machination” (D. Clark 222). The danger of course is that heterosexual desire will revert to its homoerotic origins: homoerotic here stands in for same sex and the possibility that there is really only one sex. Desire is based on “resemblance.”

We Are All Potential Hermaphrodites

Romantic puberty shows not only the tenuous ground of sexual difference, but also the instability of heterosexual desire in the Romantic period. Medical interest in hermaphrodites was another key symptom of that instability. This is even the case as surgeons, men-midwives, and doctors sought to shift the ground of the discussion on hermaphrodites from ontology to epistemology: medical writers in this period grow increasingly skeptical of the existence of human her-
maphrodites and begin to insist that hermaphrodites are really a mistake of judgment rather than an ontological ambiguity. This skepticism was the logical result of the raising of the stakes in the definition of a hermaphrodite: a hermaphrodite now had to have two sets of functioning genitals to be considered a true hermaphrodite. Notwithstanding this shift of uncertainty from being to issues of professional competence, medical understanding of hermaphrodites demonstrates once again that sex resists bifurcation. Moreover, the biologist Joan Roughgarden speculates that “hermaphroditism is more common in the world than species who maintain separate sexes in separate bodies” (31). There is simply no getting around the ambiguities of sexed bodies and sexual desire. Even wishing away of the possibility of human hermaphroditism did nothing to refute the existence of what we now call intersexed individuals, people with ambiguous genitalia.

To wit, M. Vacherie, surgeon from Brussels, comments on Michael-Anne Drouart, as she/he was being shown in Carnaby Street, London, that “when it was born, it was so strongly marked with the Types or Characters of both the Male and Female Sex, . . . they gave it the two Christian names of Michael and of Anne” (4). Vacherie continues, “As it grew up, the Predominion which they imagined observed of the Female part, determined them to call it a girl” (4). By distancing himself from their imagined sense of a predominion, Vacherie hopes to enable a medical perspective to unravel this conundrum, this grammatical it. He therefore looks closely at Michael-Anne’s genitals and determines it to be imperforate penis, one tied down by a frenum, which prevents penetration. When the eye fails, Vacherie inserts a probing finger into the subject’s “vulva” and finds no clitoris. “There is no appearance of that round and glanduous body in this subject, which is doubtless absorbed, and supplemented by the penis” (10). Two problems arise: first, how can he be sure this is a penis, especially when it does not have a “proper passage or conduit for the seed” (8)? Second, whereas other medical writers would have argued this to be a clitoris since an imperforate penis was considered to be a clitoris, how can Vacherie know that the clitoris was absorbed and supplemented by the penis? The word “doubtless” is perhaps a key symptom of Vacherie’s epistemological panic, a panic intensified by the penis’s origin as a clitoris.

Vacherie, it turns out, must rely upon the subject’s declaration of sexual “inclination towards the female sex” to call this organ a penis (17), a reliance that not only demonstrates that the patient has greater purchase upon sexual knowledge than a surgeon, but also undermines Vacherie’s authority to name this
organ a penis. In keeping with his need to arrest ambivalence, Vacherie decides that the “vulva” must really be a “passage designed to do the office of the urethra” (16–17). Notwithstanding his minute visual and physical examination of the body, Vacherie can only conclude, “ambiguity of sex diffused through the whole body. And upon the whole, it is plain to the Public, is possesst of such exterior distinct marks of the male and female sexes; as make it doubtful to which this equivocal being belongs” (17). Despite his knowledge of the bodily interior, Vacherie is reduced to the public common knowledge of bodily surfaces and the manipulation of language. Forcing ambiguity to testify to the male sex, Vacherie must bend the body’s intransigence to his categories to his will.

Like Vacherie, George Arnauld, surgeon of London, opens his 1750 Dissertation on Hermaphrodites, perhaps inauspiciously by announcing that “whatever degree of accuracy and wisdom nature employs in the composition and frame of the human body, we have oftener seen her swerve from these, and as it were, forget herself” (9). If nature “swerves” from wisdom and accuracy as she composes the human body in much the same way that perversion marks a turning the wrong way, and if she does so more often than not, then what is the ontology of perversion? Perversion’s very grounding in nature allows artists of the period to destabilize this opposition even further to their own benefit. In trying to account for variations among human beings, Arnauld implies that nature becomes bored—she is “tired out and spent with producing every day the same things over and over”—and thus she “throw[s] into her productions a variety but little conformable to her laws” (9–10).

Elaborating upon the very fickleness of nature, Arnauld claims that she sometimes withholds from the body the parts the most necessary; in another subject, she is pleased to multiply them, often allots them situations, connections, and dimensions, the most extraordinary and fantastical; she separates what, according her own laws, should be joined, and joins what ought to remain separate: hence arise those deformities in the strokes or features, those members ill-articulated, those disproportions, those imperfections of organical parts, and those combinations, so monstrous and out of the common road, that it is with difficulty we discover nature even in nature herself.

What began as a list of innocuous varieties soon sprawls into deformities and monstrosities. If nature cannot be found even in nature, and if even nature violates the very laws she presumably creates, the origin of perversion must be found in nature herself. Arnauld pushes this point to its logical conclusion when
he coyly adds that “some affirm Adam was a hermaphrodite before the fall” (14). This reminds us that even God thought of the two sexes and sexual differentiation only as an afterthought. Arnauld does, however, insist that one can “with difficulty” find nature within nature. A true medical specialist can do it, he hopes.

Even more perplexing are Arnaud’s categories for thinking about hermaphrodites. After defining “hermaphrodites” as “him or her, in whom the parts, which form the essential difference between the two sexes, are found together, either perfectly or imperfectly” (11), Arnauld divides hermaphrodites into four categories: male hermaphrodites, female hermaphrodites, perfect hermaphrodites, and imperfect hermaphrodites (14). While his definition already begs the question that if the two parts can be found together, how can they speak to an essential difference, the fact that Arnaud states that the “bad formation of parts of generation cannot be a hermaphrodite” rubs against his categories of imperfect and perfect because the imperfect hermaphrodite is categorically not a hermaphrodite.

Fanning the flames of confusion, Arnauld then describes beings “with a penis of the man, yet without being perforated like it, makes them almost resemble eunuchs, who can enjoy coition without the perfect consummation of the venereal act” (18). Lumping these under “a subject ill organized which can not [sic] properly be called an Hermaphrodite,” Arnaud once again threatens to empty out the signifier of hermaphrodite, launching instead into a chain of signifiers: hermaphrodite, eunuch, tribade. Materiality of the body becomes the materiality of medical language. Yet, since they almost resemble eunuchs, they cannot properly be called eunuchs either. As a result, Arnauld then labels them tribades, those who “have the impudence to act the part of a man with your own sex, and make yourself pass for one” (18).

Seeking to reassure his European readers, Arnauld then informs them that “these sort of women are pretty rare in Europe, but formerly were common in Egypt” (19), though he does remind his readers of the very recent example of Anne Grand-Jean. By the end of what begins as a seemingly clear Dissertation on Hermaphrodites, hermaphrodites have become ontological oxymorons who can only be embodied in a chain of signifiers insofar as the hermaphrodite’s body is always exceeding language. Yet it is their ability to straddle even the most deliberate of categories that makes them testify to the ambiguities of biological sex in the Romantic period and the inability of medical science to arrest biological sex, no matter how elaborate the taxonomic schemes. At the heart of the eighteenth-century hermaphrodite, then, was a resemblance between material-
George Arnaud de Ronsil, from *A Dissertation on Hermaphrodites*, 1750. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland.
ity and language, a kind of textualized body that manifested the ambiguities of sex itself.

The great John Hunter did not think of hermaphroditism as a matter of key concern in animals at least; it took “no great effort or uncommon play in nature to unite them in those animals in which they are commonly separated” (Observations 46). Hunter even looked to hermaphrodites to solve the problem of evolution: what triggered the dimorphism of sex? In a footnote, Hunter remarked, “Is there ever in the genera of animals, that are natural hermaphrodites, a separation of the two parts forming distinct sexes? If there is, it may account for the distinction of sexes ever having happened” (Observations 46). The very fact that he can think beyond human sexual dimorphism, even imagine hermaphrodites to be an evolutionary link between sexual monism and dimorphism, suggests why complementarity did not automatically become law.

Hunter’s thinking about hermaphrodites grows more interesting and more vexed as he contemplates human forms of this monstrosity. Because he thought of the clitoris and penis as essentially the same part, as we have seen, he thought it “impossible for one animal to have both a penis and a clitoris; the part which they have must of course partake of both sexes” (Observations 47). Hunter’s ability to read sameness onto difference prevents him from imagining a human hermaphrodite with both a clitoris and penis.

But, as in medical treatments of hermaphrodites generally, any promised clarity quickly dissolves. Hunter divided hermaphrodites into two classes: the first, “a union of the two sexes, . . . which is the most common; and the parts of the one [sex being] formed like those of the other” (EO 1:249). The sexual parts “are as subject to malformation as is any other part of an animal, and they are subject to a monstrosity [to which] no other part can be well subject” (EO 249). Why does Hunter need a distinction between malformation and monstrosity, especially given that he has just made “bad formation” one of the classes of monsters (EO 248)? Hunter then labels the former, the common hermaphroditism, “natural hermaphrodites,” but even they can “admit of monstrosity” (EO 249). Now the categories blur further: natural hermaphrodites are not necessarily monsters. Once again perversions of nature are partly natural. He elaborates,

We can make out the different parts of the sexes in a monstrous hermaphrodite much better than in the natural one; because we are perfectly well acquainted with the parts in the instances of their perfect division, as in the distinct sexes; but we are not so well acquainted with the distinct parts in the natural hermaphrodite; be-
cause they are not so similar to those in the distinct sexes. If we could have a mon-
ster from a natural hermaphrodite, in which the parts of one of other of the two
sexes only were formed, then we might make out the parts, as they are combined,
in the natural hermaphrodite. There are all degrees of monstrous hermaphrodi-
cal formations. It may be in a small degree or great degree in every part peculiar
to the distinction of the sexes; or it may be only in one of the parts which distin-
guishes the one sex from the other. The occurrence in one sex of a peculiarity of
the other, may be of three kinds. The first is a similarity of a whole that is com-
mon to both sexes, such as the body generally, but which has, naturally a shape pe-
culiar to each: for example, when a woman is shaped like a man, or a man shaped
like a woman. The second is a similarity of a part which is common to both sexes,
but which has naturally a size peculiar to each; as where the (clitoris) of the female
imitates in size the penis of the male; the breast of a male imitating that of the fe-
male; . . . The third is where the peculiarity of one sex is added to another; as an
ovarium added to a male, or a testis added to a female. (249–50)

Among the interesting paradoxes here are the fact that monstrous hermaphro-
dites make normal sexual distinctions more visible than natural hermaphro-
dites; as the categories of monstrous hermaphrodites explode, hermaphroditism
threatens to become more common than natural sexual development, and the
shift to degrees of monstrousity leads to a treatment of degrees of sexual shape of
men and women along with the common part that men and women share, one
that is only distinguished by size. If hermaphroditism is too common, how do
we know what is natural? That hermaphroditism can be tricky to localize exac-
erbates the situation, because it points out that sexual difference itself is not eas-
ily localized. Note, for example, how sexual difference has become linguistic
simile: “shaped like a man.” Hunter’s insistence upon a language of mimesis
whereby the clitoris “imitates” the penis and the breast of the male “imitates”
the female’s runs the danger of reducing sexual difference to mimicry.

Finally, if sexual difference is really about differences of degree and not kind
in that a penis is just a bigger clitoris and that a woman is shaped “like” a man
and vice versa, the very perceptual differences between the sexes that Hunter
seems to take for granted threaten to dissolve away. Thus, it is hardly surpris-
ing that Hunter himself ends his discussion of hermaphroditism in uncertainty.
Describing a child, born at Brownlow Street Hospital, Hunter wrote that he
“had what I should have called a divided scrotum, and the penis lying beneath
the divisions; but it turned out to be a female. The external parts were the two
labia, which were corrugated . . . transversely” (EO 1:250). When Hunter insists that he “should have called” the parts a scrotum—when in fact he claims they are labia—sexual difference has again returned to nominalism, and refuses to be grounded securely in the body. The net gain, however, is a sense of materiality—perhaps a surgeon’s sense of materiality—that is open to rather than resistant to change.

Matthew Baillie’s The Morbid Anatomy of Some of the Most Important Parts of the Human Body (1793), one of the very first books on pathological anatomy published originally in English, also sought to make hermaphrodites a mistake of medical judgment, rather than an ontological ambiguity.57 Baillie’s work reached eight editions (Rodin 23). Although Baillie acknowledges at the outset that there many diseases with “morbid actions only” that do not “produce any change in the structure of parts” of the body (i), pathological anatomy must confine itself to diseases that have altered structures, ones that can be localized, or else anatomy has nothing to add to our knowledge of disease. Baillie shrewdly added a list of symptoms to each chapter in the second edition (Rodin v), an addition that sought to bridge the gap between dead bodies and live ones, but one that threatened to confuse subjectively felt symptoms with scientific localized diseased structures. But once again hermaphrodites raise unanticipated problems: for example, while commenting on mistaken hermaphrodites, Baillie defines an enlarged clitoris as a natural defect, yet if the defect is natural, what separates pathological anatomy from anatomy itself? Baillie writes,

An enlarged clitoris is also a natural defect. At birth, the clitoris in such a case is often larger than the penis of a male child of the same age. It has a well formed prepuce and glans, together with a fissure at its extremity, so as to resemble almost exactly the external appearance of the male organs. These cases have given rise to a mistake, with regard to the sex, and females have been often baptized for males. On most, however, where there is an enlarged clitoris, the sex may be determined by the following circumstances. The labia are well formed, and when handled, no round bodies are felt in them, like the testicles. The fissure at the extremity of the glans does not lead to any canal of the urethra, but under the glans, and at the posterior extremity of the fissure, there is an opening which leads immediately to the bladder. I should believe, that by putting a small straight probe into this orifice, and passing it into the bladder, it could be at once determined on most occasions, whether the child was male or female. If the child should live to grow up, the clitoris enlarges, but, I believe, not in the same proportion as the penis would do. It
is a most unfortunate monstrosity, because it depresses the mind, by a consciousness of imperfect formation in a very important part of the body. Such cases have often been mistaken for hermaphrodites. (283–85)

Baillie tellingly classifies the mistaken hermaphrodite under “diseased appearances of the external parts” (283), firmly rooting the elongated clitoris within pathology. Notwithstanding the discipline of pathological anatomy, the troubling ontological issues that Baillie sought to extirpate will not quite go away. For example, if an enlarged clitoris is a “natural defect,” how does one use the enlarged clitoris to explain the possibility of unnatural Sapphic desire? And how does one know an enlarged clitoris from a normal one? How large is too large? Baillie must make sure that the hermaphroditic patients he describes had no desire for either sex. “Natural defect,” I might add, merely substitutes one ontological confusion—how can defects be mistakes of nature?—for another, how can one sex look like another? If one needs to physically probe the body to determine its sex, sexual difference cannot be a visual difference. Also, why does Baillie limit himself to “most cases”: what does it mean when the scientific probe can’t invariably penetrate to the truth? Finally, I note the shift from scientific probing of the body to belief: the doctor believes that the woman’s clitoris will not continue to grow as a man’s penis does. What beyond clitoris envy might allow him to ground this claim in mere belief? Once again, the two sexes threaten to dissolve into one.

In his appendix to the *Morbid Anatomy*, Baillie treats a second and perhaps even more disturbing example of hermaphroditism, lumping this one under “diseased appearances of the vagina” (Appendix 138). Despite admitting that she is a real hermaphrodite, Baillie seeks through classification under diseases of the vagina to do away with ambiguous ontology and to locate hermaphroditism firmly within the female sex and within pathology. “Appearance,” however, threatens to undermine the authority of pathology. He writes, “She wears the apparel of a woman. She has a remarkably masculine look, with plain features, but no beard. She had never menstruated; and on this account she was desired by the lady with whom she lived as a servant, to become an out patient at the Nottingham Hospital. . . . The vagina was found to terminate in a cul-de-sac, two inches from the external surface of the labia. The head of the clitoris, and the external orifice of the meatus urinae, appeared as in the natural structure of a female, but there were no nymphae. The labia were more pendulous than usual, and contained each of them a body resembling a testicle of a mod-
erate size, with its chord. The mammæ resembled those of a woman. The person had no desire or partiality whatever for either sex” (Appendix 139–40). Here, masculine look collides with feminine dress, and natural structures of the female collide with labia that are really scrotums. Baillie elides the appearance of disease in the female vagina with her physical look of masculinity, an elision that attempts to make appearance have scientific weight. Yet, whereas in the first example, Baillie’s medical knowledge could arrest the mystery at least provisionally—that hermaphrodite was really a mistaken perception—here the doctor can only speak the language of resemblance and appearances, a language that commits to perception but not to claims of ontology. It turns out that both the mistaken and real hermaphrodite only lead to claims about perception. Baillie’s very insistence upon resemblances raises the question if sex is more about appearance or ontology.

Like Baillie and Hunter, Everard Home tries to make hermaphrodites an epistemological problem in his “Account of the Dissection of an Hermaphrodite Dog,” published in the Royal Society’s *Philosophical Transactions* (1799). Not surprisingly, he comments that, “in the female, there are two malformations of the organs of generation, which give an appearance to the external parts, tending to *mislead the judgment* respecting sex” (162; emphasis mine). The first is a large clitoris, which he attributes to a hot climate. Home believes the accounts of large clitorises are wholly exaggerated, except in the case of Mandingo women, one of whom had a clitoris of three inches in length (163). That is to say, he hopes that British women do not suffer so. “The large clitoris is very common among Mandingo.” The second is a prolapsed uterus, which can resemble a penis (164). Baillie had also argued that an inverted vagina “has sometimes been mistaken for that species of monstrous formation called hermaphrodite” (280). 58

Lapsed judgment, though, cannot account for all hermaphrodites. To wit, Home cites Baillie’s second example of a person with a pendulous labia containing a testicle. He also cites the example of a man who gave suck to a child of two months (171). Home then speculates why such examples can occur. He writes,

In considering the influence of the testicles upon the constitution of the male, which is rendered so evident by contrasting it with those cases in which the testicles are imperfect, it leads to a supposition, that the ovaria may have a similar influence upon the constitution of the female; and that when the ovaria are imperfectly formed, or when the testicles are substituted for them, although the external parts are decidedly female, the person may grow up, deprived of that feminine
character which the constitution would have acquired, if the ovaria had been capable of producing their influence upon the body. To this cause may be attributed the unnatural bias which some women have shewn, to pass through life in the character of men. The circumstance of some women, after the time of breeding is over, (at which period the influence of the ovaria may be considered as lost to the constitution,) approaching nearer to the male in appearance, and acquiring a beard. (172–73)

I have quoted this passage at some length because it is much more complicated than it might seem. Although sex looks anatomical given that testicles and ovaries influence the body, there are a number of strange features to this discussion that anatomy does not quite explain. First, Home thinks about ovaries and testicles as interchangeable rather than as incommensurate organs. Second, he is quite comfortable analogizing from the male to the female: analogy bridges the gaps between the sexes, a point that undermines complementarity. Ovaries have similar influence as the testicles. Third, Home opens the door to bodies “with decidedly female parts” that nevertheless lack a female character, a gap that insists that gender does not necessarily coincide with sex. The presence of such a gap should undermine the idea that the Romantics understood sex as gender. Fourth, when women undergo menopause and begin to look like men, if the ovaries no longer influence the woman, what accounts for her transformation into masculinity? This masculinization suggests that the sexes are really one masculine sex until the ovaries take over. If not, what anatomical feature accounts for this masculinization? And how can an arrested ovary explain an increased masculinization if it is the testicle that performs the office of masculinization? In any event, this 1799 article should put definitively to bed the idea that until sexology and the rise of psychiatric knowledge, anatomy exhausted sex. Sex in this period was unusually recalcitrant to material fixity.

All of this conjecture leads to a stunning conclusion. Home suggests that all human beings at the outset have hermaphroditic potential insofar as the “ovum, previous to impregnation, [has] no distinction of sex, but [is] formed as to be equally fitted to become a male or a female foetus; and that it is the process of impregnation which marks the distinction, and conduces to produce wither testicles or ovaria, out of the same materials” (175). Home did not know how close to the truth he was: that the clitoris and penis begin from the same embryonic structure and until about the eighth week coexist in the fetus (Laqueur 1990 169). His conclusion nonetheless undermines the notion of complementarity
inasmuch as all fetuses are potential hermaphrodites: they all have the capacity
to grow both sets of genitals. He adds further that “the clitoris, originally, ap-
ppears therefore equally fitted to be a clitoris or penis” (Home 176). Because
ovaries and testes are made out of the very same material, sex and bodily materi-
ality are understood as flexible rather than as given. Moreover, if ovaria can sub-
stitute for the testes, this implies that hermaphroditic potential is not necessar-
ily limited to the fetus. Although he began by linking hermaphrodites with
“errors of judgment,” then Home cannot wish away hermaphrodites by stronger
professionalization, greater knowledge. The ambiguities of sex are here to stay
because we all have hermaphroditic potential. Such potential suggests that the
division of sexes into complementarity can be undone and that the human body,
as Blake imagined, can be reunited into a whole in spite of its sexual divisions.

We still argue today over what the Romantics understood about biological
sex. Anne Fausto-Sterling has sought to destabilize and dismantle the two-sex
model, which has become ontology, doxa. Focusing on intersexual births (esti-
mated as 1.7% of all births), Fausto-Sterling proposes instead that there are
really five sexes: males, females, herms (hermaphrodites), merms (pseudo-male
hermaphrodites), and ferms (female pseudo-hermaphrodites) (78). By acknowl-
edging the ontology of the intersexed as legitimate and natural, Fausto-Sterling
hopes that these new categories will help stop what is for her the barbarous prac-
tice of infant genital surgery, which can cause scarring, often requires multiple
surgeries, and can eliminate the possibility of having an orgasm. In a larger view,
Fausto-Sterling’s five sexes are designed to get at how gender and sex become
somatic facts (235). Cautioning that sex is a developmental biocultural system and
not a static entity, Fausto-Sterling reminds us that anatomic function and how
one experiences one’s sexual body change over time (242). Like Fausto-Sterling,
Joan Roughgarden examines the ways in which biology has understated and
pathologized the sexual diversity of the animal kingdom, and she even suggests
that hermaphroditism is the norm of the animal kingdom (2004 31). Moreover,
she argues that, although biologists understand males as the producers of small
gametes while females produce large gametes, they often wrongly assume that
the gamete size binary translates into corresponding “binaries in body types,
behaviour, and life history” (26). Even this seemingly secure definition of sex in
terms of gamete size can be undermined if we consider that although the egg is
about a million times the size of a sperm, the totality of sperm (1,000,000) in an
ejaculate is roughly equivalent to the size of the egg.59

In his study of the neuroanatomy of the libido, Donald Pfaff agrees that sex
is part of a developmental biocultural system, and he illustrates this by showing how in arousal the “hormones as internal signals have molecular sequelae that interact with synaptic inputs from the external stimuli to control behavior” (48). Warning that it is incorrect to state that hormones control behavior, Pfaff argues instead that sexual arousal is a complex orchestration of external and internal influences (100) involving, among other actors, the hindbrain, midbrain, and the forebrain, physiological and biochemical processes in the testicles and ovaries, the endocrine glands, and other anatomical pathways.

In sum, because of competing ways of thinking about sex in Romanticism, sexuality was rife for liberation. Not only did a one-sex model undermine the idea that the sexes were both incommensurably different and complementary, but also perversion had the power to undermine ideas of the natural, especially those like feminine sensibility that buttressed patriarchy. To make matters worse, when even nature makes mistakes or swerves from her path, why should human beings be punished for similar errors? Together, such medical concerns as a fundamentally neurological body, castration, eunuchs, the descent of the testicle, and hermaphroditism made it possible to think in terms of sexual equality. If these topics further underscored the legacy of the one-sex model, the French Revolution made it difficult for hierarchy to be naturalized in a sexed body. Insofar as puberty transformed one feminized sex into two, it brought to crisis both sexual difference and the necessary heterosexuality of human desire, and it had the potential to do so within every human body. The body’s plasticity and the mobility of sex explain why Voltaire, Bentham, and Percy Shelley would turn to puberty to help explain same-sex desire. By aligning same-sex desire with a natural rite of passage, they helped universalize homosexual desire and suggest that desire was based upon resemblance rather than difference. Read in this light, perversion and normalcy were part of a continuum, not a binary opposition, and thus the trick was to persuade others of this continuum and its consequences. Finally, to the extent that it was possible to see sex as something inscribed upon the body by both biology and culture, one could begin to question whose interests were served by the forms of inscription sex took.