Ancient questions about the causes and nature of pleasure were revived in the eighteenth century with a new consideration of its ethical and political significance. Rowan Boyson reminds us that philosophers of the Enlightenment, unlike modern thinkers, often represented pleasure as shared rather than selfish, and she focuses particularly on this approach to the philosophy and theory of pleasure. Through close reading of Enlightenment and Romantic texts, in particular the poetry and prose of William Wordsworth, Boyson elaborates on this central theme. Covering a wide range of texts by philosophers, theorists and creative writers from over the centuries, she presents a strong defence of the Enlightenment ideal of pleasure, drawing out its rich political, as well as intellectual and aesthetic, implications.

Rowan Boyson is a Research Fellow at King’s College, Cambridge.
This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those ‘great national events’ that were ‘almost daily taking place’ : the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of ‘literature’ and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

For a complete list of titles published see end of book.
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