Sexualities in Victorian Britain

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In the oft-cited conclusion to *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Charles Darwin replies to those who find their evolution from animals distasteful by arguing that he would as soon claim descent from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper... as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practises infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions. (919-20)

As I hope to make clear in the following discussion, this passage is caught in a rhetorical dilemma central to Darwin’s treatment of primitive humanity in the *Descent*: having anthropomorphized animals in the image of modern humans to make evolutionary continuity more plausible, he had then to account for apparent violations of instinctual behavior in savages. By linking savage depravity to the breakdown of what are implicitly posited as natural family and social relationships, this passage also suggests the crucial role played by sexual conduct in Victorian (and later) attempts to construct the boundary that demarcates the fully human from the animal and to chart the progress of civilization. From the Victorian period on, such accounts have been dominated by two strategies: they have tended to make social power depend upon the ability to exercise sexual choice, and they have attempted to explain, and by implication to justify, specific gender roles by constructing a history for them. Taking the power relations of Victorian society as the end whose evolution needed to be accounted for, both Darwin and the anthropologists who influenced him made bourgeois gender roles a functional part of their genealogies while in the process writing Victorian conceptions of female nature back into the past as biological and cultural norms. Because of inherent conflicts between Darwin’s conception of sexual selection and the demands of his-
torical continuity, however, the Descent affords significant insights into the ideological contradictions that this kind of scientific explanation often conceals.

The exact nature of the continuity between animals and humans where gendered behavior is concerned has proved a complicated and controversial issue in the debate over the cultural meanings of evolutionary theory. Among the more recent contributors to the discussion have been analysts of domestic ideology, who have stressed the importance of female coyness and choice in Darwin’s construction of animal mating behavior. Nancy Armstrong argues that Darwin needed to rule out force as a natural basis for human superiority in order to maintain the pre-eminence of a Victorian middle class shaped by the female domestication of male competitive instincts. For her the depiction in the Descent of female animals choosing the mates that most please them substitutes sexual exchange for competition as the basis for natural order. Having shaped animal behavior by domestic models, Darwin naturally prefers his heroic monkey to the vision of a primitive culture that is not a culture at all because it suppresses female choice (Armstrong 221–24). Although focussing more on female modesty than female prerogatives, Ruth Bernard Yeazell similarly argues that Darwin produced a “feminized narrative” in the Descent by projecting onto animal behavior a “courtship plot” drawn from domestic fiction (see 219–28). While contributing important insights about the shaping of Darwin’s narrative, such analyses do not fully acknowledge the argument for woman’s biological and intellectual inferiority and for male agency and choice, arguments that historians of science like Cynthia Russett and Evelleen Richards have identified as fundamental to the Descent’s reconstruction of human evolution (see also Alaya, Hubbard, and Mosedale for related critiques of the evolutionary biologizing of female nature in the nineteenth century).

Although I will draw more heavily on this latter position in the discussion that follows, it will become apparent that both views are made possible by Darwin’s contradictory treatment of the continuity between animals and human beings where sexual selection is concerned. My argument will trace most of these contradictions to his attempts to impose a biologically consistent explanation upon an anthropological narrative of culture implicitly at odds with his. While treating Victorian conventions of sexual conduct as in some way natural to animal behavior, Darwin also relied on anthropological reconstructions of early human life that, as Elizabeth Fee has argued, glorified middle-class patriarchy precisely because it was the product of civilization, not nature (“Sexual Politics” 88–94). Where those anthropological narratives began their construction of culture on this side of the border between animal and man, and took savage depravity as the initial chapter in the human story, Darwin’s origin myth, on the other hand, depended upon biological continuity to explain the derivation of cultural forms. By shifting his definition of instinctual sexual behavior in animals, he could project a version of the modern patriarchal family back across that border between animal and man. But this rhetorical move left him unable fully to explain what had subverted the sexual prerogatives of female animals or had produced the “unnatural”
behavior of the earliest savage cultures. The result was a narrative implicitly fragmented into rival discourses of continuity and rupture, progress and regression.

After a brief summary of the anthropological narratives that Darwin relied upon, I will examine the rhetorical problems that resulted from his attempts to accommodate their history of sexual desire to his own conception of how sexual selection must have worked among human beings. The demands of continuity cut in conflicting ways across his narrative: the vision of primeval patriarchy, which guaranteed that human sexuality would eventually fit modern paradigms, undercut in significant ways the continuum he elsewhere tried to forge between animal and human courtship and between the advance of intelligence and the development of civilization. My analysis of the ways ideological assumptions control narrative reconstruction in this Victorian debate will end by considering its modern legacy in our continuing efforts to justify cultural order by tracing its sexual etiology. As Donna Haraway demonstrates in her analysis of the “family of man” constructed by modern science and of feminist counterpoints to it, the contestation of what it means to be generically human still relies on defining “universal man” in terms that make certain gender roles crucial to the transition from nature to culture, and that conceal ethnocentric interests in the guise of timeless truths (186, 197).

George Stocking has demonstrated how the ethnology of men like Edward Tylor, John McLennan, and John Lubbock responded during the 1860s to the issues raised by evolutionary thought (Victorian 145–69). Just as Darwin had in the Origin attempted to obviate the need for supernatural intervention in the development of biological life, so too their anthropological reconstruction of early society aimed to refute claims like those made by the Duke of Argyll and Archbishop Whately that humankind could not have made the step from savagery to civilization without supernatural help (and thus that modern savages must have degenerated from higher levels). Setting out with the assumption that social development, like the rest of the natural world, was governed by uniform laws, the anthropologists constructed a single scale of achievement by which all cultures had progressed from savagery to civilization (Stocking, Victorian 169–70). On this scale, contemporary savages (like the Tierra del Fuegians whose conduct so shocked the young Darwin, or the myriad other peoples whose “licentious” behavior never ceased to appal Victorian travelers) were taken, with few qualifications, to approximate stages of what all humanity must have been like in prehistoric times; they became cultural fossils in which Victorians could trace the origins left behind by the more progressive races (Bowler, Invention 120).

Central to defining human civilization was marriage and the construction of family relationships it implied. Confronted with ethnographic evidence that mod-

ern patriarchy could not be considered timeless, innate, or divinely ordained, social anthropologists plotted the evolution of sexual relations as the triumph of self-control (read "civilization") over the natural (read "bestial") man. This is especially true of John McLennan's *Primitive Marriage* (1865) and Sir John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man* (1870), the works Darwin cited most often in his discussions of primitive sexuality. Both men took the obvious moral depravity of savage people (especially of savage women) as evidence that the earliest primitive sexual relations must have been similarly depraved. McLennan charted sexual relations from their origins in promiscuity to communal marriage, which made paternity difficult to establish and thus explained the reckoning of descent matrilineally (64–70). Female infanticide (inevitable since women's inability to feed or defend themselves made them a liability in times of stress [58]) caused a shortage of females, which was resolved by polyandry (the sharing of one woman by several husbands) in endogamous tribes, and by wife-capture in exogamous ones. Paternity became more certain as the "highest" development of polyandry affiliated one woman with several brothers (78) and as captured wives lost their matrilineal rights and became the possessions of individual men (99–101). With the growth of property, patrilineal systems naturally developed to control the descent of wealth to sons (98). Polygamy and finally monogamy gradually completed the sequence leading up to the enlightened present.

Lubbock generally endorsed these same stages of development, although insisting that polyandry could never have been anything but an aberration (153) and casting doubt on the prevalence of female infanticide (143); he instead considered exogamy and infanticide as consequences of marriage by capture rather than its cause (107–08). The simple desire for exclusive possession of women drove men from communal marriages to wife-capture. The obvious (to Lubbock) advantages to women of being sexually subject to a single man rather than to the tribe would eventually encourage them to embrace monogamous and polygamous relationships within the group as well (110–11). In Lubbock's meliorist history, male domination of individual women created the possibility of marital and paternal love that had triumphed in the compassionate marriages of his own day. For both men, the narrative of increasing male control did not inscribe the defeat of female power (as, for instance, did the matriarchal theories of J. J. Bachofen, which both rejected, or the socialist narrative of family origin constructed by Friedrich Engels out of a similar analysis), but rather celebrated the rise of that female prestige essential to advancing civilization, a prestige possible only when woman was removed from the public exercise of labor and sexuality (Fedigan 31; see also Fee, "Science" 191–92; Coward).

Darwin's relationship to such narratives in the *Descent* is a complicated one. In what Stocking describes as "an ultimate ambiguity in sociocultural evolutionary thinking," both Darwin and the anthropologists needed "a conception of man's precultural place in nature" as the starting point for explaining the origin of humanity's characteristic traits. But where Darwin reasoned forward from a pre-
assumed animal ancestor, the anthropologists reasoned backward from modern men, using the comparative method to discern traits common in all savage cultures and projecting these back to create a "hypothetical precultural state from which to think man forward again." This extrapolation left a gap between man and the animal world and wound up stressing the psychic unity and uniform development of all humankind rather than the evolution of difference (Victorian 176–78). Moreover, where social evolutionists tended to make morality the product of human sociability, Darwin imagined our simian ancestors as already social and attributed the development of human morality to increasing intelligence (Bowler, *Theories* 157). Thus, although such ethnographic accounts served Darwin's purposes by accounting for human development without supernatural intervention, by relying on them in the *Descent* he found himself entangled in assumptions that were, in important rhetorical respects, antithetical to his own argumentative purposes.

The persuasive power of the *Descent* depended upon Darwin's ability to provide a completely naturalistic explanation for the origins of human nature—upon his success in showing that no supernatural intervention was necessary to fill up the "numberless gradations" (445) that separated human intelligence and emotions from those of animal life. Anthropomorphizing animal behavior certainly made his argument more persuasive; indeed, John Durant argues, doing so was the logical extension of Darwin's conviction of the fundamental continuity between animal and human mentality (291–92). Nowhere was this process more pronounced than in his treatment of animal mating behavior, which projected back into nature the conventions of Victorian sexuality: coy females who had to be courted by avid males, from whom they finally selected the most attractive—or perhaps simply the least distasteful (579). If casting animal sexuality in the terminology of courtship, marriage, and spousal fidelity—see, for instance, his discussion of "marriage arrangements" in fish (578), mating rituals among birds (750), or the romantic preferences of female dogs (837–38)—helped soothe otherwise disquieting reminders of how literally human sexuality was rooted in animal behavior, it also posed serious rhetorical problems when Darwin came to confront the patently "unnatural" sexual behavior of primitive societies drawn from Victorian ethnographic literature.

Having fallen into what Greta Jones calls "the trap of progressive developmentalism" in an effort to make plausible the continuity necessary for the evolution of human mentality out of animal faculties, Darwin readily endorsed the assumption that savage customs mirrored primeval life and that now, as then, such people occupied the positions closest to animals on a hierarchical scale of human societies. Although positioning savages as a missing link made the incremental development of man out of animal a more plausible idea, savage sexuality offered a primal scene hardly continuous with his chivalrous depiction of animal courtship—a contradiction that never arose for McLennan or Lubbock, who considered "marriage" an inappropriate analogy for animal behavior and implicitly denied the psychic unity between humans and animals.
In a strategy that we shall find typical, Darwin early in the *Descent* salvages continuity by locating the origins of our sexual behavior in a historical moment in which "man" is somehow proleptically present without yet being fully human. When Darwin first confronts infanticide as a check to population increase among savages in chapter two, he imagines a liminal hominid stage where "natural" behavior still reigned:

If we look back to an extremely remote epoch, before man had arrived at the dignity of manhood, he would have been guided more by instinct and less by reason than are the lowest savages at the present time. Our early semi-human progenitors would not have practised infanticide or polyandry; for the instincts of the lower animals are never so perverted as to lead them regularly to destroy their own offspring, or to be quite devoid of jealousy. (430)

He can only achieve this uneasy compromise, however, by making increasing rationality, elsewhere the engine of moral development, the cause of at least temporary regression once man becomes fully human. In chapter four, for instance, Darwin finds it highly probable that "any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or a conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man" (471–72). And yet in Darwin's analysis, it was precisely savage man's increasing reason that led him to violate the "parental and filial affections" that supposedly provided the basis for moral behavior.

In the *Descent's* second edition Darwin himself oddly calls attention to the implicitly degenerative thrust of his interpretation by quoting, without comment, the *Spectator's* response to his characterization of our "semi-human progenitors." The reviewer had argued that Darwin here reintroduced "a new doctrine of the fall of man" by showing that "the instincts of the higher animals are far nobler than the habits of the savage races of men" and that "man's gain of knowledge was the cause of a temporary but long-enduring moral deterioration as indicated by the many foul customs, especially as to marriage, of savage tribes." Silence seems to have meant consent on Darwin's part, even if he could hardly have endorsed the reviewer's further celebration of the *Descent* as a "far more wonderful vindication of theism than Paley's *Natural Theology*" ("Mr. Darwin's *Descent"* 320). The conflicts between biology, morality, and rationality that problematized narrative continuity at this point would proliferate as he elaborated his theory of sexual selection.

The seemingly irrelevant intrusion of polyandry as a perversion of male jealousy into the discussion of population checks (quoted above) hints at what was most responsible for subverting continuity in Darwin's narrative of human development: his assumptions about sexual selection. A closer examination of the vari-
uous purposes served by this kind of selection in the *Descent* will suggest why it had these disruptive rhetorical effects. Darwin uses this theory to explain dimorphism between the sexes of various species, arguing that among animals female choice of the more attractive males would give those males greater reproductive advantage and hence increase the incidence of their attractive traits in their male offspring. Sexual selection provided Darwin with another means of demonstrating how the "progressive development of various bodily structures and of certain mental qualities" (918) could have been shaped through physiological processes. At the same time, sexual selection tacitly allowed some shaping influence to ideas, values, and will, rather than leaving human evolution exclusively to the apparent randomness of natural selection (Beer 184). Through its operation, Darwin notes, the influence of love and jealousy had produced male courage, strength, and size, and shaped the human body and musical abilities; the exercise of choice had developed the higher mental abilities necessary to discriminate difference (918). Sexual selection was also intended to explain forms not attributable to natural selection (particularly human racial difference, as noted below), and to take the explanation of beauty out of the hands of the natural theologians (Durant 298). But Darwin’s attempts to use this form of choice to explain human gender roles wound up destabilizing some of the arguments for continuity that it was theorized to support.

As feminist scholars like Richards and Russett have argued, this instability arose from Darwin’s attempts to derive a biologically consistent explanation for what he saw as woman’s “natural” inferiority to man in the present. He could only achieve this by positing a significant reversal in the operation of sexual selection between animals and humans. Although females were imagined as coy and passive in both animal and human courtship, Darwin assumed that in the animal world final choice of a mate almost always rested with the females, which explained why among animals males were usually more physically distinctive than females. But by the same token, the greater physical beauty of women demonstrated that men must have since gained the power of choice in human society. Darwin’s attempt at explanation—“Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman, and in the savage state he keeps her in a far more abject state of bondage than does the male of any other animal; therefore it is not surprising that he should have gained the power of selection” (901)—is implicitly contradictory in several ways.

First are difficulties with the analogy to animal behavior. Male animals, like primitive man, were also for the most part larger and stronger than females as well, and for the same reasons—the need to compete against other males for females. Yet male animals did not gain the power of sexual selection. Indeed, Darwin was troubled by the lack of evidence for male choice among animals, as shown by his correspondence with Wallace on this point (Richards 70). In other respects, natural selection would favor strength and intelligence in male and female animals alike, given their similar struggles for existence. To make natural selection explain the manifest mental inferiority of the human female (proved by her historical failure to excel in any cultural achievement), Darwin had also to posit certain sexual
relationships as intrinsic to human behavior. He argued that the tasks necessary to defend and support their families—fighting enemies, capturing animals, and fashioning tools, for instance—would have favored greater male intelligence (as well as maintaining men’s greater physical strength even after women were no longer won through combat [873–74]). But as Russett makes clear, this logic assumes that among humans, the female of the species had already been exempted in important respects from the struggle for life (83–84); no longer responsible for feeding and protecting herself, she would be destined always to remain inferior to the male whose intelligence was constantly being honed by his need to care for her and their offspring. Darwin’s reconstruction of the origins of male selection relied on a similar assumption. He imagined that from primeval times the ability of the strongest and most vigorous men to support and defend their families would have guaranteed them the power of sexual choice and greater reproductive success (899–900). Thus the construction of a biological rationale for gendered behavior required that he project a patriarchal model of the family, with its dominant males and dependent females, back into the no-(hu)man’s land between biology and culture.

Although Darwin’s logic about female inferiority is in keeping with that of the anthropologists and other theorists who equated the development of human civilization with the increasing social differentiation between men and women (and the female dependency it implied), it made more problematic his attempt to construct a continuum from his own idealized precultural past to the conditions of savage life as documented by anthropological accounts. For instance, the fact that savage women had to labor just as hard as, if not harder than, savage men provided a convincing example of cultural backwardness to anthropologists. But Darwin had to treat the contribution of savage women to their family’s subsistence as a matter of mere strength, and not intelligence, in order to preserve the mental imbalance between the sexes that was necessary to his argument (872–73). Most problematic for his attempts to use savages as missing links were primitive sexual practices that contradicted his tacit assumption that male choice and the sexual control of women it implied were in some sense fundamental to becoming fully human. Some of the obstacles to sexual selection among savages that Darwin discusses in chapter twenty, like “so-called communal marriages or promiscuous intercourse,” are instances in which savage men in a sense behave most like male animals, eager to take any female available, but where females lack the animal prerogative—if not the desire—to choose.

Darwin responds to this apparent discrepancy in his model of evolutionary continuity not by questioning the lack of “natural” female discrimination in savage women (which the anthropological account took as the sign of their obvious moral depravity), but by shifting his definition of what constitutes natural male desire. Side-stepping the issue of female choice among higher animals, Darwin uses quadruped behavior to exemplify a universal principle of male jealousy that casts doubt on the prevalence of “absolutely promiscuous intercourse . . . in times past, shortly before man attained to his present rank in the zoological scale” (895). The hedging in this last phrase is significant, since it once again allows Darwin to ex-
tend the principle of male selection and control of “the more attractive females” into that hazy borderland between biology and culture.

The incompatibility of his history of male desire with that of the anthropologists registers itself in the argumentative tone of his commentary on their models. His uneasiness about the inconsistencies that savage sexuality posed to his developmental scheme is evident in his vacillation over whether monogamous and polygamous marriages among savages represent a retention of custom from primeval times, or a return to “some form of marriage, after passing through a state of promiscuous intercourse” (896). He waffled in a similar way on the practice of savage polyandry, which presented the most obvious subversion of the patriarchal domination of sexual selection that he considered fundamental to human desire. Although agreeing with the anthropologists that it could only have resulted from a shortage of women, induced by female infanticide, polyandry struck him as indicating so perverse a breakdown of male jealousy that he considered it more likely to be “a natural stepping-stone to communal marriages or almost promiscuous intercourse; though the best authorities” argued just the reverse (899). For Darwin, of course, as for his contemporaries, the preferred solution to population pressure was not infanticide but female chastity, which he believed would be “inculcated” by male jealousy as soon as “marriage, whether polygamous, or monogamous, becomes common” (488). Here he was certainly in agreement with Lubbock in making male possessiveness the engine of higher culture, although it is also worth noting that by tacitly accepting McLennan’s argument that infanticide would naturally result from females’ incapacity to support themselves, he implies that another indicator of male control (female dependency) in effect preceded, if not caused, sexual practices that at least temporarily subverted that very possessiveness.

The other obstacles to free sexual selection among savages that Darwin gleans from the anthropological record—infant betrothals, treating women like slaves, and marriage by capture—are also cases where the appropriate male desire for a specific woman was apparently blocked by cultural practice. He could argue on the basis of modern evidence that infant betrothals did not prevent the more attractive women from being later stolen or taken by force by stronger men, and insisted that even slaves would be chosen for their appearance (898). Although when capturing wives by force savages could exercise little choice over individuals, once this practice had been ritualized by barter, men would bargain for the most attractive women (897).

The shifting logic in Darwin’s argument about the constitution of human sexuality, and how far back in our prehistory it could be projected, was rooted in implicit differences he had with the anthropologists about the “natural” shape of human desire. McLennan, for instance, made clear that the self-control of a naturally promiscuous male desire was the hard-won fruit of cultural development. In his response to a letter from Darwin on the ordering of primitive sexual development, he argued against Darwin’s model: polygyny and monogamy enforced by jealousy, female infanticide inducing polyandry, leading to promiscuity and an
eventual return to polygyny and monogamy. McLennan used examples of lower-class male behavior to demonstrate that a relative indifference to specific women (and a capacity for combination with other men to gain their sexual ends that animals lacked) would have made primeval promiscuity more likely than monogamy (Studies 50–55). Both he and Lubbock considered savage promiscuity the obvious sign of inadequate moral development and treated the monogamous marriage of a dominant man to a dependent female as a cultural achievement that only certain civilizations—and certain classes—had proved capable of attaining by learning to control their “natural” impulses. As we have seen, however, in order to maintain a naturalistic continuity between animal and man, Darwin needed to model male jealousy and female dependency as already the “natural” shape taken by prehuman sociability.

The importance of insisting on the primeval purity of male sexual choice and control was reinforced by a significant subtext in the Descent: Darwin’s desire to explain the origins of racial difference. Being able to assign no survival value to at least the physical differences among the various races of mankind, Darwin argued that sexual, rather than natural, selection was the more probable cause of racial differentiation. A substantial portion of chapters nineteen and twenty, where Darwin focusses on sexual selection with relation to man, is devoted to demonstrating that different races have different preferences where beauty is concerned; for instance, the great vanity shown by savage women is taken as evidence of how important their appearance is to their men (884), although examples of male concern with appearance also offered the possibility of some female choice that would in the long run reinforce tribal preferences (887–88). Once groups of humans had begun to disperse and become isolated geographically, the continued selection of mates according to these preferences would have molded physical diversity into distinct races.

However, sexual selection could only have produced such effects in that era before man came to practice infanticide and infant betrothal or to view his wives as nothing more than slaves (908), and so it was all the more imperative to project that idyllic stage of patriarchal choice further back into the evolutionary past. Pushing racial division into a “very remote epoch” (908) of human life allowed Darwin unconsciously to accomplish the same end as A. R. Wallace: to accommodate racist polygenist ends to his own monogenist argument for racial origins. He could consider “the so-called races of man” subspecies of a common progenitor while still rooting their origin in a time so distant that it was impossible to say just where in “the series of forms graduating insensibly from some ape-like creature to man as he now exists” the term “man” became appropriate (541). “Man” was thus always already racially distinct; race could remain a prerational, precultural essence so long as the principle of (mainly male) sexual selection (and the family structures it presumed) predated the naming of the species.

Darwin’s response to the anthropological evidence of savage sexual “perversion” discussed in chapter twenty is summed up by his reassertion of the same themes at the beginning of chapter two. He conjures up an edenic hominid state
before advancing reason had distorted natural sexual instincts. "At a very early period," he argues, "before man attained to his present rank in the scale, many of his conditions would be different from what now obtains amongst savages. Judging from the analogy of the lower animals," he would be a monogamist or polygamist, and the most powerful of his number would freely choose the most attractive females and would not treat his women as mere slaves. Insufficiently advanced in intellect to foresee the strain that rearing many children, especially females, would place on the tribe's struggle for life, primitive parents would be governed less by reason and more by instinct, especially "one of the strongest of all instincts, common to all the lower animals, namely the love of their young offspring." There would therefore be no female infanticide and none of the sexual perversions that result from it and subvert (male) sexual selection in savage society once advancing intelligence has made foresight possible (898-99).

Ultimately, Darwin could only maintain the continuity between animals and primeval man by undercutting the continuity between primeval man and savage. He is once again left with the contradiction that parental and filial devotion had been sacrificed in savages as the price of the transition into human reason, even though he elsewhere posited advancing intelligence as the faculty that creates higher morality out of just such social instincts. Having argued that the development of moral behavior is spurred by a higher mental ability to anticipate the effects of conduct on the welfare of the individual and the group, when he continues his narrative into modern times Darwin finds himself in the position of having to conclude somewhat lamely that "with the less civilised nations reason often errs, and many bad customs and base superstitions . . . are then esteemed as high virtues" (913). His narratives of natural desire and of advancing reason could finally not be joined seamlessly together.

III

When Darwin turned his attention away from the past to the functioning of sexual selection in modern human beings, his argument continued to be destabilized by conflicts between the demands of nature and those of civilization. He had wrestled throughout the Descent with the dilemma that although natural selection strengthened the social sympathies, their development blocked the functioning of natural selection and thus endangered further progress (Greene 106). At the end of this work, similar concerns led him to address the ways human sexual behavior threatens to subvert the survival of the fittest, and to call for those "in any marked degree inferior in body or mind" to abstain from marriage (918).

The relationship of property to fitness is a complicated one in Darwin's analysis and breaks down along gendered lines that can be traced back to his assumptions about patriarchy. The ethnological construction of history had of course treated the accumulation of property as essential to advancing civilization, and Darwin seems to assume that the impoverished are by definition less fit (919). But he is also
troubled by the way property subverts sexual, and by extension, natural, selection in human society. "During primordial times . . . both sexes, if the females as well as the males were permitted to exert any choice, would choose their partners not for mental charms, or property, or social position, but almost solely for external appearance," thus allowing sexual selection to operate in its purest form. Although he believes that civilized man is "impelled by nearly the same motives as in the lower animals, when they are left to their own free choice" in choosing a mate—that is, by physical attraction—and that he is superior to animals in his regard for woman's "mental charms and virtues," Darwin still laments that modern man is "strongly attracted by mere wealth and rank" (918) in his prospective bride.

It is important to note, however, that this attraction is considered a problem only for men choosing women, for reasons related to Darwin's assumptions about the way natural selection insured female weakness. Wealth and rank in women were not in themselves conducive to fitness, since they had done nothing to earn them. The same was not true in the case of wealth and social position in men, since these were the fruits of those men's "intellectual powers or energy" or those of their fathers, gained in the struggle for life (891). Thus marriages based on such preferences by women would tend to improve the race by passing on the strength of body and character of which wealth and status were the signs. When Darwin notes exceptional cases where savage women do have some power of choice, he also argues that they would "generally choose not merely the handsomest men . . . but those who were at the same time best able to defend and support them" (903) so that their exercise of choice would have similar adaptive benefits, notwithstanding the rather questionable evidence of "support" for women in savage societies. In short, he could only conceive of sexual choice by women as operating within the constraints of the patriarchal gender relations his account of human evolution had deemed necessary.

Although Darwin does acknowledge that "in civilized nations women have free or almost free choice" (891) of whom to marry, in practice he speaks almost exclusively of the effects of male choice. His most explicit example of selection by human females is reserved for the lower classes, by implication closer to the behavior of lower animals like birds:

If an inhabitant of another planet were to behold a number of young rustics at a fair courting a pretty girl, and quarreling about her like birds at one of their places of assemblage [for mating], he would, by the eagerness of the wooers to please her and to display their finery, infer that she had the power of choice. (750)

On the other hand, he assumes male choice was the agent of that process of selective breeding that had brought the European upper classes to the highest level of at least physical perfection within civilized nations (892), agreeing with Francis Galton's view that the English aristocracy had become more handsome as a group than the middle classes by having free choice of the most beautiful women over many generations (Galton 165). Although female choice is an important part of domestic courtship rituals and animal mating behavior, in practice Darwin treats
it in the *Descent* as subordinate in importance to the role played by male discrimination in shaping the power relations of modern human culture, just as it has been in creating human nature in the first place.

IV

The ways in which savage life resisted Darwin’s attempts to generate human sexuality from consistent biological principles exposed the artificiality of trying to construct bourgeois domesticity as the “natural” form of human sociability. If twentieth-century thought has proved more wary of the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and more appreciative of the power of culture to shape human behavior, it has remained obsessed with the same urge to justify a desired order as natural by writing it into the origins of human nature. The dynamic of sexual selection and control that originated in Victorian accounts has cast long shadows over modern origin myths, notwithstanding our increase in scientific and ethnological sophistication. The “traffic in women” remained central to the kinship systems constructed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and was fundamental to psychoanalytic theories that extrapolated the effects of kinship into the life of the individual (see Rubin). It comes as no surprise that Marianna Torgovnick has detected in the work of Freud and Lévi-Strauss ambivalence about the universality and otherness of the primitive that are similar in ways to Darwin’s own (see Torgovnick 194–223). Advances in our understanding of inheritance and evolutionary process have revealed the role of natural selection in shaping many factors that Darwin attributed to sexual selection, but have not provided a biological rationale for the overthrow of female choice in humans. Nor have they done much to discredit new theories that continue to project back onto animals culturally constructed sexual behaviors in an attempt to justify male aggression and female coyness as innate (see Dawkins 151–78) or to redefine them as sexually differentiated investment strategies in reproduction (see Trivers). Although purged of its Victorian ethnocentrism, the anthropological celebration of man the hunter as the decisive catalyst in the transition to full humanity still depends upon the passivity and dependence of women (see Washburn and Lancaster). In both primatology and ethnology, a human family defined primarily by the presence and dominance of the Father has continued to define and to guarantee the limits of human nature (Haraway 220–21).

In addition to identifying the patriarchal biases of such theories, feminist scholars have countered them with alternative histories. In her sociobiological model of mating behavior, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy restores female agency to the evolutionary record by emphasizing the matrific organization of primate groups and the significance of female sexual pleasure. Nancy Tanner and Adrienne Zihlman offer the first major reinstatement of woman the gatherer in the foreground of human evolution. By emphasizing the influence exerted by female choice of the more socially skilled males on the development of primate sociability, Zihlman’s early work in effect credited females with an updated version of those very domesticat-
ing powers that informed Victorian idealizations of woman. Insofar as such accounts continue to imagine the origins of human nature in terms of sexual choice and control, however, they share in the logic of patriarchal explanations.

For as Haraway's analysis has demonstrated, these feminist narratives accentuate the boundary disputes between science and ideology without being able to transcend them (see 331–67). We live in an intellectual world in which science can no longer be taken as guaranteeing such transcendence. Nowhere is this clearer than in those sciences that construct "natural histories," explanations almost inevitably shaped by narrative conventions that reinforce our tendency to seek the meaning of present phenomena in their origins and to equate continuity with legitimacy. Acknowledging the extent to which the imposition of order on events is necessarily dependent on the ideological positioning of the observer who interprets data and fashions stories from them need not rule out the possibility of satisfying scientific standards of proof and logic in our reconstructions of the past; still, we must recognize that the truthfulness of such narratives inheres not in their objectivity but in the self-consciousness of their relativism. These Victorian origin accounts should serve as cautionary tales, reminding us of the political choices we have already made when we try to make nature justify culture and when we expect historical continuity to validate present order. By recognizing the way our own ideological assumptions help to write the narratives that explain order in our world—and our interpretations of those written in the past—we can perhaps begin to take more responsibility for the role we play in constructing that order in the first place.

NOTES

1. Notes are to the second edition, revised and augmented. I have noted a few places where this edition differed from the first in ways significant to my argument.

2. Darwin's footnotes also show his familiarity with the work of other important theorists of primitive marriage like A. R. Wallace, C. S. Wake, and the early writings of Lewis Henry Morgan. See Greene for a more general consideration of Darwin's pre-Descent reading on the processes of social evolution.

3. Jones argues that by adopting an associationist, inherently progressive theory of mental evolution, Darwin committed himself to a model implying a necessary kind of progress that was at odds with his understanding of natural selection, and one that inevitably reinforced contemporary assumptions about savage inferiority (10–11). For further discussions of how arguments for social evolution depended upon savages as links, see also Bowler, Invention 94–96, 120; Stepan; Stocking, Race chap. 6; and Greene, chap. 5.

4. Both McLennan (Studies 52–55) and Lubbock (Origin 88n) exclude the possibility of animal "marriage" by stressing the importance of a contract recognized by public opinion in defining the term. Lubbock, who objected to using "morality" to describe animal behavior (Origin 416–17) did, on the other hand, endorse a continuity between animal and human where nonmoral functions like tool use or shelter building were concerned; see Prehistoric Times 572–73.

5. Darwin's reference incorrectly dates the review 12 March 1871; the actual date is 18 March.
6. Darwin also assumed that the “better endowed” males were likely to be the more vigorous and healthy, and to be chosen by the more vigorous females (572–73). His inheritance theory hypothesized that traits (like secondary sexual characteristics) developed in maturity tend to be transmitted exclusively to offspring of the same sex (587–89). See Richards 72–73 for a discussion of how this theory helped guarantee the continued inferiority of women.

7. Part of the contradiction arises from Darwin’s blurring of the effects of male beauty and those of male strength; to the extent that the latter allowed male animals to fight off competitors, it would tend to limit the range of female choice, although not ruling it out completely. But such cases might be better subsumed under natural selection (Mayr 94–95).

8. This explicit emphasis on male jealousy was added after the first edition, as was Darwin’s comment that he was glad to find that Lubbock agreed with him that there had never never been a time of “absolutely promiscuous intercourse” (as opposed to communal marriage) among primitives; compare 894–95 with the 1871 1st edition (published in London by Murray; 2:360–61).

9. It is worth noting that Engels, starting from rather different ideological assumptions, found polyandry an important advance toward the evolution of human beings precisely because it represented an overthrow of the jealousy that in male animals would deprive the family of the protection of the herd, a protection necessary to promote further development in the earliest stages of human society (30–31).

10. Darwin cites the “celebrated” 1864 paper to the Anthropological Society in which Wallace presented his argument for racial origins (see 432n and elsewhere). See Stocking (Race 46) and Stepan 62–66 and 70–72 for discussions of racialist thinking in Darwin and Wallace.

11. Armstrong’s exclusive stress on woman’s domestic virtues obscures the fact that Darwin’s call for eugenic breeding (918–19) treated the cultivation of physical and intellectual traits as equally important to the advancement of the race. To the extent that he consciously acknowledges the adaptive benefits of “mental charms” in women, it is because he assumes that beautiful and charming women must also be mentally and physically healthy and thus more likely to produce superior offspring (503).

12. Mayr provides a thorough analysis of the relative roles of natural and sexual selection as theorized in modern biological research. Zihlmann’s review of the anthology in which Mayr’s essay appears notes that its contributors leave unexamined the discontinuities of Darwin’s theory, assuming female choice in the essays devoted to animal behavior and male choice in those on human society.

WORKS CITED


