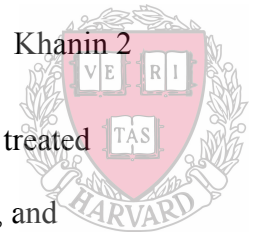


Mark Khanin

Letters to a Son and Daughter

In one of Charles Darwin's letters to his son, George, he advises him to focus on making a "permanent effect" (Darwin 9105), rather than wasting his time on work that is beneath him. On the other hand, when communicating with his daughter, Henrietta, he discusses "whether the Ophrys which [she] sent had been self-fertilised" (Darwin 5074), and other similar short-term questions. As part of the larger Darwin Correspondence Project, these letters help to create a more complete picture of Darwin's personal communications with his family. In "Sympathetic Science: Charles Darwin, Joseph Hooker, and the Passion of Victorian Naturalists," Jim Endersby uses Charles Darwin's letters to show how emotion influenced his scientific practices. By looking into his personal writings, Endersby unearths a sense of sympathy, and an, "intent [to allow] science to colonize the domestic sphere" (Endersby 316). In the same way, Darwin's letters to his children can be used to develop an understanding of how his relationship with his family influenced his scientific views. Though one must acknowledge that the two letters may not be representative of all of Darwin's communication with men and women as a whole, the letters provide significant insight into Darwin's perspective on gender and the way in which his personal views may have influenced the development of his theory of sexual selection.

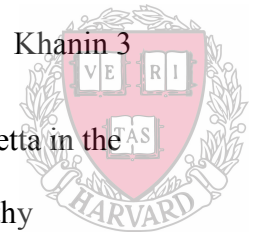
In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin posits that in humans, men are responsible for choosing a female sexual partner, and also that men have higher physical and mental capabilities than women. According to Darwin, women are both physically and mentally, an "intermediate between the child and the man" (Darwin). By providing an inside look into Darwin's personal communications, the Project allows readers to better understand how his environment and experiences shaped the way he developed these theories. In particular, an analysis of the



aforementioned letters reveals substantial differences in the way he communicated and treated his children depending on their gender. While the letter to his son was long, thoughtful, and focused on the future, the letter to his daughter was far more brief and lacked discussion of her potential. This variation, as influenced by societal pressures and personal experiences, may help critics to gather an understanding of Darwin's interactions with men and women during his time. This insight is important because his personal interactions may have contributed to his commitment to male superiority in his theory of sexual selection.

An analysis of the length and thought invested in these two letters reveals that Darwin spent much more time in constructing the letter to his son. In the message, Darwin repeats certain points to emphasize that George should not be hasty in publishing his written work: "I repeat that your essay seems to me clever & interesting, but I urge you to pause long, & if you do, I do not think that you will publish it" (Darwin 9105). Furthermore, he even refers to John Morley's *Life of Voltaire* to explain that "direct attacks [...] produce little permanent effect" (Darwin 9105). The use of repetition and citations in the letter suggests that Darwin spent a considerable amount of time forming and explaining his ideas to create a coherent and persuasive statement. He appears to have a sincere interest in making sure that his son listens to his advice, and thereby becomes successful in the future.

In his letter to Henrietta, however, he is far more concise in his sentence structure, and does not elaborate on his sentiments. He merely notes that "Mamma is better to day," and "I am so sorry about the illness of your companions" (Darwin 5074), but does not seem to take the same amount of care in laying out his ideas and describing his thoughts. The differences in detail in these interactions with his son and daughter could mean that he has greater expectations for his son, because he sees males as having more inherent potential than females in terms of career



and educational advancement. Since he may not anticipate much opportunity for Henrietta in the future, and doubts her intellectual capacity, he does not deem it necessary to have lengthy discussions with her. These impressions of gender could have clouded his scientific observation of sexual selection as a whole, and may be reflected in his portrayal of women as mentally and physically like children.

In addition to the length of the letters, there is a difference in tone. Darwin talks to George as though they are peers or colleagues. He begins the letter by complimenting George's essay, and then puts himself down, insisting that "[he is] not a good critic (no indeed on any subject" (Darwin 9105). This is particularly significant because the letter was written after Darwin achieved fame from publishing both the *Descent of Man* (1859) and the *Origin of Species* (1871). By complementing his son, and putting himself down, he seems to create a level-playing field between the two of them. As the letter progresses, he is critical of his son's decisions, but in a way that demonstrates his stake in his son's success. He tells his son, "I am rather alarmed at you getting into the habit of desiring an early harvest or result & frittering away your time" (Darwin 9105). This dismay at his son's unrealistic pursuits of immediate gratification reveals that Darwin envisions greater potential for George.

This is not the case in his correspondence with Henrietta. The tone does not suggest that Darwin is talking to her as though they are equals, but rather as though she is his assistant in the laboratory. He does not ask her opinions on the topic as one would with a colleague. Instead, he gives directions and brief thoughts on technical issues: "It is more probably that the pollen-mass had by some accident been knocked on to the stigma" (Darwin 5074). These differences in tone suggest that he spoke with women as though they were below him, and with men as if they were equals. Perhaps Darwin extrapolated the evolutionary differences between men and women in



part, from his personal and from the predominant societal views on gender. If so, these letters help critics to better contextualize the environment in which Darwin was forming his theories.

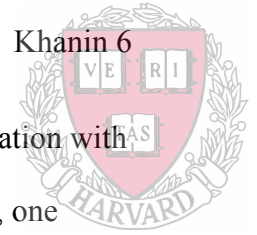
When looking at the content of the two letters, it becomes clear that the letter to George is far more concerned with his son's ability to make a long-term impact, while the letter to Henrietta focuses on immediate scientific tasks and family issues. Darwin is concerned that George will "injure [his] own power & usefulness" (Darwin 9105). This idea of usefulness can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, Darwin may be referring to his son's credibility as a thinker and a man. He wants to make sure that George preserves his reputation, so he can rise above other men in the community, and can make a long lasting influence on the world. Comparing the two letters shows that he does not have the same expectations for Henrietta as he does for George. The letter to Henrietta does not discuss impact, or how the project she is currently working on would affect the future.

Darwin's advice can be seen as a recommendation that his son not waste time on insignificant essays when he could be doing something more important. Darwin is alarmed that George is getting into the habit of "desiring an early harvest or result & frittering away [his] time on many such subjects or by writing short essays (& therefore temporary) on important subjects" (Darwin 9105). This type of concern does not extend to Henrietta. He does not criticize the fact that she is just following orders and completing tasks like a laboratory assistant. He does not consider ways in which she could potentially take on a more substantial project in the future. Certainly, this can be partly attributed to the work climate of the Victorian period. A woman's focus was on the family; therefore, Darwin could have been impressed by the fact that Henrietta was able to assist him at all, and did not feel it necessary to push her further. With George, Darwin's expectations are much higher. He does not want George to settle on something that is



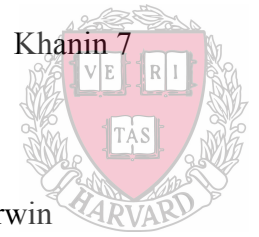
“beneath his power,” but rather insists that he make a “permanent effect” (Darwin 9105). The different ways in which Darwin attends to Henrietta and George’s projects, reveals the lower level of opportunity afforded to women during the time period, and the heightened level of promise attributed to men. Regardless of whether Darwin liked the fact that his daughter has fewer chances to make an impact than his son, he seems to go along with the predominant traditions. This social order seems to have affected the way he interacts with his children, and thereby, plausibly may have influenced the way he saw men and women in his theories of sexual selection.

These letters provide an insight into Darwin’s personal interactions with his son and daughter, and thus, a look into his perspective on gender. Although his personal views, and family interactions may have influenced the formation of his theories, the extent of the influence remains unclear. It is important to consider the way his role as a father may have affected the way he communicated and thought of his son and daughter. It is possible that his correspondences with his children were different than the way he communicated with men and women in general. Furthermore, the relationship with each individual child could explain the differences in letters, rather than varying views on gender roles. He may have been closer with George, and thus felt the need to say more to him in the letter. Furthermore, one cannot be certain about the motives behind the tone and content of each letter. He may be critical of George because he thinks that he is not good enough, or because he expects more of him. Similarly, his terse writing style to Henrietta may be show that he is treating her like an assistant, but on the other hand, could mean that he trusts her to figure out what she needs to do on the project on her own. Another factor to consider is the frequency with which Darwin was corresponding with Henrietta and George. If he had spoken with Henrietta recently, he may have felt it unnecessary



to write a long-winded response. Not to mention, it is possible that the topic of conversation with Henrietta simply merited a shorter response, or he was simply busier at that time. Thus, one cannot draw strong conclusions about his personal views on gender without doing a wider analysis of the letters in the Darwin Correspondence Project.

As evidenced by these letters, the Darwin Correspondence Project is useful in broadening the overall understanding of Darwin and his theories, by providing a look into his personal thoughts and interactions that are not accessible through his published work. However, one must utilize the broad spectrum of letters offered in the Project, to better understand his interactions and perspective on gender and evolution. By looking at the differences in tone, length, and content of the aforementioned letters, one can see that Darwin had greater expectations for his son, and treated him more like an equal than he did Henrietta. These personal experiences with may have influenced Darwin's theories of the evolution of sex differences, and thus widen one's understanding of his relationship with the gender ideology of his time. A similar analysis of the other letters in the Project could also unveil new information. As the Darwin Correspondence Project grows, the overall picture of Darwin and gender will also develop, as there will be greater access to the man behind the theories.



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