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The Origin of Charles Darwin's Courtship Theories

Are Darwin's own courtship experiences reflected in his theory of sexual selection? The first woman that Darwin showed significant interest in, a woman named Fanny Owen, was unexpectedly betrothed to another man in his absence in 1832. Years later, in 1839, Darwin married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, instead.

Long after his own courtship phase, Darwin presented his views about human sexual selection and the way in which men court women in *The Descent of Man* (1871). He proposed that males pursue females, competing with other men to gain access to women. Darwin characterised woman as tender, and men as ambitious (*Sexual Science*, 40). According to Darwin, sex differences such as these exist because higher intellectual ability, ambition and courage were necessary for men when competing for females: "mere bodily strength and size would do little for victory, unless associated with courage, perseverance, and determined energy" (*Descent*, 546). These views on men's superior energy and intellect were a common way of dividing the sexes during the Victorian era (*Sexual Science*, 40). Darwin attributed these differences not to societal custom, but rather to biological differences honed by sexual selection.

According to Darwin in *Descent*, the first stage of courtship in humans – the selection of a worthy mate – involves a male choosing a female who exceeds a standard of beauty. He explains that by choosing "from all the classes the more beautiful women," aristocrats were able to "become handsomer...than the middle classes" (*Descent*, 356). According to his theory of sexual selection, a woman who was greatly sought-after by fellow aristocrats might contain the important qualities that men deem suitable to be passed down through generations. On this view, by choosing the right women, men have the power to shape future generations, and so by



choosing a woman who is attractive, they are giving rise to a lineage of superior men, and beautiful women (*Descent*, 356).

Fanny Owen was highly sought-after in Darwin's social circle. Darwin's sister, Emily wrote to him that "Fanny...[is] very much admired, and get[s] plenty of partners at the Balls" (letter 21). A few months later, Darwin's sisters wrote again about Fanny, saying this time that "Fanny Owen has quite the preference to Sarah amongst all the gentlemen" and that she is "engaging and delightful" (Letter 31). Darwin's sisters also mention that another man was flirting with Fanny. The image that Darwin's sisters give is one of men seeking out women, and competing for them. It seems, according to their descriptions, that many men wanted Fanny because of her beauty. This is the kind of society that Darwin inhabited, and is similar to the world he describes in *The Descent of Man*, in which men compete in order to have the most beautiful woman (the woman with such advantageous beauty will thus have many offspring, passing on her beneficial traits).

About two years after his sisters penned these flattering accounts of Fanny, Darwin wrote to his second cousin, William Darwin Fox, about his affection for Fanny. Darwin was now courting Fanny, and found her particularly "charming" (Letter 53). Darwin wrote; "Fanny, as all the world knows, is the prettiest, plumpest, charming personage that Shropshire possesses, ay & Birmingham too" (Letter 54). To Darwin, Fanny fit a standard of beauty agreed upon by his society.

However, Darwin was very busy at the time, and after spending a lot of time with each other and writing many letters, Fanny began to express that she was not seeing enough of him: "but why did you not come home this Xmas? I fully expected to have seen you—but I suppose some *dear little Beetles*, in Cambridge or London kept you away" she wrote to him in January



1930 (Letter 77). Then, in a letter to Darwin on 26 September, 1831 (Letter 136), Fanny expressed sadness at having missed Darwin before he set sail on the HMS Beagle; “Little did I think the last time I saw you at the poor old Forest, that it would be **so long** before we should meet again!!” (Letter 136). Eventually, Darwin heard from his sister Emily that Fanny was engaged to another man (Letter 154). Darwin reacted to this news with disappointment, and some bitter sarcasm: “Well it may be all very delightful to those concerned, but as I like unmarried woman better than those in the blessed state, I vote it a bore” (Letter 164). Darwin’s reaction is captured in a letter to his sister, Charlotte. He is “at a loss what to think or say,” and is clearly confused by the situation: “my thoughts & feelings & sentences are in such a maze, that between crying & laughing I wish you all good night” (Letter 164). This incident portends an important element of what would become Darwin’s scientific theory of courtship – the idea that men compete for women. In this case, Darwin was defeated by another man, in his efforts to wed Fanny Owen.

While we cannot directly tie Darwin’s failure to engage the affections of Fanny Owen to his later scientific work, this experience may well have influenced Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, illustrating his idea that “man is the rival of other men” (*Descent*, 563). Darwin also states that man “delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness” (*Descent*, 563). Here, Darwin is critical of this trait in men that, according to his theory, resulted from sexual selection, and he believes it is an “unfortunate birthright” (*Descent*, 563).

Darwin started a relationship with his cousin, Emma Wedgwood. In 1838, he considered marrying her and made notes to help him decide whether this was a good idea. In these notes, Darwin concludes that marrying would be better than “spending ones whole life, like a neuter

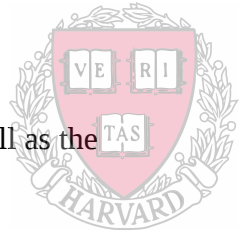


bee, working, working, & nothing after all” (*Darwin’s Notes on Marriage*). The notes reflect the different roles that men and women were expected to fill in Victorian society as well as Darwin’s active analogizing between the animal world and his own sexual dilemma. Darwin realises that with marriage would come the “duty to work for money,” and felt he would be “limited” (*Darwin’s Notes on Marriage*). Emma, on the other hand, would be an “object to be beloved and played with,” and “better than a dog” (*Darwin’s Notes on Marriage*). These musings reflect Darwin’s view that women have inferior intellect, are at best an amusement to him and primarily a way to reproduce (he lists “children” as an advantage of marriage). Darwin concludes his notes with “there is many a happy slave,” thus sentencing himself to a life of somewhat contented imprisonment. Darwin viewed marriage as a rational choice he had to make. This time, Darwin’s plans were not thwarted, and in 1838, he proposed to Emma.

Darwin married Emma Wedgwood in 1838, many years before publishing either *The Origin of Species*, or *The Descent of Man*, and so there could have been, and most likely were, other events and observations that he made about his marriage that influenced his ideas. A further analysis of Darwin’s correspondence with his wife, friends, and children would help to form an even clearer picture of the many personal influences that Darwin drew upon while working on his research and writings, as well as how they may have led to his theories. The phase of courtship in Darwin’s life is a particularly interesting topic to explore, because Darwin’s theory of sexual selection is precisely a theory of the act of choosing and competing for a mate, and there are many open questions about the empirical sources and models for his theory of human sexual selection.

While most people view Darwin simply as an icon, the Darwin Correspondence Project can help us view him more fully – as a man. His theories on sexual selection and gender were not

produced in isolation. Darwin was influenced by the events and people in his life, as well as the society that surrounded him.





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