

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Darwin's bawdy: the popular, gendered and radical reception of the *Descent of Man* in the US, 1871–1910

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Abstract

Most studies of the American reception of Darwin have focused on the *Origin*. The *Descent of Man*, however, was even more widely read and discussed, especially by those outside the emerging scientific establishment. This essay maps the varied, popular and radical responses to the *Descent* and suggests that these unauthorized readers helped shape the formation of American scientific institutions (by encouraging scientists to close ranks), as well as ordinary Americans' perceptions of gender and sex. I argue that the radical – freethinkers, socialists and feminists – embrace of sexual selection theory provides one explanation for naturalists' scepticism of the theory.

Before Americans encountered and became fascinated with the work of Charles Darwin, another British chronicler of life had long captured the national attention. For much of the 1800s, everyone from California gold miners to Ivy League professors could, and often did, recite by heart the writings of William Shakespeare. Traversing the nation in the 1830s, French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville observed that he had found 'Shakespeare in the recesses of the forests of the New World'. Not only did Americans read Shakespeare, they also saw Shakespeare performed on stages big and small, in towns and cities from coast to coast. Men and women fashioned the meaning of Shakespeare by acting out his plays, providing feedback on professional performances from their audience seats, and reformulating his work in countless parodies and spoofs. In New York City alone, the 1857–8 theatre season featured no fewer than ten different productions of *Hamlet*, and in 1875 two rival performances starring two of the most famous actors in the country opened on the very same night. As the historian Lawrence Levine has established, Americans of all sorts loved Shakespeare and, up until the end of the nineteenth century, they understood that Shakespeare was for everyone.¹ By the close of the century, however, Americans came to understand and experience culture as bifurcated between high and low. The educated elite watched Shakespearean plays in expensive theatres; the masses bought tickets to vaudeville shows.

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, part 2 (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 58, quoted in Lawrence Levine, 'William Shakespeare and the American people: a study in cultural transformation', *American Historical Review* (February 1984) 89, pp. 34–66, 38; see also Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990. The title of this essay borrows from the classic study by Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, New York: Routledge, 1947.

A similar fate befell the work of American's second-favourite Englishman. When Charles Darwin's books were first published in the US, they were read, in one form or another, by just about everyone, often popularized through new magazines such as Edward Yeoman's *Popular Science Monthly*, a unique periodical in which leading naturalists published alongside amateur science enthusiasts, including even women.² But Darwin's second major evolutionary work, the *Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), revealed fractures and fissures in this broad and diverse group of science readers, especially when those considered radical by the emerging scientific establishment began to claim the *Descent* – and sexual selection, its cornerstone theory – as part of their intellectual heritage. Because the *Descent* presented a naturalistic account of romantic love and sex differences among animals, including humans, and because it gave females an active role in the evolutionary process, atheists, socialists, sex reformers and feminists published their own interpretations of sexual selection, often claiming that this evolutionary mechanism provided naturalistic evidence in support of their proposals for social change.

At the same time, as Margaret Rossiter and others have documented, the American scientific establishment closed ranks and defined more precisely what counted as 'science' and who could claim to be practising, or even discussing, 'science'.³ In the early to mid-nineteenth century, women and amateur scientists regularly contributed their findings to scientific journals and periodicals such as *Popular Science Monthly*, and even presented their research at scientific meetings. Readers made little distinction between articles written by those with prestigious training in the natural sciences (in part because there were so few places where one could receive such specific training) and those by individuals with keen observations of the world around them. In *Popular Science Monthly*, articles by world-renowned scientists ran side by side with those by women few people had ever heard of. In this context, women from the trained astronomer Maria Mitchell to the evolutionary enthusiast Antoinette Brown Blackwell (an ordained minister with no formal scientific training) debated scientific ideas and practices, publishing alongside men like Herbert Spencer. But by the close of the century, women had lost, by and large, this small window of scientific participation. Men had formalized scientific associations to exclude women and others with little formal training; graduate training in scientific fields became required not only for membership in these associations but also for peer-reviewed publishing, and male mentor networks provided the primary means by which individuals could access professional science. As a result, for much of the twentieth century, women's main point of entry to the natural sciences was in helper positions such as secretary or lab assistant (women had slightly more access to the social sciences and many trained with leaders such as John Dewey and Franz Boas).⁴

² It would be impossible to list here all the books analysing the reception of Darwin in America. Among the classic studies of Darwin in the US are Jon H. Roberts, *Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1850-1900*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988; Ronald L. Numbers and John Stenhouse (eds.), *Disseminating Darwinism: The Role of Place, Race, Religion, and Gender*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999; Ronald L. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Darwin in America: The Intellectual Response, 1865-1912*, San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1976; Edward J. Larson, *Evolution: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory*, New York: Modern Library, 2004; Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Evolution*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985; Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

³ For more on the professionalization and masculinization of science in America see Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, especially Chapter 4.

⁴ For women in the social sciences see Rosalind Rosenberg's *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982. See also Rosenberg, *Changing the Subject: How the Women of Columbia Shaped the Way We Think about Sex and Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004; Rosenberg,

Pulling together various strands of the popular reception of the *Descent of Man*, this essay suggests that perhaps these two developments were related and that, following a pattern similar to the one Evelleen Richards has chronicled in England, the radical embrace of sexual selection theory may well have encouraged the American scientific establishment to distance itself not only from women and social radicals but also from sexual selection theory.⁵ By the 1910s, a clear line separated scientists from amateurs and scientific research from other types of scholarship.⁶ The process of institutionalization and the attendant masculinization of science have been well studied, but the role of the highly gendered reception of the *Descent of Man* in prompting this shift has not yet been explored. Future research needs to fully untangle the multivalent American reception of sexual selection theory; focusing on the popular and feminist responses to the *Descent of Man*, this essay is a first step in that direction.

For the past 150 years, the overwhelming majority of historical analysis of the American reception of Darwin has focused on the *Origin of Species* and the theory of natural selection that it introduced. This makes historical and logical sense, of course, but it has obscured the equally rich American reception of the *Descent of Man* (1871), a work that held a central place in scientific as well as popular culture for decades.⁷ While many

'In search of woman's nature, 1850–1920', *Feminist Studies* (Fall 1975) 3, pp. 141–54; and Rosenberg, 'The dissent from Darwin, 1890–1930: the new view of woman among American social scientists', PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1974.

5 Evelleen Richards, *Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection Theory*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017. This essay synthesizes my research on the American reception of *The Descent of Man*, aspects of which I have previously written about elsewhere: Kimberly A. Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution: Darwin, Science, and Women's Rights in Gilded Age America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014; Hamlin, 'The birds and the bees: Darwin's evolutionary approach to human sexuality', in Jeannette Eileen Jones and Patrick Sharp (eds.), *Darwin in Atlantic Cultures: Evolutionary Visions of Race, Gender and Sexuality*, New York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 53–72; Hamlin, 'Sexual selection and the economics of marriage: "female choice" in the writings of Edward Bellamy and Charlotte Perkins Gilman', in Lydia Fisher and Tina Gianquitto (eds.), *America's Darwin: Darwinian Theory and U.S. Culture, 1859–Present*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014, pp. 151–80; and Hamlin, 'The "case of a bearded woman": hypertrichosis and the construction of gender in the age of Darwin', *American Quarterly* (December 2011) 63, pp. 955–81.

6 Daniel Patrick Thurs, *Science Talk: Changing Notions of Science in American Popular Culture*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007. Thurs discusses the relationship between Darwinian evolutionary theory and the establishment of scientific authority in Chapter 2, 'Evolution: struggling over science'. Margaret W. Rossiter documents how, as the field of science professionalized between 1880 and 1910, it also became increasingly masculine, relegating women to helping positions, such as lab assistant and secretary. Rossiter, op. cit. (3). See also Margaret W. Rossiter, 'Women's work in science, 1880–1910', in Sally Gregory Kohlstedt (ed.), *History of Women in the Sciences: Readings from Isis*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 287–304. For histories of professional science in America see Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, *The Formation of the American Scientific Community: The American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1848–60*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976; Sally Kohlstedt, Michael M. Sokal and Bruce V. Lewenstein, *The Establishment of Science in America: 150 Years of the American Association for the Advancement of Science*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999; and Philip J. Pauly, *Biologists and the Promise of American Life: From Meriwether Lewis to Alfred Kinsey*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

7 The best and most thorough accounting of the British reception of the *Descent* is Richards, op. cit. (5). Previous accounts include Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962; Peter J. Vorzimmer, *Charles Darwin: The Years of Controversy, The Origin of Species and Its Critics, 1859–1882*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1970, 191–7; Michael Ghiselin, *The Triumph of the Darwinian Method*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; Mary Margaret Bartley, 'A century of debate: the history of sexual selection theory (1871–1971)', PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1994; Bernard Campbell (ed.), *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man 1871–1971*, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1972; Simon J. Frankel, 'The eclipse of sexual selection theory', in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (eds.), *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 158–83; and Kay Harel, 'When Darwin flopped: the rejection of sexual selection', *Sexuality and Culture* (Fall 2001) 5(4), pp. 29–42. For primary accounts of the controversies regarding sexual selection see George Romanes, *Darwin, and After Darwin*, 3rd edn, Chicago:

readers approached the *Origin* and the *Descent* as part of one long argument, the reception of the *Descent* differed in important ways from that of the *Origin*. In the twelve years separating the publication of Darwin's two major works, Americans, like their British and European counterparts, familiarized themselves with the basic tenets of natural selection, grappled with the possibility of evolution with or without a divine creator, and turned to science with a popular enthusiasm never before or since experienced. As Alfred Russel Wallace observed in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1876, 'Never, perhaps, in the whole history of science or philosophy has so great a revolution in thought and opinion been effected as in the twelve years from 1859 to 1871, the respective dates of publication of Mr. Darwin's "Origin of Species" and "Descent of Man"'.⁸ Thus readers were more intellectually prepared to dissect the *Descent of Man* and grapple with its main points, especially Darwin's proposition that humans too had evolved through the processes of natural and sexual selection.

Another vital distinction between the reception of *Origin of Species* and that of the *Descent* had to do with gender. The *Origin of Species* was, by and large, a story about males – males battling males, males surviving and males dying. 'The survival of the fittest' became a popular catchphrase and even inspired an entire genre of naturalistic manly fiction. The *Descent of Man*, on the other hand, granted females (except for human females) the leading role in mate selection, which Darwin now claimed was as vital as, if not more vital than, natural selection for the purposes of evolution. The *Descent* especially resonated with female readers because, in the 1870s, American women began attending college in record numbers after nearly 700,000 men died during the Civil War, leaving universities in need of new sources of tuition. While many schools offered feminized courses such as domestic science and home economics, others provided middle- and upper-class women the chance to learn about science through introductory courses and even special science courses just for women, such as Harvard's School of Natural History at Penikese Island or the brand-new Lily Hall of Science erected at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1886, the nation's first laboratory building exclusively for women.⁹ Women eagerly engaged with science, and what better place to start than with a book by the world's most famous naturalist in which females determined the evolutionary process?

Furthermore, whereas both the *Origin* and *Descent* invoked familiar and obscure species to explain change over millions of years, the *Descent of Man* centred beauty and sexual attraction – topics about which readers, regardless of scientific expertise, felt prepared to offer opinions. Many Americans who wrote about the *Descent of Man* were not necessarily attempting to spread the literal ideas of Darwin. Rather, they were voicing their own takes on what they understood to be Darwin's ideas, often reformulating them in the process and using the imprimatur of 'Darwin' to advance agendas that, in some cases, would have been anathema to Darwin himself. After the passage of the Comstock Laws in 1873, it became illegal to write or circulate material related to sex, even instructional textbooks, because such work was now defined as 'obscene'. As a result, the *Descent of Man* provided an acceptable, and better yet 'scientific', framework for writing and publishing about sex, as many free-love advocates, sex reformers and radicals immediately

Open Court Publishing Company, 1901, esp. Chapter 10; 'Darwin on the *Descent of Man*', *Edinburgh Review* (July 1871) 134, pp. 193–235; review of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, by Charles Darwin, *Quarterly Review* (July 1871) 131, pp. 47–90; review of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, by Charles Darwin, *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, 1 October 1872, pp. 378–400.

⁸ Alfred Russel Wallace, 'Difficulties of development as applied to man', *Popular Science Monthly* (November 1876) 10, pp. 60–72, 62.

⁹ For more on women's study of and enthusiasm for evolutionary science in the nineteenth century see Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution*, op. cit. (5).

recognized.¹⁰ In fact, the new field of sexology began, in large part, in conversation with the *Descent of Man*, drawing on its terminology and debating its main claims.¹¹

To date, most work on the US reception of Darwin has focused on ferreting out the links between Darwin's actual words and those of his popularizers and correspondents: who interpreted his ideas 'correctly', who disagreed and who strayed from the party line. What, then, to make of this additional layer – the popular, the bawdy, the radical – of readership and reception? Does it matter whether what people attributed to Darwin had anything to do with what Darwin intended? Or, more specifically, in what ways and to whom does it matter?

At the end of the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's plays moved from the province of the many to the purview of the few, just as Darwin's ideas moved from the tavern and women's club to the scientific establishment. While cultural elites and scientific experts were not necessarily one and the same (though sometimes they were and they surely encountered each other at places such as Ivy League universities and men's clubs), the creation of these hierarchies proceeded in much the same fashion. Shakespeare's plays began to be performed for and studied exclusively by the cultured and educated elite, whereas Darwin's ideas became the property of the emerging scientific establishment. Who were regular Americans to offer insights about either? Boundary work, to borrow the phrase coined by Thomas Gieryn and elaborated by Daniel Patrick Thurs, characterized the trajectories of the sciences as well as the fine arts and it may be instructive to consider the two processes in tandem.¹²

To better understand the popular reception and radical embrace of the *Descent of Man* and sexual selection theory in the US, historians might borrow more intentionally from cultural historians and from historians of British science who have done so much to unravel the relationships between the scientific enterprise and its cultural reception.¹³ In *Darwin, Literature, and Respectability*, for example, Gowan Dawson persuasively argues that 'perhaps the most significant impediment to establishing a naturalistic worldview' was 'Darwin's surprisingly recurrent connection with sexual immorality', a connection cemented by British literary writers' many references to the *Descent*.¹⁴ Many of Darwin's critics in England went so far as to claim that the *Descent* not only 'transgressed Victorian standards of respectability' but also the 'acceptable boundaries of nineteenth-century scientific publishing' because the book dealt so frankly with sex.¹⁵ Surely, then, sex and gender are vital to understanding the US reception of the *Descent* as well as the British reception.

10 For the influence of Darwin on the American free-love movement see Jesse F. Battan, 'Sexual selection and the social revolution: anarchist eugenics and radical Darwinism in the United States, 1850–1910', in Jeannette Eileen Jones and Patrick Sharp (eds.), *Darwin in Atlantic Cultures: Evolutionary Visions of Race, Gender and Sexuality*, New York: Routledge, 2010, pp. 33–52.

11 For more on the Darwinian origins of sexology see Hamlin, 'The birds and the bees', op. cit. (5).

12 Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999; Thurs, op. cit. (6).

13 Historians of science have traced these processes much more carefully in the British context than in the US; see, for example, Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010; James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001; Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Richards, op. cit. (5); and David Stack, *The First Darwinian Left: Socialism and Darwinism, 1859–1914*, Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2003.

14 Dawson, op. cit. (13), p. 4.

15 Dawson, op. cit. (13), p. 28. See especially Chapter 2, 'Charles Darwin, Algernon Charles Swinburne and sexualized responses to evolution'.

Likewise, much has been written about the American reception of natural selection and its application by social scientists such as Herbert Spencer, but curiously little has been written about the *Descent*, despite its prominence in the scientific, academic and popular cultures of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.¹⁶ Indeed, few scientific works sold more copies or inspired more broad-based conversations than did the *Descent of Man*, perhaps in part because, with its focus on sex differences and reproduction, it could be enlisted to answer pressing questions about changing gender roles and the growing independence of women following the Civil War. For decades, women and social reformers had looked to scientific and pseudo-scientific theories such as phrenology to bolster their claims about equality and social change, but from the 1870s until the early 1900s the scientific theory they drew on most frequently was sexual selection.¹⁷

While one of Darwin's motivations for writing the *Descent* was to provide an evolutionary basis for racial differences that discounted polygenists' claims that different races ought to be viewed as, essentially, different species, the *Descent of Man* still placed white men at the top of the evolutionary ladder and naturalized white racial superiority as part of the evolutionary process, limiting the radical potential of this work and prompting many Darwinian radicals to embrace highly racialized, if not outright racist, ideologies, including what would come to be eugenics.¹⁸ Moreover, the reviews analysed in this essay appeared in mainstream and radical US periodicals, which published white writers nearly exclusively, thus African Americans' responses to the *Descent of Man* require future study and research.¹⁹

Some scholars have argued that questions about the evolution of different races prompted Darwin to write the *Descent*, but it is the evolution of sex differences that motivates and propels this landmark work, as Evelleen Richards has established in her definitive study.²⁰ In terms of sex, Darwin's explanation of human and animal kinship enabled individuals, especially those already inclined to challenge the status quo, to question whether or not patriarchy, monogamy, female domesticity and even heterosexuality were 'natural' when so many varieties of domestic and sexual arrangements could be found among other animal species. Focusing on the US reception of the *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* reveals the multiple and motley ways in which men and

16 For histories of social Darwinism in America see Richard Hofstadter's classic *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944; Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979; Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Howard L. Kaye, *The Social Meaning of Modern Biology: From Social Darwinism to Sociobiology*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986; and Barry Werth, *Banquet at Delmonico's: Great Minds, the Gilded Age, and the Triumph of Evolution in America*, New York: Random House, 2009.

17 For more on phrenology in discussions of gender in the mid- to late nineteenth century see Carla Bittel, 'Woman, know thyself: producing and using phrenological knowledge in nineteenth-century America', in Christine von Oertzen, Maria Rentetzi and Elizabeth Siegel Watkins (eds.), *Beyond the Academy: Histories of Gender and Knowledge*, *Centaurus* (May 2013) 55, pp. 104–30; and John van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism*, London: Routledge, 2004.

18 Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin's Views on Human Evolution*, New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2009.

19 For African American men's responses to evolutionary theory (mainly *Origin of Species* and natural selection) see Eric D. Anderson, 'Black responses to Darwinism, 1859–1915', in Numbers and Stenhouse, op. cit. (2), pp. 247–66. For African American responses to the Scopes trial see Jeffrey P. Moran, 'The Scopes trial and southern fundamentalism in black and white: race, region, and religion', *Journal of Southern History* (February 2004) 70, pp. 95–120; and Moran, 'Reading race into the Scopes trial: African American elites, science, and fundamentalism', *Journal of American History* (December 2003) 90, pp. 891–911.

20 For studies of the impetus and development *The Descent of Man*, in addition to Richards, op. cit. (5), see also Desmond and Moore, op. cit. (18); and Robert J. Richards, *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

women responded to and revised Darwin's theory of sexual selection as well as the varied registers in which scientific ideas trafficked. After all, the motive agent of sexual selection theory was female choice of sexual partners and, as a result, many readers interpreted the *Descent* in terms of gender and sex. Moreover, the *Descent's* foregrounding of female reproductive agency and autonomy inspired many readers to challenge sexual power dynamics among humans and demand a return to a more 'natural' system in which human females determined mating choices. This essay maps the sundry, popular, bawdy and entirely unauthorized reception of the *Descent of Man* and suggests that these responses gendered sexual selection theory as feminine in the eyes of many naturalists, diminishing their interest in engaging with it as a 'real' scientific theory, and shaped ordinary Americans' perceptions about what is 'natural' in terms of gender and sex.

The *Descent of Man* in American print and popular culture

Nineteenth-century American naturalists, by and large, remained sceptical, if not dismissive, of sexual selection theory. But this does not appear to have diminished the popular appeal of the *Descent of Man*. Indeed, perhaps the most striking aspect of the American reception of the *Descent of Man* was how widespread it was. Reviews of the book, including the first and second volumes individually as well as the second edition, which included both volumes, appeared in hundreds of local and national newspapers from coast to coast, major magazines, small reform magazines, literary publications and professional journals. The *Descent of Man* also inspired several spoofs, short stories, novels, commencement addresses and cartoons which likewise appeared in magazines and newspapers from Macon, Georgia to Honolulu.²¹ Referring to sexual selection, the *New York Times* reported that 'nothing that Darwin has written is so ingenious or suggestive than the long, minute, and careful investigation in this field'.²²

Compared to the shock that greeted the publication of *Origin of Species*, many naturalists noted with surprise the calm acceptance with which readers and editorialists met the *Descent of Man*. Darwin himself mused, 'everyone is talking about it without being shocked'.²³ Shortly after the *Descent's* publication, Darwin's friend Joseph Hooker told him, 'I dined out three days last week, and at every table heard evolution talked of as an accepted fact, and the descent of man with calmness'.²⁴ One literary notice observed that 'the very general discussion by the press of Darwin's "The Descent of Man" has, instead of exhausting public interest in this latest scientific question, greatly stimulated it. The sale of Darwin's work is almost unprecedented in scientific literature'.²⁵ Shortly after the American publication of the *Descent*, Edward L. Youmans excitedly wrote to Herbert Spencer exclaiming, 'things are going here furiously. I have never known anything quite like it. Ten thousand *Descent of Man* have been printed, and I guess they are

21 For additional reviews of the *Descent* see Chauncey Wright, 'Contributions to the theory of natural selection', *North American Review*, July 1871, pp. 63–104; review of *The Descent of Man*, by Charles Darwin, *Southern Review* (July 1871) 10, pp. 733–9; 'The Descent of Man', *The Nation*, 12–13 April 1871, pp. 258–60. 'Darwin's Descent of Man', *Old and New* (May 1871) 3, pp. 594–600; 'Darwinism', *Scribner's Monthly* (May 1871) 2, p. 110; James McCosh, 'Darwin's The Descent of Man', *The Independent* (4 May 1871) 23, p. 3; 'The leather bottle: a Darwinian ditty', *Harper's Bazaar* (3 June 1871) 4, p. 343; 'Is man descended from the monkey? A baboon's views', *Saturday Evening Post*, 3 June 1871, p. 3; and 'Mount St. Mary's annual commencement', *The Sun* (Baltimore), 24 June 1875, p. 1.

22 'New publications: the Descent of Man', *New York Times*, 1 June 1871, p. 2.

23 Francis Darwin (ed.), *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Including an Autobiographical Chapter*, vol. 3, London: J. Murray, 1887, p. 133; quoted in Himmelfarb, op. cit. (7), p. 355 n. 11.

24 Hooker to Darwin, 26 March 1871. Joseph Dalton Hooker, *Life and Letters*, vol. 2 (ed. Leonard Huxley), London: J. Murray, 1918, p. 125; quoted in Himmelfarb, op. cit. (7), p. 355 n. 10.

25 'Literary Notes', *Appleton's Journal* (20 May 1871) 5, p. 596.

nearly all gone'.²⁶ By May of 1872, Youmans had inaugurated *Popular Science Monthly* to spread exciting new scientific ideas, such as those in the *Descent*, to the masses of eager readers and science enthusiasts.

Print reviews of the *Descent of Man* generally remained neutral with regard to its content, but nearly all signalled to readers that the book was required reading. Even the negative reviews recommended that people read the *Descent* for themselves. The *Galaxy* enthused, 'whatever may be thought of Mr. Darwin's conclusions as to the origin of man, his book will be found a rich mine of facts, entertaining and curious on the highest questions of natural history'.²⁷ *Godey's Lady's Book*, the most popular nineteenth-century women's magazine, noted that the book 'will call forth discussion and dissent among the masterminds of the age', but demurred in conclusion, 'we are not yet an avowed convert to Darwin's theories, but we find his book exceedingly interesting'.²⁸ *Old and New* concluded that the *Descent* was 'as exciting as any novel'.²⁹ *Appleton's* declared that the book was the literary sensation of the month, while *Harper's* proclaimed that 'few scientific works have excited more attention' than the *Descent*. As proof, the reviewer observed that it was impossible to open a magazine without reading about it.³⁰ Readers of all backgrounds and interests were encouraged to read the *Descent*, and by all accounts they did.

Many American periodicals indicated that Darwinian evolution explained the origins of organic life on Earth but rejected Darwin's hypothesis about human-animal kinship. Several also included critical comments from St George Mivart and Alfred Russel Wallace, two leading scientific critics of sexual selection. *Scribner's* review began with an overview of human genealogy according to Darwin, from the 'monkeys of the Old World' back to the 'son of a reptile, which was the son of a fish', to 'the son of an amoeba, which was the son of - we don't know what'. The reviewer observed that this was certainly 'quite a different genealogy from the biblical one, ending with "Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God"', and expressed relief that other naturalists retained their belief in the idea that humans had been specially created by God.³¹ After all, it was Darwin's alternative human-origin story - one that did not hinge on who said what to whom in the Garden of Eden - that initially endeared him to freethinkers and feminists.³²

In addition, numerous mainstream reviews focused on what sexual selection might mean for human gender roles and sexual relations. For example, *Overland Monthly* published a lengthy analysis of sexual selection in the article 'The Darwinian Eden'. This review pointed out that sexual selection could not possibly pertain to modern society, where 'the most likely young fellow that ever trod the earth does not stand the ghost of a show beside the rich man, though the latter should be humped as to his back, gnarled and twisted as to his limbs, lean, withered, and decrepit'.³³ In the age of the Comstock laws, other publications skirted outright discussions of sex, especially among humans. *Appleton's* explained sexual selection theory in two consecutive articles but only in

26 Quoted in Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996, p. 3 n. 3.

27 'The Descent of Man', *The Galaxy* (March 1871) 9, p. 463.

28 Literary Notices, *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* (May 1871) 82, p. 479.

29 'Darwin's Descent of Man', *Old and New* (May 1871) 3, p. 598.

30 'Darwin on the Descent of Man', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1871, p. 305; 'Table-talk', *Appleton's Journal*, 11 February 1871, pp. 174-5. See also the review in *The Nation*, 13 April 1871, p. 258.

31 'Culture and progress at home', *Scribner's Monthly* (May 1871) 2, pp. 109-10. A similar review is 'Here a little, there a little', *The Friend* (Hawaii), 1 May 1871, p. 40.

32 For more on the role of Eve/Genesis in the reception of Darwin see Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution*, op. cit. (5), Chapter 1.

33 'The Darwinian Eden', *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine* (July 1871) 7, p. 164.

terms of birds, avoiding all mention of humans.³⁴ ‘We scarcely know how to deal with Sexual Selection ... It is both a delicate and a difficult subject, and cannot be discussed within moderate limits’, declared the *Albion*. This reviewer objected to Darwin’s hypothesis that sexual selection accounted for women’s relative lack of body hair; something so miraculous, the reviewer insisted, must have been instigated by a divine creator.³⁵

Print reviews reveal just one layer of the *Descent*’s American reception and wide appeal. In fact, the *Descent* remained on book lists for women’s and girls’ clubs until the turn of the twentieth century, and the *New York Times* reported that it was among the most popular books checked out of Manhattan public libraries as late as 1895.³⁶ The book also featured prominently in popular culture, in political speeches and in common parlance until well into the twentieth century. News reports described a popular party game in which participants selected a book title and represented it ‘by a picture, by a drawing, or by some arrangement of objects so that it could be guessed’. One entrant depicted the *Descent of Man* as a ‘little ladder, with a toy monkey on top round, and a toy man at the foot’.³⁷ In his 1912 speech at the memorial for those who had died aboard the *Titanic*, the legendary preacher and three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, the man who would later lead the anti-evolutionary crusade resulting in the Scopes trial of 1925, thundered, ‘Let no man bring to my deathbed for my consolation Darwin’s “Descent of Man”’.³⁸ The next month a round table of ‘Well known Duluthians’ discussed the ‘dancing problem’ and invoked the *Descent of Man* as evidence that young people dancing need not necessarily be sexual.³⁹

Visual images also highlight the key role that gender played in popular interpretations of the *Descent of Man*. *Harper’s Bazaar* published two cartoons, originally printed in the British magazine *Punch*, in response to the publication of this watershed work.⁴⁰ In the cartoon ‘A logical refutation of Mr. Darwin’s theory’, a husband read passages from the *Descent* to his wife, ‘whom he adores, but loves to teaze’. In the illustration, the bearded husband knelt in front of his wife in their well-appointed Victorian parlour and read to her while she cuddled their baby. The wife, however, rejected the assertion that their baby was ‘descended from a Hairy Quadruped with Pointed Ears and a Tail’. ‘Speak for yourself, Jack! I’m not descended from anything of the kind’, she responded. ‘I beg to say; and Baby takes after Me. So there!’⁴¹ The illustration depicts the wife in a buttoned-up, fashionable Victorian dress, holding tightly to her young child, the paragon of nineteenth-century femininity, seated in a chair above her kneeling, bearded husband. While brute and hairy man may have evolved from ape-like progenitors, surely his decorous, civilized wife did not.

That the *Descent* provided a template through which readers puzzled over human gender roles was particularly evident in the spoofs parodying its main ideas. One of the most popular was a song, to the tune of ‘Greensleeves’, first published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and reprinted in numerous US periodicals. Among the ‘very queer things’ that

34 ‘The museum’, *Appleton’s* (15 April 1871) 5, pp. 447–8; and ‘The museum’, *Appleton’s* (22 April 1871) 5, pp. 479–80.

35 ‘Mr. Darwin’s New Work, “The Descent of Man”’, *The Albion: A Journal of News, Politics* (1 April 1871) 49, pp. 198–9.

36 See, for example, Augusta Leypoldt and George Iles (eds.), *Lists of Books for Girls and Women and Their Clubs*, Boston: American Library Association, The Library Bureau, 1895, pp. 108–11. ‘The Aguilar Free Library,’ *New York Times*, 5 July 1896, p. 24.

37 ‘A new game’, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 December 1891, p. 10. Reprinted from the *New York Recorder*.

38 Edwin A. Nye, ‘Heart to heart talks: science or faith column’, *San Jose Mercury News*, 18 June 1912, p. 2.

39 ‘Well known Duluthians discuss the dancing problem’, *Duluth News Tribune*, 14 July 1912, p. 1.

40 See also Richards, op. cit. (5), pp. 192–3, on these images in the British context.

41 ‘A logical refutation of Mr. Darwin’s theory’, *Harper’s Bazaar*, 6 May 1871, p. 288.

happened as humans descended from animals was that ‘women plainly had beards and big whiskers at first; While the man supplied milk when the baby was nursed; And some other strong facts I could tell – if I durst – Which nobody can deny’. For those raised on the twinned ideas that God made Eve from Adam’s rib and that men and women inhabited separate spheres, Darwin’s suggestion that all organic life had descended from a single-celled hermaphroditic organism proved unsettling. This song, however, rejected the notion that people might one day be expected to make mating choices based on ‘fitness’ because in Gilded Age America, everyone knew wealth trumped looks: ‘The Bad may be pretty, the Good may be plain; and sad matches are made from the lucre of gain; so perhaps as we are we shall likely remain – which nobody can deny’.⁴²

While upholding traditional gender roles had initially served as a reason why many readers dismissed the *Descent of Man*, by the end of the century, feminism and evolution came to be conflated in popular imagination as two linked, modern causes, which proved a boon to feminism and a detriment to sexual selection theory. One review highlighted Darwin’s remarks about ancestral beards on women and nipples on men, commenting tongue-in-cheek, ‘it is consoling to obtain here some scientific basis for the women’s rights movement. It is, evidently, a blind and instinctive reversion to a primitive condition in which domestic cares were equally shared by both parents’.⁴³ And, in 1899, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a cartoon titled ‘The New Woman speculating on the descent of man’, featuring three well-dressed ladies admiring a monkey in a cage, intimating that New Women and the acceptance of evolutionary theory went hand in hand, perhaps at the expense of traditional male roles.⁴⁴

Just as Americans had read Shakespeare as a poet and playwright of the people, so too did they read the *Descent of Man* as form of literature to be freely interpreted by all. The most colourful response to the *Descent of Man* was the satire entitled *The Fall of Man: Or, the Loves of the Gorillas*, published anonymously by the Shakespeare scholar and essayist Richard Grant White. Billed as a ‘popular scientific lecture upon the Darwinian theory of development by sexual selection, by a learned gorilla’, this spoof lampooned Darwin’s assertion that female choice of mates had determined the evolution of species.⁴⁵ The ‘learned gorilla’ organized a public lecture to explain to his neighbours how their distant cousin man had ‘descended from monkey-hood to humanity’. Reminiscent of the Genesis creation story, the narrator began by highlighting that monkeys had ‘fallen’ through ‘the frailty and fickleness of the female sex’. In contrast to the biblical account of the fall through female curiosity, however, gorillas fell through female choice. Long ago, the narrator explains, a female fell in love with a mutant, hairless gorilla, but he refused the advances of hairy females. So his admirer concocted a clever solution: she adhered herself to a gum tree to remove her unwanted body hair and succeeded in winning her beloved’s affections. Shortly thereafter, the hairless male gorilla encouraged his other female admirers to similarly remove their hair, and, through these hairless pairings,

42 *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* ran this spoof of *The Descent of Man* (Darwinian loquitur) in its April 1871 edition and it was widely reprinted in the US. See ‘The Descent of Man (Darwinian loquitur)’, *Appleton’s Journal of Literature, Science, and Art*, 13 May 1871, pp. 558–9; ‘The Descent of Man (Darwinian loquitur)’, *Christian Advocate* (22 June 1871) 46, p. 194; ‘The Descent of Man (Darwinian loquitur)’, *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* (June 1871) 13, pp. 696–8; ‘The Descent of Man (Darwinian loquitur)’, *Medical and Surgical Reporter*, 14 October 1871, p. 351; ‘The Descent of Man (Darwinian loquitur)’, *Scientific American*, 3 June 1871, p. 361.

43 Rev. Wilder Smith, ‘The descent of man from the apes’, *Minnesotian Herald*, 10 June 1871, p. 5.

44 ‘The new woman speculating on the Descent of Man’, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5 March 1899, p. 3.

45 A Learned Gorilla, *The Fall of Man: Or, the Loves of the Gorillas. A Popular Scientific Lecture upon the Darwinian Theory of Development by Sexual Selection*, New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1871. Published anonymously by Richard Grant White.

man evolved from gorilla.⁴⁶ To readers like White, Darwin's suggestion that female reproductive agency was 'natural' sounded as preposterous as the existence of hairless men.

Literature, too, reveals how readers interpreted the *Descent of Man* as a commentary on nineteenth-century gender roles and heterosexual romance. In 1873, critic Philip Quilibet described the literary scene in terms of Darwin: 'the novel-writer's province bears witness to the Darwinian ferment. Tracing simian propensities in society must henceforth be invariably the story-wright's leading business'.⁴⁷ For example, in her novel *My Wife and I; or Harry Henderson's History* (1871), Harriet Beecher Stowe commented on women's limited choices in courtship by using the *Descent of Man* as a literary prop. To distract herself from obsessing over a crush, Eva sat down to read her friend Ida's copy of *The Descent of Man*. However, she soon realized that this book was entirely about sexual attraction, fuelling her thoughts about Harry Henderson. Ida, her proudly single friend, encouraged Eva to remain open-minded and finish the book, noting that the main reason she could think only of her beloved was that she had little else to do.⁴⁸

Edith Wharton wrote the short story 'The descent of man' to parody a man like Darwin, enmeshed in his scientific work, who had 'eloped with his idea'. Professor Linyard despised the popularizers and pseudo-scientists and wrote a book to mock them. Much to his chagrin, his publisher marketed the book as 'real' science and it became a huge bestseller with a mostly female readership, a sub-theme that may well testify to Wharton's knowledge of the popularity of the *Descent* among women. Next, the professor began publishing 'Scientific sermons' in the *Woman's World* magazine (freethinkers did, in fact, host regular 'scientific sermons' in New York in the 1880s).⁴⁹ Having a largely female readership, it would seem, foreshadowed the end of any real scientific career.

In the story 'Madcap Violet' by William Black, Violet North, the beautiful and single protagonist, did not want to marry because she liked her independence. She went out 'adventuring' and stopped by a bookstore where she informed the bookseller that she needed the best book on philosophy for a 'gentleman who has studied nearly everything'. She saw the new copies of the *Descent of Man* and immediately decided that it was the perfect gift. She selected this book for her love interest both as a sign of affection and to send an important message about herself: she was open-minded and modern, not bound by traditional ideas regarding gender or courtship.⁵⁰ Indeed, for nineteenth-century men and women, the phrase 'sexual selection' and the title *The Descent of Man* often functioned as shorthand for new ideas about gender roles and courtship.

46 A Learned Gorilla, op. cit. (45), pp. 8, 9. This waxing process is described on pp. 33–4, and its implications for humans on pp. 37–8.

47 Philip Quilibet, 'Darwinism in literature', *The Galaxy* (May 1873) 15, p. 697. This assertion is further developed by Bender, op. cit. (26). See also Jennifer Elisabeth Gerstel, 'Sexual selection and mate choice in Darwin, Eliot, Gaskell, and Hardy', PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2002; Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003; and Patricia Murphy, 'Re-evaluating female "inferiority": Sarah Grand versus Charles Darwin', *Victorian Literature and Culture* (1998) 26(2), pp. 221–36.

48 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I; or Harry Henderson's History*, New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1871, pp. 321–2.

49 Edith Wharton, 'The descent of man', in Wharton, *The Descent of Man and Other Stories*, reprint, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970 (first published 1904), pp. 1–34.

50 William Black, 'Madcap violet', *The Galaxy* (May 1876) 5, pp. 602–8. *The Galaxy* became the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1878. For another American short story that referenced the *Descent*, see also Margaret Vandegrift, 'Mademoiselle stylites', *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* (April 1873) 11, pp. 459–64.

Prescriptive literature promotes the evolutionary power of female beauty

As further proof of the *Descent of Man*'s far-ranging influence in American culture, references to the book pervaded prescriptive literature. In the pages of advice books, popular interpretations of sexual selection theory upended long-held truisms about courtship. In his popular book *Happy Homes and How to Make Them* (1870), John William Kirton, for example, had advised men to seek 'the daughter of a good mother' with a 'suitable temperament', who knew 'the worth of money' and possessed a 'religious character'.⁵¹ Advice books published after 1870, however, generally offered drastically revised guidance to those hoping to wed. Ignoring personal, intellectual and spiritual traits, books published after the *Descent of Man* tended to advise women and men to select their partners based on physical appearance and to develop their own good looks if they hoped to one day wed. As Mrs H.R. Haweis cautioned in *The Art of Beauty* (1878), there were two types of women: the visible and the invisible. 'The distinguishable ones marry – those who are beautiful, or magnetic in some way, whose characters have some definite colouring, and who can make their individuality felt'.⁵²

Several courtship and beauty guides made explicit reference to the *Descent of Man*, while others relied on Darwinian terms, such as 'sexual selection', 'coloring' and 'charm', which would have been readily identifiable to contemporary readers familiar with *Popular Science Monthly* or *Nature*. A consensus emerged that beauty was the most importance feature to look for in any potential mate. Reviewing the *Descent* in *Nature* in 1871, P.H. Pye Smith observed that Darwin had established that 'though in the lists of Love the battle is often to the strong, even more frequently it is to the beautiful'.⁵³ Henry T. Finck, music editor of the *New York Evening Post*, drew heavily on Darwin's writing and his theory of sexual selection in his advice book *Romantic Love and Personal Beauty* (1887). Finck compared various nations in terms of the beauty of their female citizens, concluding that the sway of natural selection was on the decline. As a result, he contended, 'Sexual Selection has freer scope to modify the human race into harmony with aesthetic demands', ushering forth the age of 'Romantic Love and Personal Beauty'.⁵⁴ Similar arguments were later adopted by positive eugenicists who urged Americans that strategic marital choices offered the best way to improve the national character. Several of the feminists and radicals who incorporated sexual selection theory into their programmes for social reform were likewise drawn to eugenics both in the US and in England, as Evellen Richards has documented, not because of its emphasis on beauty but because it offered the possibility of female reproductive agency.⁵⁵ Though it

51 John William Kirton, *Happy Homes and How to Make Them; or, Counsels on Love, Courtship and Marriage*, London: F. Warne and Co., 1870, p. v, Schlesinger Library, History of Women Collection.

52 Mrs H.R. Haweis, *The Art of Beauty*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1878, p. 263, Duke University Special Collections.

53 P.H. Pye Smith, review of *Descent*, *Nature* (13 April 1871) 3, p. 463.

54 Henry T. Finck, *Romantic Love and Personal Beauty: Their Development, Causal Relations, Historic and National Peculiarities*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912, pp. 542–3. This book was first published in 1887.

55 The idea that outer beauty equalled health and fertility became a mainstay of prescriptive literature in the years between the publication of the *Descent* and the organizational debut of the American eugenics movement. For more on the American eugenics movement in the Progressive Era see, for example, Susan Rensing, 'Feminist eugenics: from free love to birth control, 1880–1930', PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2006; Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985; Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of Century to the Baby Boom*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001; Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity, 1865 to the Present*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005; Dana Seitel, 'Unnatural selection: mothers, eugenic feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's regeneration narratives', *American Quarterly*

is beyond the scope of this essay, the links between the popular embrace of sexual selection theory and the growing prominence of eugenics in the US are vital to understanding the overall eugenics movement.⁵⁶

In the late nineteenth century, marriage experts further asserted that external beauty indicated internal fertility and health. Beauty was no longer an aesthetic criterion; rather it became an evolutionary imperative. The ominously titled *The Ugly Girl Papers* (1875) reminded readers that looks alone attracted mates: ‘How dexterously Nature inserts the reward of beauty before the self-denials needed to gain health!’ A beautiful woman’s ‘magnetism attracts every creature who comes within its influence’.⁵⁷ Mrs Haweis clarified that she did not necessarily agree with Darwin’s suggestion that different races had different standards of beauty, but she wholeheartedly endorsed his claim that female beauty served important evolutionary purposes and warned that ‘those [women] who are completely negative, unnoticeable, colourless, formless, invisible – are left behind’.⁵⁸

Popular courtship manuals elevated the importance of female beauty by emphasizing its evolutionary function and demanded that good looks be ‘natural’. Physical-culture expert and inventor of the penis-scope Bernarr MacFadden warned of a ‘false sexual selection’ through which men had been socialized to appreciate artificial beauty (fancy clothes, padded bras and make-up), rather than natural, maternal traits (wide hips and natural bosoms) which true sexual selection favoured.⁵⁹ Similarly, social scientist W.I. Thomas reminded readers, ‘Man is naturally one of the most unadorned of animals, without brilliant appearance or natural glitter, with no plumage, no spots or stripes, no naturally sweet voice, no attractive odor, and no graceful antics’, and implored women to trade in their fancy clothes for plain ones, lest they confuse men and deter the evolutionary process.⁶⁰

Advice book authors and advertisers stressed to their female readership that the ultimate barrier to beauty was facial hair. Changing perceptions of the cultural significance of facial and body hair, on both men and women, were another ramification of the popular reception of sexual selection theory, as I have argued elsewhere.⁶¹ In the *Descent of Man*, Darwin posited that male beards had developed because females preferred them, whereas he explained that women had lost facial hair as men selected the least hairy mates.⁶² Darwin’s hypothesis about the evolution of female hairlessness was among the most debated aspects of the *Descent*, reframing popular and scientific understanding of the significance of facial and body hair.⁶³ While women, no doubt, have been battling chin hair

(March 2003) 55, pp. 61–88; Seidler, *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Nancy Ordovery, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007; Douglas Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020.

56 See, for example, Battan, op. cit. (10); and Rensing, op. cit. (55).

57 S.D.P., *The Ugly Girl Papers, or Hints for the Toilet*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875, p. 107, Duke University Special Collections. This book is reprinted from *Harper’s Bazaar*.

58 Haweis, op. cit. (52), pp. 263, 7, 1.

59 Bernarr Macfadden and Marion Malcolm, *Health - Beauty - Sexuality from Girlhood to Womanhood*, New York: Physical Culture, 1904, p. 88.

60 W.I. Thomas, ‘The psychology of women’s dress’, *American Magazine*, November 1908, p. 66.

61 For an analysis of the gendered and racialized significance of female facial and body hair in an evolutionary context see Hamlin, ‘The “case of a bearded woman”’, op. cit. (5).

62 ‘The absence of hair on the body is to a certain extent a secondary sexual character; for in all parts of the world women are less hairy than men. Therefore we may reasonably suspect that this is a character which has been gained through sexual selection’. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1st edn, introduction by John Tyler Bonner and Robert M. May, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981 (first published 1871), vol. 11, p. 376.

63 Wallace in particular objected to this assertion. See, for example, Alfred Russel Wallace, *Darwinism: An Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection*, 3rd edn, London: Macmillan, 1901 (first published 1889).

and moustaches for centuries, visible facial hair did not become a disease until 1878 when dermatologists described the disease of hypertrichosis, 'superfluous hair', in women, which reportedly traumatized their female patients. In the decades that followed, physicians devoted undue attention to the study and treatment of this new disease that had no other symptoms or health implications beyond unsightliness. A popular 1896 dermatological textbook, for example, devoted twenty pages and seven images 'representing freaks of nature with respect to hairiness', while much more prevalent diseases such as ringworm 'occupie[d] less than two pages'.⁶⁴ Desperate for relief from superfluous hair, women helped inaugurate and sustain the new field of dermatology by making regular appointments for electrolysis, invented in 1869, a costly and impermanent solution to unwanted hair that could only be administered by a dermatologist. Those who did not encounter female facial hair in the mirror paid good money to see it on display at the circus sideshow. The most popular sideshow exhibit from the 1870s until 1925 was the bearded woman named Krao who had been kidnapped from her home in Laos as a young girl so that circus promoters could display her as 'Darwin's Missing Link'.

The radical potential of female choice

Perhaps the most unintended of all responses to the *Descent of Man* was the popularity of female choice among radicals and feminists, as I have analysed in detail in other publications.⁶⁵ From the pages of freethought, sex reform and feminist periodicals (including *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, the *Woman's Tribune* and *Socialist Woman*) to the most widely read reformist fiction of the era (including Edward Bellamy's bestselling *Looking Backward* (1888) and many works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman), female choice, unfettered by economic inequality, redeemed society and saved the human race. To these reformers and writers, lower down the hierarchy of civilization than the members of the American and British Associations for the Advancement of Science but no less interested in evolution, animal kinship provided compelling evidence for social change. Animals arranged themselves sexually and domestically in many more interesting patterns than did humans, and the animal evidence for female choice promised a natural precedent for revising reproductive and domestic practices among humans. If humans were indeed part and parcel of the animal kingdom, then who could rightly argue that Gilded Age domestic and sexual practices among humans were 'natural'?

As naturalists on both sides of the Atlantic debated the existence and efficacy of both natural and sexual selection, 'reform Darwinists' embraced sexual selection theory, and especially female choice, to prove the 'naturalness' of their proposed reforms and grant them scientific imprimatur.⁶⁶ Feminists, in particular, enlisted the *Descent of Man* as evidence of female superiority and to argue that human gender roles were 'unnatural'. Most reformers who invoked sexual selection did so by quoting Darwin in the original, either disregarding or not recognizing the many scientific debates surrounding sexual and natural selection at the end of the nineteenth century. Reformers may not have cared whether sexual selection was demonstrably verifiable or scientifically accepted. To them, it was enough that it might be true and that one of the most respected scientific minds of all time had articulated it. Sexual selection offered the promise of an official, scientific sanction for goals long seen as antithetical to civilized life in majority-

64 J.N.H., Review 3, no title, *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* (March 1896) 111, p. 328.

65 Hamlin, *From Eve to Evolution*, op. cit. (5); Hamlin, 'Sexual selection and the economics of marriage', op. cit. (5); and Hamlin, 'The birds and the bees', op. cit. (5).

66 For a discussion of Lester Frank Ward and reform Darwinism see Beryl Satter, *Each Mind a Kingdom: American Women, Sexual Purity, and the New Thought Movement, 1875-1920*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, pp. 36-7. For a study of reform Darwinism in England see Stack, op. cit. (13).

Christian nations like the US, including birth control, the demise of patriarchal marriage and the economic autonomy of women.

The influence of Darwin on the emerging birth control movement was first publicly demonstrated during the famous ‘Fruits of Philosophy’ trial in England in 1877, which galvanized the movement on both sides of the Atlantic. In pleading their case, birth control pamphlet publishers Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant wanted to establish that birth control was natural, not obscene, and that it accorded with evolutionary principles regarding population growth. To establish the movement’s scientific legitimacy, Bradlaugh and Besant invited Darwin to take the stand.⁶⁷ Darwin politely asked to be excused from testifying on account of his ill health and the fact that he disagreed with artificial checks to fertilization. In his reply to Bradlaugh’s invitation, Darwin explained that he opposed birth control because he feared ‘any such practices would in time spread to unmarried women & w^d destroy chastity, on which the family bond depends; & the weakening of this bond would be the greatest of all possible evils to mankind’.⁶⁸ Even though Darwin refused to take the stand in defence of Bradlaugh and Besant, the *Descent of Man* circulated among sex reformers on both sides of the Atlantic and his theories of reproduction and population remained associated with the birth control movement, diminishing the scientific legitimacy of sexual selection in England (as Dawson has established) and quite possibly in the US.

American women socialists, in particular, were drawn to reformist readings of evolution. According to Mark Pittenger’s research on evolutionary thought in American socialism, male socialists tended to use evolutionary rhetoric as a way to justify the status quo and, especially, the second-class status of women and African Americans because they favoured ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ narratives that placed white men at the top of the evolutionary ladder.⁶⁹ To female socialists, however, evolutionary science offered an appealing alternative to the status quo because the *Descent of Man* redefined the roles of females in nature. In the pages of *Socialist Woman*, authors quoted the *Descent* and the work of reform Darwinian Lester Frank Ward to highlight the feminist implications of evolutionary science and argue for female economic self-sufficiency. In fact, the very first issue of *Socialist Woman* (June 1907) included a note instructing subscribers to ‘Read Darwin’s “Descent of Man”’. It will give you a pretty good idea of the part the feminine principle has played in the animal kingdom’.⁷⁰ Subsequent articles in *Socialist Woman* denounced marriage rooted in economic necessity, criticized church and state for regulating marriage and compared marriage to prostitution. For solutions to the marriage problem, these women looked to the animal kingdom. As Sara Kingsbury noted in ‘The lady-like woman: her place in nature’ (1908), the modern ladylike woman ‘violates the habit of every other female in the animal kingdom ... She is the only female in the animal kingdom who seeks to charm the male’. She then observed that ‘Darwin, in his “Descent of Man”’, had established the natural pattern of courtship whereby the males must earn access to the females. ‘In the animal world there is no economic dependence on the part of the female to drive her to accept the advances of the amorous male, whether she desires

67 Geoffrey West, *The Life of Annie Besant*, London: Howe, 1929, copy residing in Margaret Sanger Papers, Series III, Box 26, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA. See also Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant, A Biography*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 116–17.

68 Charles R. Darwin to Charles Bradlaugh, 6 June 1877, Letter 10988, Charles Darwin Correspondence Project, Cambridge University, at www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-10988.

69 Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870–1920*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993. See also Pittenger, ‘Evolution, women’s nature, and American feminist socialism, 1900–1915’, *Radical History Review* (1986) 36, pp. 47–61.

70 ‘Notes’, *Socialist Woman* (June 1907) 1(1), p. 4. *The Descent of Man* was included on another reading list published later that year, ‘Books on the woman question’, *Socialist Woman* (October 1907) 1(5), p. 6.

them or not'. Kingsbury ended on a hopeful note, however, observing that 'there are those of us who are awakening. We have science for an ally'.⁷¹ Evolutionary arguments for female economic self-sufficiency reached an apex in the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, arguably the most influential feminist thinker of the Progressive Era, first in her landmark book *Women and Economics* (1898) and later in her fiction and the countless articles she published in her magazine the *Forerunner*.⁷²

Yet it was precisely these same feminist implications that limited sexual selection's plausibility among naturalists for generations, as Erika Milam and Evelleen Richards have established.⁷³ First Mivart and then Wallace cited the 'instability of a vicious feminine caprice' as prima facie evidence for the absurdity of female choice as an evolutionary agent, though Wallace later did champion female choice not because he saw evidence for it in nature but because he thought it might improve conditions for humans.⁷⁴ But it was not just that scientists could not fathom females (or animals in general) as choosers; they also did not want to associate with the people who thought women should exercise reproductive autonomy. In England, as Richards has explicated in her landmark study *Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection* (2017), the radical and feminist interpretations of sexual selection theory were closely monitored and policed, first by Darwin himself and after his death by Thomas Huxley and other official Darwinians. In the US, however, Darwin had no such bulldog (Asa Gray, for example, did not mention sexual selection in his influential *Darwiniana*). The Darwinian radicals in the US were not as centrally organized as they were in England (around Annie Besant and, later, the Men's and Women's Club), nor was the emerging American scientific establishment aligned around a Darwinian axis as closely as it was in England, leaving the Darwinian radicals and reformers more leeway (though they were often checked by the Comstock Laws). Between 1900 and 1930, Milam notes, the *New York Times* regularly ran articles espousing the societal benefits of female choice among humans, promising that women's intelligent selection of mates would surely increase future health and prosperity. Most of these articles appear to have been written by laypeople, not scientists, but they were nevertheless widely read.⁷⁵ For nearly fifty years, sexual selection resonated with members of what David Stack has termed 'the Darwinian left' in England – socialists, feminists, freethinkers and sex reformers – though no comprehensive study of the Darwinian left in the US has yet been published.⁷⁶

One primary question raised by this research, then, is the extent to which the radical and feminist embrace of sexual selection theory in the US may have tainted its appeal among naturalists who were, at the very same time, creating the institutions that marked 'science' as a separate and special form of knowledge for experts, who were nearly always white men. Just as Tocqueville was shocked to hear lumberjacks recite Shakespeare, perhaps naturalists recoiled at the sight of Darwin's name in the pages of *Lucifer the Light-Bearer* or *Socialist Woman*. Indeed, the elements of sexual selection theory that enticed reformers and feminists to embrace the concept – that it linked human love with animal mating and granted females reproductive autonomy – were the very same premises that made the theory so difficult for naturalists to accept. Perhaps the more that radicals, non-scientists and feminists invoked sexual selection, the less 'scientific' the theory seemed and the more official science sought to distance itself both from the

71 Sara Kingsbury, 'The lady-like woman: her place in nature', *Socialist Woman*, August 1908, p. 9.

72 I develop this argument in 'Sexual selection and the economics of marriage', op. cit. (5).

73 Erika Lorraine Milam, *Looking for a Few Good Males: Female Choice in Evolutionary Biology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010; Richards, op. cit. (5).

74 Quoted and discussed in Richards, op. cit. (5), p. 478.

75 Milam, op. cit. (73), pp. 31–2.

76 Stack, op. cit. (13).

masses and from women. This essay is a first attempt to chart the wide-ranging reception of the *Descent of Man* in the US and, hopefully, prompt future research which will more fully investigate the links between the feminist adoption of sexual selection theory and scientific ambivalence toward it at the turn of the twentieth century.

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