Who’s the Fairest of them All? The Beauty of Charles Darwin

Alyssa Lord

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors

Part of the Religion Commons, and the Rhetoric and Composition Commons

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/97

Recommended Citation
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/97

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
The name Charles Darwin inspires a montage of pictures and concepts: evolution, the H.M.S. Beagle, natural selection, beetles, God-killer, a wrinkled forehead and scraggly white beard. Along with the images and ideas come emotions ranging from adoration to abhorrence, depending on the hearer. The cultural controversy surrounding Darwin’s theory of evolution and its possible spiritual implications draws battle lines that box Darwin into specific conversations about science and religion. As a result, when we hear his name, we rarely think of beauty. To some, science and beauty may seem incongruous: one functions in a lab without windows, the other blooms in a field of wildflowers. Ironically, Darwin would rather have been in the meadow collecting beetles and observing wildlife, not in a closed space with hissing beakers. As he writes in his autobiography, “beautifully adapted” organisms witnessed in the wilds of the Galapagos inspired him to prove the gradual modification of species that became his finest work:
On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection. Beauty led Darwin to his science, informs his science, and, ultimately, gets explained by his science.

Connecting Darwin with beauty makes little sense considering his personal life. Having no patience for sparkling prose, he desired that Origins consist of one “long catalogue of dry facts” (Darwin, Origins 29); later in life, Darwin lost a sense of the beauty around him: as he reports in his Autobiography, Shakespeare “nauseated” him, music only made him think “too energetically” about his work, and despite “retaining some taste for fine scenery,” it gradually lost “the exquisite delight it once” held for him; in fact, it seems only novels with happy endings and a character worth loving – if “a pretty woman all the better” – brought him aesthetic pleasure (Darwin, Autobiography 138-139). Like George Eliot’s Lydgate, Darwin appears too devoted to science, a pursuit that squelches his appreciation for the beautiful rather than edifying it. Only a superficial and cheeky admiration for fictional women remains. What meaningful commentary could this man add to the serious philosophical discussion surrounding beauty and aesthetics?

How about a new definition for aesthetic? The Oxford English Dictionary credits Darwin with expanding the meaning of aesthetic through The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex (1871). Before Darwin, aesthetic discussions did not include animals or things; it focused solely on human perception. Darwin, however, parallels animals and humans in their critical perception of beauty. His definition of beauty deals less with traditional understandings of pleasing appearance and taste than how beauty developed and the organisms that manipulate it.

Surprisingly, despite this change in definition, Darwin’s aesthetics receive little scholarly attention. When scholars discuss Darwin, his science pertaining to evolution and progress
receives most of the attention. More controversially, Darwin gets caught up in religious versus science debates. Little else has been written on Darwin that does not focus broadly on evolution or religion.³

Feminists have interpreted Darwin in terms of beauty, but come to two opposing conclusions: one, that Darwin’s theory oppresses women (thanks to its patriarchal, sexist language and its assumption of human female weakness) or two, that it empowers women because of his emphasis on female choice (in the animal world). Even in these discussions of beauty in Darwin, the emphasis lies on its social ramifications and barely scrapes the surface of the aesthetics in the science.

Even those authors who relate Darwin to literature do so in broad, evolutionary terms. Lionel Stevenson’s *Darwin Among the Poets* precedes George Levine’s *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* but neither book examines beauty. Both discuss what I call generalized popular-Darwin: those Darwinian notions most people attribute to Darwin whether he said them (meant them) or not. Of course, both of these works read Darwin critically but the focus remains on broader evolutionary implications, just the type of conclusions Darwin himself viewed as inferior to more detail-oriented, fact-based proofs.

Drawing from his minutiae-oriented science and emphasizing physicality, Darwin creatively redefines beauty and elevates the value of the corporeal world. Pre-Darwinian literature and aesthetics influenced this shift, especially the works of his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin. The concept of sexual selection that eventually naturalized beauty for Charles Darwin appears centuries earlier and while Erasmus highlights the ideas of the ancients in his poetry he never goes as far as his grandson to redefine beauty. Rather than positing beauty in the spirit or

---

³ Ironically, Darwin never touted evolution, at least as a term. In fact, he tried to distance himself from it because of its philosophical, soft-science connections.
soul, Darwin labels beauty for body’s sake, anticipating the Aesthete movement initiated by Walter Pater. Although some scholars mention Pater and Darwin in context, none ever explores them in depth. I found this in all the sources I read; the pieces were there waiting to be put together, but no one had yet attempted the puzzle. As a well-known beauty connoisseur and aesthetic revolutionary, Pater’s consonance with Darwin lends credibility to the assertion that Darwin radically changed contemporary notions of beauty. Their juxtaposition also highlights their difference: though Pater and Darwin both challenge societal definitions of beauty, Pater’s adaptations provide a healthier understanding of beauty that preserves life and provides future potentialities for Darwin’s endless forms.

Understanding Darwin’s influence on Pater begins with exploring Darwin’s divergence from traditional notions of beauty. As Jude Nixon notes, Darwin’s “life and occupation reflect the aesthetic concerns of nineteenth-century England. As the age became more positivistic, utilitarian, and mechanistic, a new aesthetic theory had to be forged” (Nixon 166). Darwin provided the means through his mechanisms of natural selection and the sexual selection that relies on physical attraction. Throughout Origins, even “the humblest parasite” reveals “beautiful adaptations everywhere and in every part of the organic world” (Darwin, Origins 39). Adaptations aid their subject, foster survival, and engender life. Even the “the beautifully plumed seed of the dandelion” does not represent superfluous ornament (Darwin, Origins 49). Wind blows through the fan of seeds, scattering them throughout the fields. The more plumped and plumed, the more seeds to distribute, the greater chance of growth and passing on of genes to promulgate the species. Combining these two senses – one of appearances and one of efficiency
— suggests a more unconventional understanding of beauty. Darwin connects beauty with action, movement that requires a body.⁴

Any countercultural movement inevitably spawns detractors. Reverend P.N. Waggett, writing thirty years after the publication of *Origins of Species* and nine years after *Descent of Man*, wrote an essay simply titled “Beauty,” a word he hoped to rescue from Darwin’s destabilization. Waggett’s ambitious project — to define beauty as a sign of divine creation — references John Ruskin but focuses on Darwin, representative of “positive science” (Waggett 131). By including Darwin so naturally with one of the most distinguished beauty critics of the Victorian period, Wagget demonstrates how easily Darwin might be placed in an aesthetic discourse. For Waggett, Darwin’s theory of sexual selection necessitated lengthy discussion because of its aesthetic implications.

Talking about Darwin’s types of Beauty often becomes difficult because we lack more specific synonyms. When Darwin says “beauty,” he could mean one of two things, what I divide into function or flourish. Functional beauty allies itself more with natural selection: the means by which one individual survives and is selected by virtue of not dying. The bivalve’s hinge, for instance, which Darwin terms the “most beautiful adaptation” is not beautiful for its appearance but rather because, like dandelion seeds, it works so well. Conversely, physical appearance for its own sake and not as survival mechanism underlies sexual selection and the survival of the species. This beauty of flourish refers specifically to ornament and does not exude the pragmatism of a beautiful hinge. However, despite its alignment with decorative display, the practical nature of sexual selection makes even Darwin’s flourishing beauty one of usefulness.

---

⁴ Considering Darwin’s science, ‘body’ does not just apply to the traditional human body. Even dandelions can have bodies: physical, concrete, biological, organic structures that grow and live.
Understanding sexual selection begins by placing it within the broader framework of the more culturally familiar natural selection. In *Origins* Darwin calls sexual selection “less rigorous than natural selection” because it “depends not on a struggle for existence but on a struggle between the males for possession of the females” (*Origins* 56). Natural selection determines the subject’s ability to survive; sexual selection asks if the subject will continue the species, ensuring survival of the community rather than the individual. Natural selection presents the more immediate concern for an individual, but sexual selection decides the ultimate fate of the species.

Despite relegating sexual selection to secondary importance in 1859 and only devoting a few pages to its elucidation in *Origins*, Darwin revised his perception of its significance by 1871. *Descent*'s controversial thesis claims that “of all the causes which have led to differences in the external appearances between the races of man…sexual selection has been the most efficient” (Darwin, *Descent* 606). He therefore “found it indispensable to treat the whole subject in detail” so that the second part of his work, dealing with sexual selection, “extended to inordinate length,” eclipsing *Descent of Man*, a fate that “could not be avoided” (Darwin, *Descent* 3). For a belabored writer and thinker like Darwin, such extensive attention indicates his belief in its significance and emphasizes his concern with the development of human appearance.

As an efficient mechanism for developing our looks, sexual selection utilizes what Darwin calls “secondary” sexual characteristics, or what he also calls characters. Primary characters distinguish the sexes biologically, while secondary sexual characters encompass those not directly responsible for reproduction. Examples of secondary sexual traits include the human beard, extravagant avian plumes, and male organs of sense and prehension for finding,

---

5 Darwin employs gendered language, but when discussing his ideas I intentionally use his terms for continuity.  
6 *Descent* fills 206 pages while *Selection in Relation to Sex* encompasses 413 (double his original project). The two parts were published together in one volume, most commonly called simply *Descent of Man*.  
7 In biological science, the words ‘character,’ ‘characteristic,’ and ‘trait’ are interchangeable.
reaching and capturing the female. Though these characteristics do not necessarily distinguish the sexes, they remain so necessary to the act and success of sexual reproduction that for Darwin “it is scarcely possible to decide which ought to be called primary and which secondary” (Descent 207). Blurring the distinction between which features stimulate greater reproductive success increases the importance of the secondary sexual characteristics and raises sexual selection to equal importance with natural selection. Darwin emphasizes sexual selection’s efficacy to persuade his contemporaries that nature utilizes this method. Traits that appear useless for survival may actually play key roles in preserving the species, a preservation more significant than natural selection’s maintenance of the individual. This communal understanding of beauty shifts focus from the traditionally-admired individual to the collective group.

Utilizing secondary sexual characters, sexual selection propagates beauty over time as subjects continually choose attractive traits. Darwin reasons that “just as man can give beauty, according to his standard of taste, to his male poultry, or more strictly can modify the beauty originally acquired by the parent species…so it appears female birds…, have by long selection of the more attractive males, added to their beauty or other attractive qualities” (Descent 211). If attractive mates reproduce, their traits pass to their offspring who will also desire attractive partners. Over time, the uglier subjects reproduce less frequently (being passed over more often for their attractive counterparts) becoming less representative among the species until eventually fading away, taking their ugliness with them. Without secondary sexual characteristics, the species might inadvertently select less ideal forms and consequently stagnate.

This is the most simplistic understanding of Darwin’s aesthetic and indeed does not accurately capture the true meaning of beauty for Darwin. Of course, Darwin proposes progress

---

8 See Descent of Man Chapters 8-13 (insects, birds, fish, reptiles, lower order animals) and Chapters 17-20 (mammals and humans) for discussions of secondary sexual characters.
over time throughout his writing but he does not limit that progress to simple linearity; therefore, while this example of birds adding to their beauty describes one aspect to his theory, it remains at the surface level of meaning within Darwin’s writing. As if to emphasize that fact, this is the notion of beauty that Waggett picks up on. In his “Beauty” essay, Waggett concludes a similar, less-comprehensive summary of Darwin’s sexual selection with rhetorical flourish: “Hence, Beauty” (Waggett 139). The declarative nature of this short sentence fragment succinctly describes the power behind Darwin’s theory. Sexual selection pins the ever-elusive beauty down to feathers and features; simultaneously in that capture, sexual selection ties beauty to the physical realm, a new position that Waggett disputes.

Scholars today debate whether Darwin’s theory of sexual selection actually influenced his contemporaries. Apparently, sexual selection was not taken seriously by scientists until recently, despite some acknowledged ideological influence. George Levine believes it “unlikely” that “Darwin’s theory of sexual selection had much influence on the Victorian culture” because it reinforced the gendered discourse of the day and because “the scientific community found it impossible to credit the idea that the female could have had much to do with evolutionary development” (Loves 189). While the second part of Levine’s assertion stands – as Waggett will shortly demonstrate – Waggett himself negates the first part. The explicit references to sexual selection in Waggett’s article confirm it as part of the Victorian conversation and directly influential on the aesthetic discussion. In fact, Darwin proves so influential that Waggett feels he must work through Darwin’s message about beauty before he proposes his own. Darwin presents a stumbling block, a counter argument. Waggett accepts Darwinian natural and sexual selection on a micro-evolutionary scale, but becomes uncomfortable when

---

9 Primarily gendered and racist ideologies purported by Darwin’s socially-grounded discourse.
natural mechanisms explain away the mystical side of beauty, the spiritual essence where beauty inhabits the soul. Waggett refuses to combine these two planes – spirit and body – because he wants to maintain man’s exalted place in creation. This more traditional understanding of beauty illuminates how far Darwin provoked change in contemporary conversations about beauty.

Waggett resists beauty’s naturalization because Christianity shapes his understanding of beauty as an expression of the divine. For him, beauty acts as a veil, clothing the created world; it shields our eyes from God’s fingerprints, for the glory therein might terrify or destroy us. Waggett ends his essay without ever defining beauty; instead he gets as close as he can: “And beauty – this is where the thought comes closest – and all but breaks through….This is where the phenomenal almost is real, almost conveys what it signifies; if other things show the finger of God, these [expressions of beauty] are the veil of his face” (Waggett 141). An anti-climatic conclusion, but one that encapsulates Waggett’s sense of beauty. The thought ‘comes close,’ but cannot quite make it; the ‘phenomenal’ waits, just out of humankind’s reach, mysteriously vague. According to Waggett, beauty remains a shroud for something greater, true beauty: God’s glory. As a cover and a clue, beauty turns our eyes “homeward” to heaven (Waggett 141). To Darwin, such notions of unattainable beauty and heavenly ideals do nothing but distract from the wonders of present life on Earth. What good is a beauty that almost-never-quite reveals itself? Certainly not any force powerful enough to change the course of species; and so, Darwin adapted the traditional definition of beauty to his purpose and tailored a few alterations in Waggett’s veil.

A definition of beauty seems difficult to adjust, especially considering contemporary ideas of standardization. Waggett bluntly states that “taste is as much fixed as other faculties,” for, otherwise, all judgment would fall into chaos (Waggett 136). If one God created the
universe, then his standard of beauty, a fixed taste, would also mark his creation. For Waggett, the unity of taste throughout the world and cultures demonstrate part of God’s cohesive workmanship. That same unity also requires a linear understanding of beauty. Imagine a graph of beauty over time: at time zero, complete ugliness. As time passes, beauty increases in a straight linear line. This teleological beauty also parallels traditional teleological understandings of creation and God: at time zero, God creates; time continues in a line according to divine plan until God ends the world.

Of course, fixed standards of linear beauty means that some meet it, and others do not. In the minds of most Victorians, it also meant that Western European beauty standards represented the height of success. Fixed taste allows one race to become more beautiful than another. In his travels, however Darwin witnessed too many tribal cultures to retain the idea of ubiquitous taste. He clearly claims that though the “senses of man and of the lower animals” intuit pleasure in appearance and sound to distinguish those that “are called beautiful,” “it is certainly not true that there is in the mind of man any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body. It is, however, possible that certain tastes may in the course of time become inherited, though there is no evidence in favor of this belief; and if so, each race would possess its own innate ideal standard of beauty” (*Descent 585*). Darwin admits that all creatures sense beauty – this, they have in common – but that does not mean all perceive it in the same way.\(^\text{10}\) Darwin creates space for evolving standards of beauty that change with the experience and impression of the viewer.

\(^{10}\) Darwin makes his own preference very clear in his language contrasting the beauty of “savage” nations that makes no sense to him. Still, Darwin only acknowledges its strangeness to him; he does not say it does not count as beauty.
Without fixed standards of taste, beauty resists typification. Darwin notices that, although humans “prefer what they are accustomed to” and “cannot endure any great change,” we still like variety, and admire each characteristic carried to a moderate extreme….No doubt characters of all kinds may be too much developed for beauty. Hence a perfect beauty, which implies many characters modified in a particular manner, will be in every race a prodigy….If all our women were to become as beautiful as Venus de’ Medici, we should for a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety; and as soon as we had obtained variety, we should wish to see certain characters a little exaggerated beyond the then existing common standard. (Descent 585)

Darwin suggests that beauty constantly changes as conformity increases: as we adapt to standards, we fail beauty. As types become established, and therefore stagnantly boring, the new grabs attention; difference creates beauty. Evolution pushes progress toward an ideal form, the most efficient, the most beautiful, and, typically, we understand this ideal as an ultimate, standard form. But when Darwin suggests difference delineates beauty, he also implies that difference leads to increased modification and therefore progress; however, the progress Darwin charts concerns the multiplication of forms, not the continual development of one. In other words, Darwin cares less about one species becoming more developed, more beautiful – in short, better in such a way that would require a standard to measure such improvement – and more about variety of forms in any direction. His divergence from Waggett’s more traditional standardization reduces possibility for beauty-monopoly. Instead, Darwin champions mutability, a beauty of endless forms owned by many. Success lies not in attainment (finally achieving a linear goal) but in never attaining (and thereby continually diversifying).
The idea of variant beauty in multiple forms parallels Darwin’s idea of interconnected species development. It is no accident that Darwin anthropomorphizes the animal kingdom in an attempt to draw connections between his species and others (Levine, *Loves* 174). Darwin also grounds ethics, morals, intelligence, and aesthetics in rational, biological explanations. As Levine notes, the “greatest of Victorian scientists trembled at the prospect of naturalizing ethics and aesthetics. [Alfred] Wallace…drew back at the prospect and claimed that even though natural selection worked on every aspect of bodily development, it could not possibly be responsible for human intelligence and the virtues of higher civilization” (*Loves* 174). For men like Wallace and Waggett, Darwin overstepped boundaries when he tied aesthetics to human intelligence. The mind, center of language, complex ideas and imagination sets humans apart, a distinction propounded by pre-Darwinian writers and philosophers. Rene Descartes grounds his philosophy of being in the fact that he thinks, and therefore, exists. Darwin, however, to emphasize the descent of man from animals, wants to prove the opposite: that humankind’s most conspicuous feature – the mind – actually developed as a means of sexual selection.

In doing so, Darwin claims the body deserves triadic equality with the mind and soul. Darwin contributes the development of the male intellect to his sexually selective role in developmental humanoid stages: “With respect to the differences of [mental power] between man and woman, it is probable that sexual selection has played a highly important part” (*Descent* 563). Capturing food for the family and defending his offspring leant man greater mental

---

11 Wallace developed a theory of natural selection simultaneously with Darwin, but despite their correlation, Wallace stayed in the background, never the public figure Darwin became. Partly, this is due to Darwin’s greater social and scientific standing, but also, their theories – though both describing natural selection – differ substantially in how the selection functions. Wallace attributed agency to nature and habitat as formative forces, while Darwin proposed competition among species and sexual selection based on success, strength, and visible characteristics. Darwin accounts “in naturalistic terms for qualities that seem to be exclusively human, without positing, as Wallace always felt required to do, intelligent intervention from outside the sphere of nature” (Levine, *Loves* 175).

12 John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold also agree with Waggett here: “Human nature, argues Arnold, is constituted by the instinct not only for knowledge but also for beauty,” an instinct animals lack (Ferguson 469).
prowess as the shrewd survived while the imbecile died. Man’s ability to protect, fashion tools, and provide develops out of his ability to creatively solve dilemmas, but also requires energy and courage to complete the plans. As his body enabled him, man developed more creative solutions, thereby developing his intellect. In other words, it is not enough to think; the body must be able to act. Darwin claims that when two subjects of equal mental capacity compete, the subject with “higher energy, perseverance, and courage” will prevail (Descent 564). The victor, in this case, encompasses genius: “unflinching, undaunted perseverance” plus “higher powers of imagination and reason” (Darwin, Descent 565). Genius and the mind develop from the body and thus, without the body, both stagnate. Darwin situates the intellect in physical development, elevating the body by beauty to equal worth with the soul and mind.

Darwin goes straight for the jugular – or spinal cord, as it may be in this case, when he claims that animals also recognize aesthetics. When he writes that birds “have nearly the same taste for the beautiful” as humans, he claims birds recognize and critically appreciate beauty, an ability previously associated with human intellectual superiority (Darwin, Descent 359). While Darwin acknowledges hierarchy, noting that man carries the aesthetic sense further with complex ideas, he brings birds too close for the comfort of most of his contemporaries. He suggests birds exhibit an almost-human sense, an aesthetic neither spiritual nor mystical but purely natural. Waggett’s opposition to Darwin’s mechanism of sexual selection clings to the traditional notion that animals do not recognize beauty. While he admits that “bold lines” and “bright colors” might contribute to Darwin’s theory, Waggett maintains that when “beauty consists, as it does, in the Argus pheasant, in spaces colored and shaded so as to resemble an artist’s picture of a beautiful oval object, or the egg and dart of Greek architecture, it is difficult or impossible to suggest the early female judgments which could lead to such a result” (Waggett 139). Besides
gendered assumptions, Waggett also doubts the ability for animals to appreciate marks of civilization – like Greek architecture – as humans do. Waggett references an argument in Descent where the Argus pheasant provides a concrete example of sexual selection in action. Waggett offers no other explanation for such beauty, except, of course, that God created it, but he misunderstands Darwin. Whereas Waggett focuses on the end result because he believes in universal standards, Darwin never writes that the females select with the end product in mind; rather, the end result simply occurs over time. In fact, “nothing is less like Darwin’s doctrine than the idea that new species should be already present in their ancestors, from which they only have to evolve in the course of time” (Gilson 51-52). Because Darwin believes no standard of taste exists, what we see today simply represents another form in the chain, not beauty’s conclusion. The last line of Origins allows for continual transformation: “from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved” (Darwin, Origins 307).

The Argus pheasant represents just one of those forms in flux. A male Argus keeps its wings tightly hidden until time to “show himself off before the female” (Darwin, Descent 398). Then, in an awe-inspiring display, he flips open his wings, spreading his pinions into a spherical shield that covers his entire body. This outrageous display reveals artistic details beneath the feathers: twenty-some circles, “above an inch in diameter” line each feather; “oblique stripes and rows of spots of a dark color, like those on the skin of a tiger and leopard combined” also “elegantly” mark each feather (Darwin, Descent 398). The male holds his head to one side behind the feather-shield; all attention focuses on the display. The feathers represent secondary sexual characteristics – they serve no other survival purpose, no aid for flight, and are only displayed before females. Darwin questions the excess and decides the answer must be sexual
attraction. Additionally, in a rare moment of stylized prose, Darwin employs metaphorical imagery from other animal classes, tying the hereditary knots tighter between humans and birds. No part of beauty superfluously exists for pleasure or enjoyment alone; instead, its functionality reminds us of the interconnectedness of life and contributes to the success of that life, not the glory of God.

Unfortunately for Waggett, Darwin never proposed Supernatural Selection. The idea of miracles and unrealistic Biblical events contributed to Darwin’s rejection of Christianity. Thus, while Waggett postulates that beauty exists for God’s sake, Darwin wants to prove the world depends on naturalistic, not-created causes. In doing so, he continues a tradition begun in ancient Greece by a man better known for his poetics: Aristotle.

At first, Aristotle’s conception of beauty appears fairly traditional and anti-Darwinian. After all, he proposes standards of universal beauty like symmetry, order, and definiteness; however, Aristotle also distinguishes himself from Plato by exploring beauty more scientifically and less metaphysically. By situating beauty in the world rather than the heavens, Aristotle raises the body to new significance. This distinction parallels the difference between how Aristotle and Plato viewed forms. For Plato, idealized forms inhabited other realms while in the world we merely experience shadows. For Aristotle, forms never separate from reality and we must know reality by grasping the forms for ourselves (“Aristotle on Aesthetics”). Significantly, in the famous painting School of Athens, Plato and Aristotle stand at the center, Plato with his hand turned up towards a heaven of ideal forms and Aristotle with his hand outstretched toward the earth, a world of endless forms in reality. Darwin, with his beauty of details, promotes Aristotle’s vision of the tangible world as the most significant and valuable form of experience.
Besides an emphasis on form and the body, Aristotle discusses an aesthetic pragmatism that informs Darwin’s sense of beauty. Eugene Gilson notes that “with an inflexible steadfastness he [Aristotle] refuses to dissociate the beautiful from the useful. Flowers, butterflies, birds, and numerous animals have become beautiful for the sake of their beauty…. Darwin knows them better than Aristotle; his reasons for admiration are better founded, but it is the same admiration that is involved” (Gilson 82). Here Gilson paints Aristotle as an early Darwin, or at least, a sharer of similar thought and passion. The pragmatic associations of Aristotle’s view of beauty coincide with Darwin’s similar emphasis. Aristotle and Darwin would both find beauty in the bivalve hinge.

Between Aristotle and Charles Darwin lived a man who intellectually connects them both: Charles’ grandfather, Erasmus Darwin. Erasmus (1731-1802) worked professionally as a doctor, but his hobbies included scientific pursuits, philosophy and writing poetry. Considered as a possible candidate for England’s position of poet laureate, Erasmus embodied varied talents and interests that intrigued his grandson. Charles crafted his autobiography knowing that it "would have interested me greatly to have read even so short and dull a sketch of my grandfather" (Darwin, Autobiography 21). Despite notice and some popularity in its own time, Erasmus’ literary achievements fell out of favor with the more vigorous poetry of the Romantics. Scholars now recognize Erasmus’ work for its “vivid pictures of evolution and cultural progress interlaced with stirring accounts of science, technology, and society during the English Industrial Revolution” rather than his literary accomplishments (Browne 594); however, though most scholars and readers consider Erasmus’ poetry outdated and clichéd it provided an imaginative means of capturing his unusual ideas that were so ahead of his time and science that poetry

---

13 For this section of the paper, I use first names (Erasmus and Charles) to avoid confusion but at all other times “Darwin” refers to Charles Darwin.
provided the best method of documentation. Erasmus anticipates Charles’ thesis of natural and sexual selection but does so through poetry, not experimental science.

Charles might not have known his grandfather well, but he did know his work. Charles proclaims adamantly in his autobiography that

I had previously read the Zoonomia of my grandfather, in which similar views [to Lamarkan evolution] are maintained, but without producing any effect on me. Nevertheless it is probable that the hearing rather early in life such views maintained and praised may have favored my upholding them under a different form in my Origin of Species. At this time, I admired greatly Zoonomia; but on reading it a second time after an interval of ten or fifteen years, I was much disappointed, the proportion of speculation being so large to the facts given. (Darwin, Autobiography 49)

And yet, Erasmus also desired a naturalization of beauty that emphasized sexual reproduction – in his words, the “chief d’oeuvre, the masterpiece of nature” (Browne 603). He believed that foundationally, life seeks reproduction. In turn, reproduction produces new organisms and acts as the “hidden force behind evolution and progress, since new organisms were introduced into the world through variations that arose in the offspring of sexual unions alone” (Browne 603).

Since Charles eventually made a similar conclusion at the end of Descent of Man, how to explain this apparent contradiction of his Autobiography? Nora Barlow, author of the appendices to Charles’ autobiography, emphasizes “the words in a different form. For Erasmus Darwin’s method was largely built on a heavy superstructure of speculation on an insufficient foundation of fact, a method alien to Charles Darwin’s whole outlook” (Darwin, Autobiography 152,

---

14 Browne notes that as a euphemism for vagina, the word ‘masterpiece’ had added meaning for cultured readers in the 18th century (n. 34, See Peter Fryer, Mrs. Grundy: Studies in English Prudery. London: Dennis Dobson, 1963. pg. 48). Just another example of Erasmus’ constant layered allusions.
Charles, of course, desiring *Origins of the Species* to be “one long, dry catalogue of facts” disagreed with the method of speculation (*Origins* 29). In his mind, an idea unsupported by physical evidence was no idea at all and undeserving of contemplation. Charles sincerely claims his grandfather’s work did not influence his own – in his mind, their work differed too significantly to have any influence. In so far as Charles never wrote poetry nor speculated through scientific philosophy, his claim stands correct.\footnote{Of course, Charles went so far as to deny the subject of evolution “in the air” (*Darwin, Autobiography* 153 Appendix), an absurd statement considering the copious work done today to demonstrate his forbearers and the ripeness of science and culture for his work.}{15}

It is no wonder Charles wanted to distance himself from Erasmus. Coleridge coined the term ‘darwinising’ long before Charles was born to describe the “wild theorizing of Erasmus” (*Darwin, Autobiography* 150, Appendix). As a hobby-scientist, Erasmus never experimented as deeply into the details of nature as his grandson. He preferred offering ideas, spinning visions. The pretentious tone and heroic couplets make for laughable moments in Erasmus’ poetry that seem inappropriate to the serious science of his grandson. Even Erasmus subconsciously admits the lack in his poetry: footnotes galore, at times running significantly longer than the poetry, explain the scientific meaning behind the poetic metaphor and come closest to encapsulating the scientific observation behind his verse. Erasmus’ poetry acts as a veil Charles Darwin would prefer to rend for the sake of the footnotes beneath.

Contrarily, Erasmus considered poetry the best genre for scientific discussion. His culture comfortably accepted the idea that “literature, natural philosophy, art and social theory were so closely integrated during the 18th century that natural philosophy was frequently presented in stylized literary form” (Browne 593). Erasmus saw verse as the perfect medium for conveying his “diverse ideas” (Browne 594). He could pursue whatever line of thinking his
fancy followed without being confined to one particular experiment that required conclusion. In other words, he could constantly hypothesize without testing, recording, or completing laborious laboratory work. Rather than invalidating his authenticity, Erasmus saw verse as the ultimate fertile ground for his imagination: what the science of his day struggled to tangibly assess he could philosophize into reality.

The imagination in his poetry aided a cause, for during Erasmus’ lifetime, the scientific world warred over one deceptively simple question: do plants have sexes? What seems like obvious knowledge today stimulated “heated debate” in the seventeenth century (Browne 596). Today, of course, we readily recognize the answer to this query, much the way we easily accept ideas of natural selection. But just as Charles faced opposition to sexual selection in his time, so Erasmus found himself caught up in a battle of the sexes. The question of plant gender held implications for more serious questions concerning vegetative reproduction. After all, plants cannot have sexual relations – that is, between male and female as opposed to hermaphaditism – unless the plants themselves actually have male and female parts. Two schools violently disagreed over the nature of plant sexuality: Charles Linnaeus, father of scientific taxonomy, published in favor of distinct sexes while the opposition argued that because plants did not display the animalian sexual characteristics, plants did not have sexes. Erasmus aligned himself with Linnaeus who believed that “flowers were expressly organs of reproduction, present only to enable the perpetuation of species” (Browne 597). Rather than the essentials required for reproduction, the buds of the flowers – petals, colors, patterns – form ornamental displays that attract agents of cross-pollination (like bumble bees). Traditionally, flowers demonstrated the glory of God; now, blossoms represented sexual flourish pragmatically influencing reproduction. Understanding Linnaeus and Erasmus as influences on Charles’ thoughts about sexual selection
means that any discussion of the emphasis laid on sex by Erasmus becomes one about Charles as well for Charles would eventually define flowers as secondary sexual characteristics.

Why focus so intensely on whether or not plants have gender? Doing so emphasizes sexual selection (though Erasmus did not actually use those terms). As one of his first works, Erasmus published *The Loves of the Plants* to generally expose his audience to his ideas and to gauge its reaction. He “dramatized Linnaeus’ system by portraying the stamens and pistils (the male and female organs) as men and women” (Browne 594). Broadly, the poem covers the “relations between the sexes” but becomes an “extended account of human sexual behavior” due to its transposition of plants into human scenarios (Browne 594). The “enthusiastic reception” that met *The Loves of the Plants* surprised even Erasmus who “recounted his profits with great satisfaction” (Browne 595). Apparently, readers could relate to the anthropomorphization of the botanical world. In fact, without the footnotes, it becomes possible to forget Erasmus discusses plants at all. So vivid are his portrayals of plants as people that transferring the actions from herbage to human becomes relatively easy.

Or maybe his readers simply enjoyed the barely veiled references to sex. Though Erasmus literally discusses the “sex life of flowers,” the poem “unabashedly” explores “sex and sexual relations” among all creatures fueling the “all-pervading drive to find a mate and reproduce” (Browne 596). Erasmus held this law to be the most basic in nature and as such made it the foundation for his work. Charles eventually came to a similar conclusion when he announces that sexual selection constitutes the most efficient force behind our appearances and beauty. Similarly, Linnaeus not only believed in plant sexuality, he based his entire system of classification and taxonomy on “well-developed theories about the function and purpose of sex” (Browne 597). He grouped plants based on ratios of male to female parts, stamens to pistils. In
doing so, he brought unprecedented attention to plant sexuality and thereby emphasized the foundational importance of sexual reproduction to all life (Browne 597). Traditionally, sexual reproduction had been assumed as an animal-only activity; but if sexual reproduction also functions among more-basic life types, like plants, then it becomes a universal force that ultimately ties life together more closely than previously imagined.

For Erasmus, Linnaean ideas jived precisely with his own view of the universe. If being a Linnaean taxonomist meant believing “in the sex life of flowers,” Erasmus was more than happy to follow suit (Browne 597). To combat the strong opposition to his idol’s ideas, Erasmus began *The Loves of the Plants*, part defense of Linnaeus, part expansion of Linnaean system, part philosophy, part poetry, part science. Significantly, he wrote the poem while translating the works of Linnaeus from Latin into English (Browne 601). *The Loves of Plants* relies on anthropomorphization to make the relationships of the sexual animal kingdom applicable to plants because Linnaeus himself initiated the use of human metaphors in the plant kingdom. He used terms related to matrimony to describe the relations between the sexes and divided plant groups into “houses” (Browne 600). His metaphors helped readers grasp the new ideas behind plant sexuality by tagging them to more familiar and accepted human sexuality. Additionally, the popularity of his metaphors allowed his ideas to spread more quickly among other scientists of his day.

As the first to proclaim plant sexuality, Linnaeus went further when he discussed the relations between those sexes. He held that hybrids “owed their existence to promiscuous mixing of males and females” while he defined a genus (the grouping of species) as “nothing

---

16 Erasmus founded a Linnaean society dedicated to translation of Linnaeus’ work. Though the group never gained more than its three original members, its translation work was seen essential to the defense of Linnaeus (Browne 599).
else than a number of plants sprung from the same mother by different fathers” (Browne 597). Linnaeus’ general descriptions of plants behaving in human ways, even to the point of promiscuity, laid the groundwork of metaphor that Erasmus carried further in his poetry. Perhaps more striking is the idea that a genus comes from one mother but many fathers. One male can conceivably impregnate multiple females simultaneously but a female can only carry one pregnancy to term at a time. Therefore, the idea that multiple males compete for one female to produce a genus indicates the more stringent sexual selection that Darwin introduces in *Descent of Man*. Charles discusses the ratios of males to females to show that when males outnumber females, the competition increases and males pay more attention to their appearance (*Descent* 592). While Linnaeus did not literally suggest an idea, Erasmus did.

Erasmus extended the metaphor by fictionalizing plants into human characters. Expanding the metaphor to describe that marriages or other human aspects of the plants not only emphasized the sexuality in the science but also made the connections between the plant and human world more viable. Additionally, Erasmus stressed appearance through the “proportion, length, and arrangements of the organs within the Linnaean numerical system” (Browne 602). While Linnaeus described flowers in simple ratios of male to female, the images of Erasmus’ poetry allowed him greater specificity and personality. Not only did Erasmus describe how many males inhabited a flower, he went into individual characteristics that distinguished males from each other or from the males of other flowers. He did so primarily through human relationships and thereby emphasized the humanness of plants as well as the significance of individuality to sexual selection and reproduction. Suddenly, appearance and physical characteristics associated with biological sexes took on the significance of Charles’ primary and secondary sexual characters.
Consider the example of *Melissa officinalis*, the lemon balm tree. Erasmus writes “Two knights before thy fragrant alter bend, / Adored Melissa! and two squires attend” (*Loves of the Plants*, canto 1, lines 59-60, p. 6). Initially this couplet seems to describe a medieval scene of a lady with her knights, but examining the flower of the *Melissa officinalis* reveals Erasmus’ code. First, and most obviously, the name of the lady comes from the scientific name of the plant. By using the actual names of the plants, Erasmus acknowledges Linnaean taxonomy and underscores his defense of Linnaean ideas. Linnaeus would classify this plant as simply 4:1 but Erasmus pictures two knight and two squires: all four male figures, but an example that demonstrates how Erasmus more specifically codified the plants. In the lemon balm plant, four male stamens rise out of the center of the plant and curve slightly like crooks back over the flower. Two are taller, more mature, stronger than the other two that are shorter. The taller become knights, the shorter their squires, together four gentlemen ready to wait on Melissa. Significantly, the appearance of the males contributes to their sexual success for the knights – the taller stamens – reproduce before the shorter.

His grandson never appreciated his methods, but despite Charles’ insistence on originality in his autobiography, Erasmus anticipates too many of the ideas in *Origins* and *Descent* to be of no literal influence. As Hassler notes, the ““best” theory, which runs continually through [Erasmus’] writings, is one of material forces moving inexorably over vast distances of time and space, with no supernatural or anthropomorphic agency, to produce nearly infinite configurations of organic and inorganic matter. In short, [Erasmus] was a materialist with a profound sense of change and flux”: he “is not troubled with trying to discover one central myth – not troubled because he basically understands…that there is no such final unity” (Hassler 17, 28). Charles’ un-fixed beauty relies on the idea that it knows no final goal; rather, an infinite
number of beauteous forms are possible due to sexual selection and variation. Erasmus too remains open-ended. This openness distinguished Erasmus and later Charles from more traditional Platonic thinkers like Waggett. By disregarding a search for final unity in his work, Erasmus anticipates Charles’ vision of endless forms. His sprawling poetry laid the groundwork for his grandson by emphasizing sexuality as a force so primary to life even the most basic plants use it to reproduce.

Though broadly open to change and flux, Erasmus concentrated on the details, at times to the detriment of his poetry. As contemporary and fellow poet Anna Seward comments: “Dr. [Erasmus] Darwin’s excellence consists in delighting the eye, the taste, and the fancy, by the strength, distinctness, elegance, and perfect originality of his pictures; and in delighting the ear by the rich cadence of his numbers; but the passions are generally asleep” (Hassler 35). Erasmus pays so much attention to describing the scene, to pleasing the visual faculty – what Charles terms the most perfect of all organs – that he undermines the sentiment behind the picture. What Seward laments as a lack in the poetry, Charles should appreciate for it indicates the poetry more nearly approaches clinical scientific observation. After all, Charles situates beauty in the feather markings of the Argus pheasant and all other display as the force driving sexual selection.

While Erasmus’ emphasis on naturalization and sexual reproduction make clear connections to his grandson’s later writing, he also emphasizes the eye as the organ of vision where the visualization of these events occur. He “writes principally to the eye” by creating “pictures in the imagination” (Browne 615). After all, his descriptions of plants as people served as a means of classification, one based on visual characteristics as with the stamen of different height. Lockean epistemology, that “all we can know are visual images which themselves are only general approximations,” heavily influenced Erasmus (Hassler 20). He writes in Zoonomia
that the “human eye is more accurate because it recognizes feminine beauty… beauty is the
object of love” (Darwin, *Zoonomia* 108). Also, the “human animal is directed to the object of his
love by his sense of beauty” (Darwin, *Zoonomia* 106). This direction comes, of course, through
the eyes. Charles also focuses on the eye as primary visual faculty to further his thesis that
secondary sexual characteristics, visual displays, form the primary means of sexual attraction.
Though Charles spends some time discussing sound and smell as well, the vast majority of his
argument focuses on the eyes and the details of the body thereby seen.

Erasmus emphasizes the eye further in his choice of structural device for *The Loves of
Plants*. He begins the poem by offering it as a camera obscura: “Lo, here a camera obscura is
presented to thy view in which are lights and shades dancing on a whitened canvass….walk in
and view the wonders of my [E]ncahnted Garden” (Darwin, *The Loves of Plants* Front Matter,
1). By situating his poem within the frame of a camera, he suggests that the best way to view or
understand life and its sexual reproduction relies on the eyes. It seems to be enough for the
viewer to simply look without going further – taking a tour of the garden through sight. Just as
the camera obscura represented a shocking technology at its inception, so Erasmus uses it to
usher in his revolutionary thesis: plants have sexes, reproduce sexually and respond to
appearances as well.

Suggesting plants respond visually without actual evidence of eyes metaphorically
extended the illusion of plants as people. Erasmus “simultaneously attributed humanity to plants
and naturalized sex in humans. Beneath his seeming anthropomorphization of the vegetable
kingdom was his belief that plants feel” (Teute 323). Erasmus “included plants in the
evolutionary chain of being” and allowed them “attributes of sensation, movement, and certain
degree of mental activity” for he believed that “plants too indulged in the pursuit of pleasure and
the avoidance of pain; they too sought gratification through sexual reproduction” (Browne 604, 603). In this way he more radically anticipates his grandson. Charles departed from scientific and cultural norm by proclaiming animals capable of aesthetic recognition and choice; Erasmus proposes the same for plants, beings seemingly even less sentient. Both Charles and Erasmus sought to make a statement about humans and beauty but chose to do so through the natural world in order to redefine beauty as a force of the body and sexual reproduction, not the glory of God or magnification of human intellect. By “portraying all of life’s forms as organized around sexual reproduction, [Erasmus] imagined plants and animals, along with humans, as partaking of common instincts, emotions, and manners arising from their sexual impulses…. He shifted the basic principle of natural existence away from Lockean notions of sentient intellect to sexuality” (Teute 328). This movement forms the crux of Charles’ argument transposing aesthetics from the mind to the body. Charles highlights the physical to elevate the body and naturalize beauty but Erasmus provided the intellectual basis for such a transferal through his poetry.

Though Erasmus goes further than Charles in making plant life human, he only continues a tradition of plant anthropomorphization from the ancients. Arthur Stanley Pease, writing in the early 20th century notes that “among the quainter conceits appearing in ancient writers, both imaginative and scientific, is that of the mutual hatreds and affections of certain plants” (Pease 94). Pease entitles his essay The Loves of the Plants, clearly acknowledging his debt to Erasmus. This record of ancient sources discusses the sexual/romantic relationships between plants and demonstrates the scientific-cultural heritage of the 18th century. It serves as an anecdotal history that reveals the groundwork for Erasmus’ ideas. Just as Erasmus preceded Charles, these pieces of plant-lore anthologized by Pease preceded Erasmus. Ideas of plant sexuality and sexual selection extend back beyond the Darwins to ancient history: modern science appears as the final
conclusion to common knowledge. Both Darwins participated in an already established scientific discourse, but each modifies the ideas to meet the expectations of their audiences and to make the ideas more acceptable, Erasmus through poetry and Charles through science.

The very first paragraph of Pease’s essay establishes its ideas as general knowledge. Not only are plants attributed emotion but Pease records Theophrastus’ discussion of plants as having animal, if not human, qualities: “They say that the vine scents the cabbage and is infected by it” so that the vine “whenever it comes near this plant turns back and looks away” (Pease 94). The anecdotal nature of this comment demonstrates two things: first, the lore-nature of these plant myths. The fact that “they say” that plants have certain characteristics indicates that many people recognize this idea, but none felt the need to prove it scientifically. It is common folklore, so much so that no one remembers who first recorded the idea. Rather than in scientific findings, these plants that love and hate, smell and turn away, exist in tales passed down orally. Erasmus appreciated this type of storytelling; his grandson did not. However, the second thing that the anecdotal tone reveals demonstrates why this tale remains significant to Darwin. A legend might not be true, but everyone knows it. Just as Erasmus’ ideas influenced Darwin by osmotic absorption, so plant folklore would have influenced him as part of his cultural discourse. These flora tales indicate that long before Linnaeus, ancient philosophers considered plants as sexual beings.

Besides being familiar knowledge, and the idea of plants feeling emotion or taking action being historically viable and popular, Pease makes stronger connections between Erasmus and ancient scientific philosophers. Ancient philosopher Pliny “describes the friendship of rue and fig tree, but more often the utilitarian rather than romantic element receives stress” (Pease 95). What is that utilitarian element? Matrimony: “vines trained on trees are describes as wedded to
the supporting species” (Pease 95). Pease traces the idea back to Italian farmers, as picked up by Cato, and eventually becoming a favorite Elizabethan conceit (Pease 95). The epigraph to this paper by Shakespeare ties together perfectly the idea of matrimony as utility: increase, reproduction – the purpose of sexual selection and the propagation of the species. Charles, of course, participates in the same tradition when he highlights the pragmatic nature not only of love but of beauty through the construct of sexual selection as seen in paired relationships. Between these Italian farmers, Cato, Shakespeare and Darwin, we find Erasmus: poet-philosopher transferring cultural folk-lore into his poetry. Rather than intimate human relationship, historical precedent applies marriage to plants and makes it an institution of reproduction rather than an extension of the Church or expression of Holy Trinity.

Pease even discusses sexual selection himself, though not in so many words. He notes that “necessities of reproduction may explain some cases of mutual affection” among plants and then quotes a long passage from Achilles Tatius that is worth quoting in full and that starts, once again, with that tell-tale “they say”:

Plants, they say, fall in love with one another, and the palm is particularly susceptible to the passion: there are both male and female palms; the male falls in love with the female; and if the female be planted at any considerable distance the loving male begins to wither away. The gardener realizes what is the cause of the tree’s grief, goes to some slight eminence in the ground, and observes in which direction it is drooping (for it always inclines towards the object of its passion); and when he has discovered this, he is soon able to heal its disease: for he takes a shoot of the female palm and grafts it into the very heart of the male. This refreshes the tree’s spirit, and the trunk, which seemed to the
point of death, revives and gains new vigor in joy at the embrace of the beloved: it is a
kind of vegetable marriage. (Pease 96)

Remarkably, Tatius announces plant sexuality calmly: of course there are male and female
plants! Apparently, gardeners had known for thousands of years. Then why the controversy
over the same issue that sparked Erasmus to defend Linnaeus? The historical folk-lore precedent
for vegetative sexuality relied on farmer-sense – darwinizing, if you will – not solid facts. The
scientific community did not accept whatever “they said” but the ideas prompting such folklore
certainly fueled scientific undertakings as science developed to keep pace with legend. One
might argue that Tatius alone had no influence on the scientific community but as Pease goes on,
he notes that Tatius was not the first: “A somewhat similar tale is told by Ammianus, and
underneath the quaint verbiage of both authors is the significant fact that it was in the case of
palms that the whole principle of the sexual reproduction of plants, so fundamental to modern
botany, horticulture, and other derived sciences, was definitely established” (Pease 96). Erasmus
continues this trend with The Loves of the Plants in his anecdotal structure that jumps from plant
to plant and explores its characteristics. According to Janet Browne, an Erasmus scholar, the
narratives of his men and women (plants) were “carefully matched to create an appropriate
anecdote that would explain and define each chosen species” (Browne 607). The tradition of
plant sexuality among flora-lore at first escaped scientific attention but was eventually
recognized. Charles unknowingly describes the phenomenon best when he writes in his
autobiography and though no one had as yet solved the puzzle, “innumerable well-observed facts
were stored in the minds of naturalists ready to take their proper place as soon as any theory
which would receive them was sufficiently explained” (Darwin, Autobiography 124). Charles
provided that theory by means of natural and sexual selection. Science validated what literary lore claimed all along.

Erasmus extends the cultural tradition of organic sexuality and simultaneously participates in contemporary social discourse of beauty. The relationships between Erasmus’ plant ratios demonstrate “just how completely he was using the idealized pictures of his time in describing human relationships” (Browne 611). Looking at a summary of the relationships in The Loves of Plants reveals that Erasmus confined sexual relationships to ratios appropriate for his society. For example, in plants with one to one ratios between male and female, the relationships fulfill marriage roles, either of love or domestication. No divorce, no strife: just idealized marriage. As the ratio of males to females increases, the role of the males change from husbands to competing lovers, protectors, knights and squires, helpmates. In higher ratios, Erasmus paints the woman as a harlot, flirt, or otherwise sexual temptress. Significantly, in the few examples where women outnumber the men, Erasmus removes sex completely. The relationship represents platonic friendship, tutelage or siblinghood. The relationships that Erasmus allows between his plants situates him in the conventional discourse of his time. Additionally, it demonstrates the Erasmus knew his audience and wrote for their convenience. Rather than attempt to challenge social conceptions of sexual relationships (and thereby beauty) he contentedly created characters familiar for his readers. No Waggett could blame Erasmus for destroying cultural standards of beauty.

Furthermore, not only does Erasmus participate in social conceptions of sexual relationships, he also explicitly promotes social ideas about beauty. Erasmus describes Meadia, as in Dodecatheon meadia (or, American Cowslip), as a “wonton” mistress who “rolls her dark eye” and “waves her golden hair” (The Loves of Plants, canto 1, lines 63-64, pg. 6). Although
this portrayal seems only another anthropomorphization of plant to human, Erasmus chooses aesthetic details of appearance that do not actually apply in reality. The American Cowslip displays a purley-pink flower, or in some varieties a white bloom, but never the golden petals that Erasmus’ description would seem to entail. Since Erasmus desires to reveal as much about his subject through his verse – so much so that readers might identify a plant species according to his hints – why would he mislead his readers as to the appearance of the plant by describing it as blonde when in fact the petals are not yellow?

We find a clue to this conundrum in a passage from another of Erasmus’ work. In The Temple of Nature, Erasmus depicts the creation of Eve but borrows the final couplet of his description from Milton (Hassler 85). Erasmus wants his readers to remember Milton’s Eve as they read about his own: “Down her white neck and o’er her bosom roll’d, / Flow’d in sweet negligence her locks of gold” (Hassler 124, n. 7). Significantly, the couplet Erasmus borrows from Milton uses the same word – wonton – as he later uses to describe the American Cowslip. By transposing the golden hair of Milton’s Eve onto his own, and then again onto his American Cowslip, Erasmus alludes to a literary figure that increases the respectability of his own work. This choice demonstrates Erasmus’ conventionality when it comes to beauty. He offers only “reassuring stereotypes” that safely suggest that beauty gone before remains better (Browne 618). While Erasmus might encourage the acceptance of sexual reproduction as a means of life and bounty, he remains conventionally unaware of its impact on aesthetics. Charles extends the work his grandfather began by applying those ideas firmly to beauty and suggesting, in fact, that the conventional, rather than providing legitimacy (as Milton’s Eve did for Erasmus) actually only maintains the status quo, an unacceptable ambition.
traditional apart from his emphasis on sexuality and the visual faculty Charles goes further in de-emphasizing universal standards.

Although Erasmus participates conventionally in cultural standards of beauty, he does promote its naturalization and this makes him a strong influence for his grandson. For his final group of plants, Erasmus chose to describe their “fertilization” as “if it were a Tahitian marriage ceremony, invoking the idea that human bonding was no more sacred than the purely physical meetings of stamen and pistil… human actions in the realm of love were, in reality, natural phenomena and not owing to attributes bestowed by a creator” (Browne 614). Erasmus observes that though other poets “did by art poetic transmute Men, Women, and even God and Goddesses, into Trees and Flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions” (*The Loves of Plants* vi). He freed the plants and his grandson’s imagination, though Charles would never acknowledge it as such.

From his grandfather, Charles intellectually inherits his greatest distinction from the scientists of his day. One of the most startling aspects of Erasmus’ plant treatises is the prominence of sexuality, plant or otherwise. Erasmus “encouraged readers to think of plant species as sophisticated living organisms that enjoyed all the benefits of human existence, most notably sexuality…. Few readers,…Charles Darwin among them – could afterwards forget that garden flowers had a sex life” (Browne 620). Ultimately, he championed “the advantages of reproduction by sexual love, with all its potential for variousness and evolutionary change” (Hassler 85). This seems the ultimate argument of Charles’ aesthetics: that change and flux provide the most fertile environment for endlessly evolving forms by means of sexual selection.
It can be no coincidence that Erasmus championed each facet of this argument through poetry read by his grandson and grounded in herb-lore.

Erasmus influenced the theories of his grandson but also other contemporary literature. In the Preface to her novel *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley writes that “the event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. [Erasmus] Darwin… as not of impossible occurrence” (Shelley 5). She applies ethos to her novel and validates its authenticity on the scientific reputation of Charles Darwin’s grandfather. In turn, *Frankenstein* anticipates some of the aesthetic implications of *Descent of Man and Sexual Selection*.

Rather than beauty, *Frankenstein* seems a story obsessed with ugliness. The horror of the monster’s appearance is such that whenever he tries to make contact he never gets the chance to exchange words with his audience before being immediately rejected. His observers immediately judge: ugliness equals evil. Beauty in *Frankenstein* often carries moral implications and in fact questions the deception of appearances. Consider the juxtaposition of the “perfect forms” of the “cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions” with Frankenstein’s reaction to his appearance: “but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool!… when I became convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (Shelley 106-7). Ironically, in spite of his physical ugliness, Frankenstein displays the humble sensitivity of shame. Because his despair focuses on himself and not another subject, even his bitterness seems gentle. As for the cottagers, in appearance perfect, but quick to anger and violence upon seeing Frankenstein. Superficially rejected for his ugliness, their lack of pity reveals an ugliness of heart not apparent in Frankenstein… yet.
Not only is beauty in Frankenstein primarily moral, but it also maintains traditional notions of beauty. Despite Dr. Frankenstein’s “broken spirit” no one can “feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature….Such a man has a double existence” (Shelley 22). Here is the duality of body and soul. Whatever Beauty is, it is a mysterious entity that heals wounded souls and is most accessible through a double existence. Somehow, the body must be left behind, in this case through reflection on nature. The irony in this traditional understanding undermines the viewpoint: by admiring nature to leave the body, the viewer turns her gaze upon the most natural of subjects, nature itself. Darwinian beauty exposes this inconsistency to say that as we admire natural nature, so beauty might also best be a natural facet of our bodies, not our souls.

So how does Frankenstein inform Darwin’s notions of beauty? In Frankenstein we find a middle ground between traditional notions and Darwinian ideals. To Dr. Frankenstein, “a church-yard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm” (Shelley 43). Here, the body/soul duality breaks for a moment in the rotting of flesh. He declares the body beauty’s seat. Of course, in death, beauty has flown away with the soul, but in life – the time of importance to Darwin – beauty resides captive in physical form. The earthy graveyard reminds readers that even in Christian religion the body comes from dust: dirt transformed to beauty. For Dr. Frankenstein to recognize the body rather than mind or spirit as the chief seat of beauty (much as Erasmus considered sexual reproduction the “chief d’oeuvre” of nature) distinguishes this aesthetic from traditionalists like Waggett and moves closer to Charles Darwin’s thesis of beauty in flux.

This concession of beauty to the body seems relatively insignificant until considering the words of Dr. Frankenstein. He reflects that his monster’s “limbs were in proportion and I had
selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful – Great God!” (Shelley 48). This moment presents a parallel idea to Darwin’s discussion of domestication. *Origins* begins with domestication and Darwin repeatedly refers to it throughout his writing because it provides a case study for the natural world. What man does intentionally, nature does eventually. It might take nature longer but through selection the favorable traits will triumph. Why focus on man as domesticator when that seems to demonstrate the need for some creative power behind the selection just as Dr. Frankenstein, the god to his monster, creates from intellect? Because in man’s domestication Darwin shows his readers a quickened version of reality. He can prove within a few generations that species change. It then becomes an argument of time, for nature could do the same thing through random selections if only given enough time. Then, to make his case stronger, Darwin argues for the aesthetic intellect of non-human selectors. Similarly, Dr. Frankenstein skips a nine-month gestation to make a statement about the creation of life, not to comment on intelligent design.

Not only does Dr. Frankenstein select for beauty but Shelley also explores the sexual relationship as the most basic and meaningful of human relationships, the lack of which drives monster Frankenstein to murder an innocent child. Frankenstein notices the “portrait of a most lovely woman” in a locket around the neck of his young victim: “in spite of [his] malignity, it softened and attracted [him]” but presently his “rage returned” as he remembered that he was “forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow” (Shelley 136). Why not create a friend for Frankenstein? Is a companion of the opposite sex so necessary to human happiness? Victor demonstrates that in Henry Cleval abiding companionship and respect provides intimacy and community; in his relationship toward Elizabeth, he seems remarkably cool for a lover. Yet the monster desires a mate. His plaintive cry “Shall each man…find a wife
for his bosom, and each beast have his mate and I be alone?” almost convinces the reader that he might make a more devoted lover than Victor (Shelley 161). What can a mate provide that a friend cannot? Offspring. Without a mate, Frankenstein must face the knowledge that his existence begins and ends with him, one life. There will be no inheritance, no propagation of the species, no evolution. Without a mate and without offspring, Victor also denies his monster the ability to improve through evolutionary change. Monster Frankenstein’s desire becomes fully realized when considering the emphasis placed on sexual reproduction by Erasmus and in flora folk-lore: if plants pine after mates and seek reproduction as life’s greatest purpose, how much more so might that desire consume a creature nearly human?

Of course, the principle of progress through change would not work for Frankenstein in this case because sexual selection would not function properly. The monster reasons that “one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species, and have the same defects” (Shelley 137). Ironically, Frankenstein reasons that her ugliness must match his not so that they will be mutually attractive but rather that they will be mutually rejected. By enforcing sexual rejection instead of selection, humankind will force monster Frankenstein and his bride to be companions. This negative application of sexual selection – rather than choosing from among the competing horde, Frankenstein’s bride will have no choice but to accommodate her husband – denies the principle of choice in sexual selection that allows improvement. *Frankenstein* reveals sexual selection gone wrong in the hands of a creator but also anticipates Charles Darwin’s beauty grounded in the body.

Though only partly human, Frankenstein appreciates beauty. He admires the cottages for their purity of form and grace, feeling attracted to their beauty. Despite his half-human status, Shelley attributes him with aesthetic intelligence, much like Darwin’s birds. Darwin believed
birds capable of sexual selection precisely because he believed birds also recognized beauty with a highly developed aesthetic sense. Before Darwin, no one allowed for aesthetic intelligence among any creature but a purely human one. Shelley’s exaltation of her monster underscores her position half-way between traditional thinkers and Darwin yet also demonstrates how she anticipates his arguments.

Finally, Frankenstein embodies Darwin’s definition of genius that defies the mind and accepts the body. In order to elevate the body and promote it as the locus for beauty (as opposed to soul or mind) Darwin declares that genius necessitates both imagination and physical strength: the body plays a key role in success and intellectual progress. Frankenstein, exhibiting great feats of strength, yet simultaneously learning language and culture, defines Darwin’s genius in the flesh. He reinforces the idea that the body provides life with meaning. Without his terrible strength, Frankenstein inhabits an ugly shell of flesh but his might combined with his mind makes him a formidable opponent. He needs his body despite its lack and this need for a body consonantly supports Darwin’s thesis that intellect alone will never comprise true genius; that knowledge and strength wait for permission from the body. Therefore, the body initiates aesthetic implications, a key component of Darwin’s naturalized beauty situated concretely in the physical realm.

Beauty serves the body and creates the body through its role in sexual selection, but Darwin goes one step further so that beauty is the body. This seems like an ordinary idea: of course beauty exists physically! But when Darwin removes God from beauty, he grounds aesthetics in the physical concrete realm and removes questions of the soul, an unusual consideration for the time. Unlike Waggett’s body/soul divide, for Darwin, the body and beauty
are one: they function together and cannot be divided. Therefore, as beauty exists for the sake of the body, so it exists for itself: beauty for body’s sake means beauty for its own sake.\textsuperscript{17}

The Victorian most commonly associated with this sentiment, however, is Walter Pater, an art critic at Oxford University in the late nineteenth century. Throughout the Victorian era, the phrase art for art’s sake had “chequered fortunes”: “The phrase is notable for its rarity in Victorian writing – Pater himself used it only once, in the final paragraph of the essay on William Morris. But when the paragraph was reprinted as part of the ‘Conclusion’ to The Renaissance, the phrase jumped immediately into prominence; the passage was quoted in at least half a dozen reviews of 1873” (Prettejohn 281). Certainly, Pater’s infamous ‘Conclusion’ stirred up considerable controversy; but, significantly, between the publishing of the Morris essay in 1868 and the ‘Conclusion’ in 1873, Darwin published Origins and Descent of Man. Both of these works, widely read,\textsuperscript{18} subsumed the Victorian imagination and worked their worldview into the arts as well as general culture.

Darwinian ideals permeated the culture because of their balance between scientific and popular dissemination. In a book on Gerard Manly Hopkins (that also references Darwin and Pater as part of the same literary conversation), Jude Nixon argues that “even if Hopkins did not read [Origins], its arguments were sufficiently chronicled, reviewed, and discussed in all of the major literary organs” (Nixon 112); therefore, readers should not be surprised at the Darwinian influence in literary works nor the “peculiarly complex and even counterchronological

\textsuperscript{17} Others have connected Victorian positivistic science with the Decadence movement, but never focus on Darwin and his relationship to the arts. See Ferguson. My argument focuses closely on Darwin’s ideas whereas most other studies examine general cultural trends, and I consider Darwin as an aesthetic figure, rather than only scientific.

\textsuperscript{18} Darwin considered Origins of Species without doubt “the chief work of my life” (Autobiography 122). Incredibly successful, Origins sold out its 1250 copies on the first day of publication, then a second edition more than twice the number soon afterwards. By the time Darwin wrote his autobiography in 1876, he reports sixteen thousand copies sold in England, a “large sale” considering “how stiff a book it is” (Autobiography 122).
interpenetration between science and literature” (Levine, *Novelists* 3). In one such example of interconnectedness, Charles Dickens gave the *Origin of Species* a “remarkably fair-minded review” in which Dickens summarizes the theory in his own words – as well as in some of Darwin’s without direct attribution (Levine, *Novelists* 128). Dickens’ unconscious plagiarism demonstrates Darwin’s interdisciplinary power on contemporary language and thought.

Darwin’s influence on Pater could be drawn from this general argument of cultural propagation, but the actual connection between these two Victorian aesthetes runs much deeper. In his introduction to a collection of Pater’s writings, literary theorist Harold Bloom claims Pater read Darwin (Bloom xxx). Bloom adds that “Darwin compelled” the most significant divergences between Pater and other High Romantics for “The Renaissance is already a Darwinian book” (Bloom xvii). This assessment acknowledges the surprising amount of Darwinian reference in Pater’s writing considering their close chronological proximity and attributes some of Pater’s distinctiveness to Darwinian influence. Perhaps the most convincing admission comes from Pater himself. Pater discusses Darwin in “Plato and Platonism” (1893): in “Darwin and Darwinism… ‘type’ itself properly is not but is always becoming” (Quoted in Nixon 157). Here is Darwin’s beauty related to form: no ‘type’ exists, but it constantly changes.

In the Plato essay Pater connected this thought literally to Darwin, but he emphasized this idea earlier in *Marius the Epicurean* (1883), his only full-length novel. Less a series of plot events than psychological developments, Marius continually refines his aesthetic sense. As an Epicurean, he does this through “the objects of our ordinary experience,” that “fixed as they seem, are really in perpetual change, had been, as originally conceived, but the preliminary step…Then as now, the illuminated philosophic mind might apprehend, in what seemed a mass of lifeless matter, the movement of that universal life, in which things, and men’s impressions of
them, were ever ‘coming to be’” (Pater 75). Pater unites the mutability of species with the
development of life in flux. Acknowledging change in our physical world leads Pater to argue
that our ‘impressions’ of aesthetics constantly change because beauty, the subject of aesthetic
perception, continually transforms. In order to appreciate a series of endless forms, our
impressions must match the evolution of their subject.

Pater alludes more specifically to sexual selection in the story of Cupid and Psyche read
by Marius as part of his early aesthetic education. Trying to convince her sisters of her
husband’s handsomeness, Psyche mentions Cupid’s “good beard” without seeing his face (Pater
41). Even if she felt the beard during an intimate embrace, her focus on this particular
characteristic seems odd; why not say something about his height, or strength of his arms?
Darwin’s *Descent of Man* may explain Psyche’s choice – or rather, Pater’s choice of the beard as
a mark of attractiveness. Darwin identifies the beard as a sexual character, proof of man’s past
part in the sexual selection process. Because few women demonstrate the trait, it represents a
difference between the sexes and Darwin reasons that it developed as an agent of sexual allure
among races that prefer it: men sport beards rather than feathers. Darwin repeats the beard motif
repeatedly throughout his work, always referring to it as a mark of beauty preference. When
Psyche chooses the beard as the character that most demonstrates her lover’s attractiveness, she
participates in Darwin’s sexually selective discourse. Pater chooses this feature as the one
Psyche will find most convincing for her sisters because he perceives it as an attribute attractive
to women, more attractive than any other touchable characteristic thanks to Darwin’s emphasis.

Pater introduces more obviously Darwinian ideas through a conversation Marius hears
read from two renowned Greek thinkers: Chaerephon and Socrates. To Chaerephon’s doubting

---

19 See *Descent*, 600-604 for a preliminary discussion Darwin references throughout the rest of the book. Pure
speculation, but perhaps this explains his own famously prodigious beard.
query “But tell me, Socrates, what is one to think of those stories which have been told from the beginning, of birds changing into mortals and mortals into birds?” Socrates replies: “methinks we are but half-blind judges of the impossible and possible….Therefore, there are many things that seem to us impossible which are really easy….From the dumb and lifeless egg, Nature moulds her swarms of winged creatures…she brings [them] wings and feet, brightens and beautifies [them] with quaint variety of color” (Pater 189). Like scoffers at Darwin’s evolution, Chaerephon doubts the Greek myths that challenge the idea of fixed forms. In his response, Socrates sounds suspiciously like Darwin, attributing the power of change to Nature and reminding us of our personal transformation: organic beings pass from egg to life. Not only can Nature create life, putting together the pieces of an insect like a puzzle, but she endows beauty as an artist. Waggett attacks this idea when he mocks the Argus pheasant, but Socrates contradicts Waggett’s traditional interpretation of beauty in nature by defending natural selection as Nature’s means of forming the world. Along with natural selection, he implies sexual selection by referring to appearances. Perhaps, in Socrates, we find Darwin’s first “bulldog.”

Socrates’ support of Nature as creator partially reveals the religious agenda in Marius. In his search for the best life philosophy, Marius sometimes detects “some transforming spirit” that “was guided by a wonderful tact of selection, exclusion, juxtaposition, begetting thereby…a grave yet wholesome beauty” (Pater 207). Without naming the source, Pater describes sexual selection in more mystical terms, nearly Christian language. However, his word choice, implying the process of conception and birth, also highlights a Darwinian connection between

\[20\] Socrates does mention a Deity, but Pater does not insinuate Christian apologetics: first, Socrates represents Pagan Rome; secondly, Pater frequently invokes a mystical spirit-presence that does not claim to be God or creator; thirdly, Pater bases his substitute religion on aesthetics and will.
nature, reproduction, and beauty’s origin. Through sensory means, Pater displaces God and Waggett’s beauty with Darwin’s beauty for body’s sake.

To install a religion of aesthetics rather than in the traditional sense, Pater borrows strategy from Darwin. As Marius carefully observes his world he finds beauty even in inorganic substances: the “fragments of older architecture, the mosaics, the spiral columns, the precious cornerstones of immemorial building, …put on, by such a juxtaposition, a new and singular expressiveness, an air of grave thought, of an intellectual purpose, in itself, aesthetically, very seductive” (Pater 196). Pater evokes the way aesthetics seduce, but this time he links that capture to the intellect. Just as Darwin suggests that sexual selection develops the mind through action of the body, so Pater grants the architecture new purpose and thought once its aesthetic qualities attract a viewer. In “Appreciations” (1889), Pater more literally emphasizes the connection between intellect and body, mind and beauty: “There are no beautiful thoughts…without beautiful forms” (Quoted in Nixon 196). The body precedes the intellect in such a way that declares it worthy of honor, perhaps worship. By emphasizing the birth of thought from form, Pater expresses Darwin’s development of the intellect and genius from the body through natural and sexual selection. Pater and Darwin say I am, therefore, I am. With the confidence of the Hebrew God, I AM, these men claim final fulfillment in the human body and no need for either the supernatural or intellectual superiority to define human existence.

Elevating the body increases the significance of the concrete: beauty must be sensed, experienced, seen in the world. Before his journey to Rome, Marius comes to understand the “ideal in connection with a vivid sense of the value of mental and bodily sanity. And this recognition of the beauty, even for the aesthetic sense, of mere bodily health” protected him from

---

21 Oscar Wilde snidely noted that Marius couldn’t have been a Christian because he would have been too distracted during the sermon by the wooden carving of the pews.
other “less desirable or hazardous tendencies of some phases of thought,” like Stoicism (Pater 24). Ultimately, Marius disagrees with the Stoics because they were “despiser[s] of the body” (Pater 170). Neglecting the body leads to loss of human dignity, as when the Stoic Roman emperor watches executions yet calls them games. Such degradation of the body convinces Marius of the danger in glorifying the mind at the expense of the body. Traditionally, as in Waggett’s view, beauty held an exalted position aligned with mind and soul as an immobile veil covering the face of God; when Darwin and Pater shift the veil to drape it over the body they declare beauty accessible and tangible.

The concrete images and sights that form the foundation of Pater’s aesthetic theory grew out of Darwinism. Levine notes that throughout the later nineteenth century, “Darwinism was quickly absorbed by the developments in the empiricist theory that entailed a culture-wide critical examination of the primary act of knowledge, observation….These forces, leading to the internalization of knowledge in science, are reflected in the famous difference between Arnold’s desire to ‘see the object as in itself it really is,’ and Pater’s, ‘to know one’s impression as it really is’” (Novelists 218). In the Preface to The Renaissance, Pater’s most well-known work, he establishes his ideas about concrete beauty: it, “like all other qualities presented to the human experience, is relative….To define beauty, not in the most abstract, but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not a universal formula for it, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics” (Bloom 17). Despite an essay titled “Beauty,” Waggett would never earn the title Aesthete in Pater’s terms because he tries to standardize beauty into an absolute formula for taste; Darwin, however, earns the appellation because his theory of sexual selection provides a general “formula” to study beauty’s “manifestations” and his science observes concrete terms of the physical world.
Darwin’s sexual selection provides an apt outlet for such observation because Darwin claims the visual as the primary perceptive faculty. Man can “hardly select, or only with much difficulty, any deviation of structure excepting such as is externally visible; and indeed he rarely cares for what is internal” (Darwin, *Origins* 25). Man relies on his sight: he breeds based on what he sees, he selects a mate primarily based on external appearances. Our eyes perceive fastest of all our organs: sound must travel to our ears, smells waft to our noses, our hands must be within reach; before a female bird hears a mating call, she sees a mating dance. For organizational emphasis, Darwin discusses “organs of extreme perfection and complication,” beginning with the eye (*Origins* 117). The eye functions as the most powerful instrument of selection, “intently watching” and “carefully selecting” the best variations (Darwin, *Origins* 119). The focus remains with the gaze, living by sight not faith.\(^\text{22}\) By implication, Darwin stresses the importance of the physical body. Of course, if perverted, this sentiment encourages eugenics and the elevation of those most fit\(^\text{23}\) – a dangerous application. But if interpreted as redemption for the body and recognition of its worth, this focus on appearances transforms ordinary life into works of wonder to be appreciated in and of themselves. At the very least, Darwin deconstructs Waggett’s soul/body dichotomy that, pointing toward a heaven, neglects the quality of life found in our world.

For Pater as well, the eye functions as the purveyor of aesthetic appreciation. As Elizabeth Prettejohn notes, in Pater’s ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance* the “imagery implies visual experience, and perhaps it is no accident that the writing becomes more vivid at this

\(^{22}\) This philosophy reverses a common Christian mantra: “We live by faith, not by sight.” Darwin and Pater both subvert the idea of faith with their emphasis on concrete aesthetics.

\(^{23}\) Most people commonly understand this to be a Darwinian idea, but it develops later through the work of Francis Galton to be discussed later in the paper. Darwin does not use ‘survival of the fittest’ in its most negative sense. He typically celebrates the abundance of life, rather than a Malthusian obsession with death.
juncture; already there is a sense of excitement about the immediacy of seeing” (Prettejohn 257). Marius captures that same excitement as he develops his own sense of aesthetic and comes into contact with multiple philosophies of life, but concludes that

For himself, it was clear, he must hold still by what his eyes really saw. Only, he had to concede also, that the very boldness of such theory bore witness, at least, to a variety of human dispositions and a consequent variety of mental views, which might…be correspondent to, be defined by and define varieties of facts, of truths, just “behind the veil,” regarding the world all alike and actually before them as their original premise or starting point; a world wider, perhaps, in its possibilities, than all possible fancies concerning it. (Pater 193)

As man can only select for the beauty he sees, and organisms sexually choose their mates based on appearance, so Marius realizes that any other appreciation of beauty would prove false. If Marius were to assume that beauty existed in some other form than what his eyes see, not only could he not prove it, but he could never experience it. He would always be lacking, a deprivation he avoids by grounding his sense of beauty in the physical. Simultaneously, Marius realizes that doing so means multiple people might define beauty differently based on how they experience the world; but this, rather than scaring him, excites him. The world might have more to offer in physical reality than we can literally imagine; it might just be a sphere of endless forms. The business of the aesthete, then, becomes finding and experiencing what the world has to offer. Pater does not fear lifting the veil to see the glory behind it, especially if varieties of facts and truths inhabit the space, not just one God.

Pater desires to see behind the veil, but he does not advocate destroying it. Marius breaks with Stoic philosophy in part because the emperor claims to be a Stoic and shows no emotion, no
compassion, at the Roman games where victims give life without offering it. By contrast, Marius, “weary and indignant,” recognizes the “sin of blindness” perpetuated by the games and vows to reject a philosophy that could wallow in death as entertainment (Pater 138). Marius returns to what “his own philosophy had said: Trust the eye: Strive to be right always in regard to the concrete experience…: ‘This, and this, is what you may not look upon!’” (Pater 139).

Marius detests the decadence of Rome and in turning from some sensory experiences acknowledges that the veil provides a needed measure of restraint.

Pater personifies this warning in Cornelius, one of Marius’ friends who represents both freedom in the sensuous but also necessary limitations that preserve aesthetics from decadence. With Flavian, his first friend, Marius felt at times like an “uneasy slave,” but with Cornelius, a measure of “restraint…mystically washed, renewed, strengthened” his “bodily eyes” (Pater 134). This self-control accords with philosophical balanced Epicureanism – a mature hedonism, one that selects and evaluates for the benefit of the observer and subject. Pater ties together the eye as a instrument of vision with its chosen experiences and combines these forces into an aesthetic conscience that replaces the moral one. It serves Marius well – he recognizes the fault of the Roman games precisely because he finds them unaesthetic, and hence, unfit for visual consumption. Choosing experience, the right aesthetics, becomes an act of will, the will as vision:

‘Tis in thy power to think as thy wilt.’ And were the cheerful, sociable, restorative beliefs,… just hidden behind the veil of a mechanical and material order, but only just behind it, ready perhaps even now to break through: were they, after all, really a matter of choice, dependent on some deliberate act of volition on his part?…. Might the will itself be an organ of knowledge, of vision? (Pater 176-7)
When Waggett uses nearly the same language\textsuperscript{24} to say beauty does not quite break through the veil, the parallel seems uncanny if not intentional, almost as if Waggett seeks to close down the means of knowledge that Pater suggests here: peeking behind the veil. Whereas the end of Waggett’s essay extinguishes the light about to pierce the veil – so that beauty only “all but” appears – here Pater suggests it may be breached in the proper way: through concrete aesthetic experience. Situating aesthetics in the realm of choice and will acknowledges the discernment of the viewer: experience, but experience wisely. Cornelius’ restraint provides a measure of freedom for Marius, and in this freedom he comes most closely to understanding beauty.

Sexual selection relies exclusively on such an aesthetic will. Male birds perform, females choose; in “savage” marriage rights, men choose the women, including one culture where the “posterior part of the body projects in a wonderful manner” and men line up possible marriage candidates in order to select the woman whose “behind” extended farthest (Darwin, \textit{Descent} 579).\textsuperscript{25} In either scenario, Darwin’s selection seems one sided, biased in favor of whichever sex holds the most power. For an ideal world, however, Darwin presents an alternative vision. He discusses the possibility of a “double” sexual selection with the “more vigorous and precocious females selecting the more attractive and vigorous males, the latter rejecting all except the more attractive females” (Darwin, \textit{Descent} 225). Darwin believes this may be the case with humans, but certainly not with the animal kingdom where the lack of discipline among males “generally eager to pair with females” overcomes their rational capability to select (\textit{Descent} 226). By making this distinction between humans and animals and acknowledging a hierarchy he usually

\textsuperscript{24} “this is where the thought comes closest – and all but breaks through” the veil (Waggett 139).

\textsuperscript{25} Darwin relates the amusing anecdote of a woman in a “savage” culture “considered a beauty” who exhibited such an “immensely developed behind” that “when seated on level ground she could not rise, and had to push herself along until she came to a slope” (\textit{Descent} 579). Perhaps more humorous than the resulting mental image are the number of euphemisms Darwin employs to maintain decorum. On a more serious note, Darwin demonstrates here his ability to appreciate without understanding or agreeing personally. He prefers less established posteriors, but still allows that in another culture such a trait might be ‘considered beautiful.’
deconstructs, Darwin conveys approval for the more selective process that balances sexual power. If one sex overpowers another, less refined selection occurs, which means progress occurs more slowly, even though more reproduction might produce more offspring: quantity does not mean quality. Double selection limits rampant and unhealthy coupling, balancing selection between the sexes and holding reproduction to its most beneficial level.

Despite their caution, both Pater and Darwin precede decadent movements that lack restraint. Science and literature taken to extremes lack the moderation implied by Darwin but explicitly urged by Pater. This distinction between Darwin and Pater explains where their thinking diverges and how Pater becomes more helpful. Misreadings are the risk of any writer, but Pater’s more explicit references to control combat misunderstanding. One of the difficulties with Darwin lies in his massive applicability; it is easy to misread him and “different readers can find their hopes and fears confirmed by extending the implications of Darwin’s thought in one direction or another….There is something fascinating and perturbing in a text [that] can generate such a variety of ideological potentialities” (Ferguson 477, n 9). In the past, feminists used Darwin for their cause but also rejected him because his evolutionary refinement twines with power to create social hierarchies. Feminist Rita Freedman argues that, thanks to Darwin, “beauty has an exclusionary function that divides those who have it from those who don’t….Thus, the odds are fixed so that only a few can win” (Freedman 6). While this thinking certainly develops from Darwin’s theory, another target actually deserves Freedman’s resentment: Francis Galton.

Galton, Darwin’s cousin, remains the most disturbing example of dangerously applying Darwinian thought. Nicholas Wright Gillham, a Galton biographer records that “after reading *Origins of Species* Galton concluded that it might be possible to improve mankind through
selective breeding” (Gillham 1). Galton coined the term eugenics and conveys his philosophy in a novel bluntly titled *Kantsaywhere* that lays out a plan of inherited perfection among the human species. Galton proposes physical examinations of fitness, encourages intermarriage among elite individuals, and allows secondary citizens to propagate “with reservations” (Gillham 2). With this novel, Galton proposes the universal ‘formula’ Pater warns against – one based on the standardization of excellence and beauty valued by traditionalists like Waggett. In his idea of formula, Galton limits the future to his fancy rather than leaving it open to possibility. He does not know his impression as it really is – only one of many – so he assumes he knows the answer.

Disturbingly, Galton remains venerated today as a father of statistics and empirical science. Galton’s statistics, however, contain the exclusionary categorization bemoaned by Freedman. In one project, Galton began a ‘Beauty-map’ of the British Isles: “Galton used a thimble with a spike on the end to prick holes in a piece of paper. One counter was in his left-hand pocket and the other in his right. A girl who got a prick on the right passed muster, but the unfortunate young woman who got one on the left failed. Galton found London was blessed with the highest number of attractive women, but poor Aberdeen had the fewest” (Gillham 309). Although never published, Galton’s beauty map and his judgments that reduce women to pinpricks in paper demonstrate the superficial nature of his science. Galton even tried proving hereditary beauty by examining family portraits in an art gallery. He strolled down the hall of portraits and admired the last and most recent more than the first. Based on this completely impartial scientific observation, he encouraged intermarriage among the aristocratic classes to preserve their image (Tomasula 140). Pinpricks and portraits express the limited vision of his science – this was the apogee of his fancy. Though his ideas develop from Darwin, Galton leaves no room for the unimagined beauty of endless forms in his universalizing formulas.
By contrast, decadent literature never spawned eugenics or exclusion, but its association with decadent science taints its influence. In her article “Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment,” Christine Ferguson wants to redeem literary Decadence by suggesting that usefulness rises from uselessness and that if we “recognize decadence as realization rather than disavowal” and “the conclusions of decadent texts as a particular type of fulfillment rather than failure – we can go beyond the movement’s sterile pejorative connotations” (Ferguson 466). Despite her optimism, her conclusion detracts from her persuasiveness. Ferguson admits Decadence presents a “horribly troubled form of fulfillment…: at the moment subjects grasp the ineffable or make the final foray against established identity, they cease to be” (Ferguson 476). She maintains her scholarly poise, excusing Decadence without applauding it, but that very caution undermines the faith she places in the ability for Decadence to provide meaningful human success. Like Galton’s science, decadent literature leaves few possibilities for imaginative endings that aid the subject. Instead, its emphasis on ultimate discovery destroys the subject in the process.

Ferguson demonstrates how decadence opens new pathways to knowledge, but her examples also reveal the inherent danger of such processes. She writes that in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894) when the protagonist performs experiments on a young woman, “he cuts into living flesh to unleash the primordial truth of existence from its last hiding place” but he “seems remarkably unconcerned with the effect or purpose or function of such an unveiling” (Ferguson 475). Seeking truth: important, necessary, human. But at what cost? Here Decadence falls short. It irresponsibly seeks worthwhile knowledge in a destructive manner that destroys its subjects. Despite his decadent protagonist, Machan offers a final caution, just as Ferguson does in her essay. The last line of *Pan* warns that “when the House of Life is thus thrown open…human flesh may become the veil of horror one dare not express” (Ferguson 476).
What happens when we no longer ‘dare express’ ourselves in flesh? The species expires. This bleak image illuminates the danger in a literature that implicitly promotes callous curiosity.

Darwin provides an image in contrast. Rather than the House of Life and flesh of horror, Darwin offers the Tree of Life that “covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications” (Origins 82). Aesthetics provide a means of knowing, one that engenders life rather than death by decadence. Whereas decadent subjects cease to be at the moment of discovery (not much good to their knowledge at that point), students of aesthetic perception based on the will as vision glimpse a world of endless forms beyond the veil without destroying it or themselves.

This balanced vision provides a means to the knowledge sought by decadence without ending in destruction. After describing the science that developed late in the nineteenth century, Ferguson claims Darwin “not a decadent scientist by any means” (Ferguson 476). Though not a scientist on Galton’s terms, Darwin praises his cousin’s work and references Galton’s Hereditary Genius in Descent as part of his argument for the mental superiority of men over women. Darwin seems less aware of the possibility of negative applications of his work than Pater and more willing to pursue extremes to naturalize beauty. Pater realized the dangerous tendency of his work, for his later writings, following The Renaissance, “shows the Aesthetic Critic accepting his own hint, and turning away from self-destruction” (Bloom xxi).26 Not every experience proves worthwhile or profitable, just as the Roman games go too far in providing entertainment. Preserving the species means careful experience of pleasure and beauty. Responding to one review of his book, Pater writes, “I did mean it to be more anti-Epicurean than it has struck you as being” (Seiler 114). He wishes to avoid both extremes of hedonism and

26 Pater puts it this way in “Style” (1888): “Self-restraint, a skilful economy of means, ascesis, that too has a beauty of its own” (Bloom 110).
Stoicism, pursuing a narrow line between the two. Building off Darwin’s ideas, Pater achieves a more balanced vision for aesthetics that depends on concrete experience, but does not crush the soul from the body. He maintains a sense of spirituality in sensuality that Darwin tries to remove from beauty altogether. Rather than lose the spirit, Pater makes it one with the body: he calls one particularly aesthetic house an “expansion of the body,” both adorned and decorated until “between outward and inward, there is no longer any distinction at all” (Pater 194). Both become one – but, significantly, both spirit and body continue to exist.

Meshing the body and soul into one – not destroying one to elevate the other – answers Decadence’s aesthetic difficulty. When Darwin and Pater redefine beauty, radically distinguishing it from traditional understanding by aligning it with the body, they also grant beauty mortality. Damaging the body, then, also hurts beauty – not in the spiritual sense that Waggett supports but in the concrete reality of Marius and his Epicureanism. Preserving life becomes a means of protecting beauty and – this is where the thought comes closest – makes aesthetic vision a possible substitute for moral will. How to best implement that aesthetic will of vision ranges along a varied scale: decadence cuts through the veil with a scalpel, damaging it irrevocably; Darwin pulls it down, and, thanks to Galton, can not put it back; Pater peeks behind it, but preserves the veil; Waggett transforms the veil into an impenetrable iron curtain. Of these four options, three promote some level of permanency; only Pater provides a means of self-control that simultaneously frees beauty to pursue ceaseless transformation. Pater’s freedom with restraint provides the best means of knowledge because the aesthetic “will as vision” sees in such a way that preserves a sense of unlimited future for Darwin’s endless forms.

The most difficult figure to place on this scale of veil sensitivity would be Erasmus Darwin. Unlike Waggett, Erasmus feels no need to preserve the veil for the sake of any God that
might lurk behind it; however, his primarily conventional invocations of beauty and his linear understanding of standards tie him more closely to Waggett than to his grandson, Charles. So concerned with revolutionizing plant sexuality, Erasmus seems content with leaving beauty alone. He envisions “the immortal form enamor’d nature hail’d, / And Beauty blazed to heaven and earth, unveiled” and yet Beauty remains hidden, cloaked in conventional social aesthetics (Darwin, *The Loves of Plants* 40, line 65). He enjoys the conventional standards of poetry, the social idealizations that characterize his visualizations. However, “rather than submit completely to materialistic flux, he uses the suggestiveness of myth for what it is worth” (Hassler 28). Erasmus participates in a narrative of nature that encourages his readers to examine their world and find naturalization.

Charles Darwin needed little encouragement to examine the natural world. Most of *Origins* ambles along in dry, scientific prose meant for a particular audience, but on its final page Darwin reveals the passion beneath his work (albeit, restrained):

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us ... Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life…that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Darwin, *Origins* 307)
This is the beauty of Charles Darwin: the potential for perpetual creativity, life, recombination. Progress does not indicate straightforward motion but rather a joyous sprawl of vines representing the tangled interconnections between species and all forms of life. The resistance to predictability creates an unimaginable number of possibilities continually pre-empting us with new and wonderful forms for our contemplation and appreciation. Though earlier writers, folklore, Erasmus, literature and general scientific trends influenced Darwin none of these intellectual ancestors anticipate the simple joy Darwin finds in an evolutionary beauty of change and surprise that renews our belief in wonder. This is the beauty of Charles Darwin: an aesthetic evolution that restores our jaded vision for fresh discovery.

WORKS CITED


