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# Mr. Darwin and the Evolution of the Bitch



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by C.Flisi

When a book's title is "*Bitch*," one doesn't think of spiders and frogs as the subject matter. It sounds more like a tale of Hollywood harlots or Big Apple broads, overlaid with Frette sheets and social calendars clocked by Audemars Piguet.

But author Lucy Cooke is a British zoologist, not a chronicler of jet-setting social mores. Her focus is non-human animal behavior, specifically as it relates to gender stereotypes. *Bitch* is a new way of looking at male and females — and the surprising gradations of same — and subversively blowing them up.

Cooke begins by describing Charles Darwin as her “idol,” and notes that his masterwork, *On the Origin of Species*, is “as brilliant as it is simple and justly hailed as one of the greatest intellectual breakthroughs of all time.”

At the same time, she acknowledges some of its flaws, gaps, and omissions. Natural selection alone, i.e., the most efficient adaptation to one’s environment over the course of time, can’t explain why male stags have such, well, staggering antlers or why male peacocks have such ridiculously flamboyant tails. Darwin recognized this lapse and attributed it to a “secondary evolutionary mechanism” — the quest for sex. “Primary sexual characteristics” were reproductive organs and genitals, the baseline tools for reproduction. “Secondary sexual characteristics” were cool features like iridescent feathers and elaborate mating calls. The purpose of these latter had to be to attract the opposite sex, the scientist reasoned, and the opposite sex was obviously female, the passive participant in sexual courtship.

*The Origin of Species* was published on November 24, 1859, and Cooke cuts her idol a lot of slack for the flaws in his thesis because he was obviously a product of his time, Victorian England, with all its repressive attitudes towards sexual behavior in general and ignorance of female anatomy in particular.

Cooke is not so lenient with regard to Darwin’s second opus, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871. In her telling, the second book is Darwin’s attempt to reconcile natural selection with sexual selectivity, again in the context of Victorian mores. Darwin’s observations included the assertion that “The males of almost all animals have stronger

passions than the females. Hence it is the males that fight together and sedulously display their charms before the females. The female, on the other hand, with the rarest of exceptions, is less eager than the male . . . she generally ‘requires to be courted’; she is coy.”

Such statements may have worked a century and a half ago for their intended audience of male scientists, but they don’t fly today, with all we know about the human body, about chromosomal lineups, about the behavior of polygamous lionesses, polyandrous female bonobos, and exuberantly libertine female dolphins, not to mention those Darwin-defying queen bees, anacondas, octopus, scorpions, and oh-so-well-named black widow spiders.

Plus, how did Darwin explain the infamous female praying mantis, who not only decapitates her mate during sex but can reproduce asexually in a process called parthenogenesis? Natural selection *can* be seen at work here, in that the body of the male mantis can deliver the goods even *après le guillotine*, sometimes better than before, and eating her mate can help the female activate the parthenogenetic process. But sexual selection as defined by Darwin doesn’t hold up.

It turns out that the female of the species is not only deadlier than the male (the eponymous poem by Rudyard Kipling was published in 1911, a decade after the end of the Victorian era . . . but not much improved by feminist standards) but more complex, more aggressive, and infinitely more interactive than Darwinian theory would have us believe.

Most of *Bitch* (the book) lays out the evidence in support of these

contentions, and it is pretty convincing. If I were a male instead of a she/her female, I would start to be concerned about the future of my gender. Parthenogenesis is only the beginning. What about hermaphrodites, born one sex but able to switch to the other, depending on external circumstances, including climate change? Birds do it. Bees do it, maybe. Turtles and some lizards in the trees do it. Happens in humans too.

Or gynandromorphism, where male and female traits are visible bilaterally, with the male on one side and the female on the other? Some butterflies are dramatic examples of this phenomenon; so are some crabs and lobsters. Most strikingly, so are cardinals: these avian gynandromorphs are blazing red on one side and drab brown on the other. This particular gender blur is very rare in the animal kingdom and doesn't happen in mammals (including humans) because the embryonic development of mammals depends on the hormonal milieu surrounding our cells, independent of their chromosomal makeup.

Still, we seem to be moving to a more gender-fluid society. What that means in terms of male-female roles and functions — for humans — is still up for grabs. What it all means for nature in general awaits the analysis of a future Darwin, or Darwina. Or maybe a Lucy Cooke?

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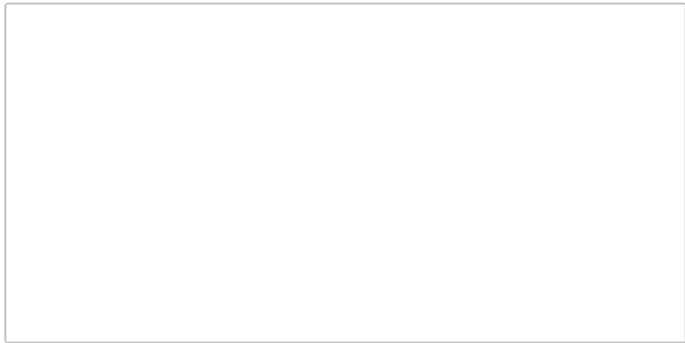
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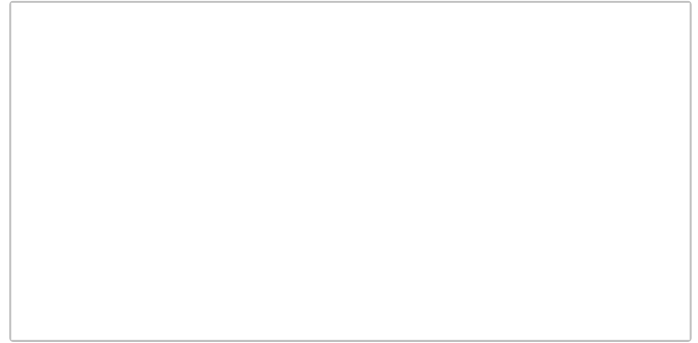
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