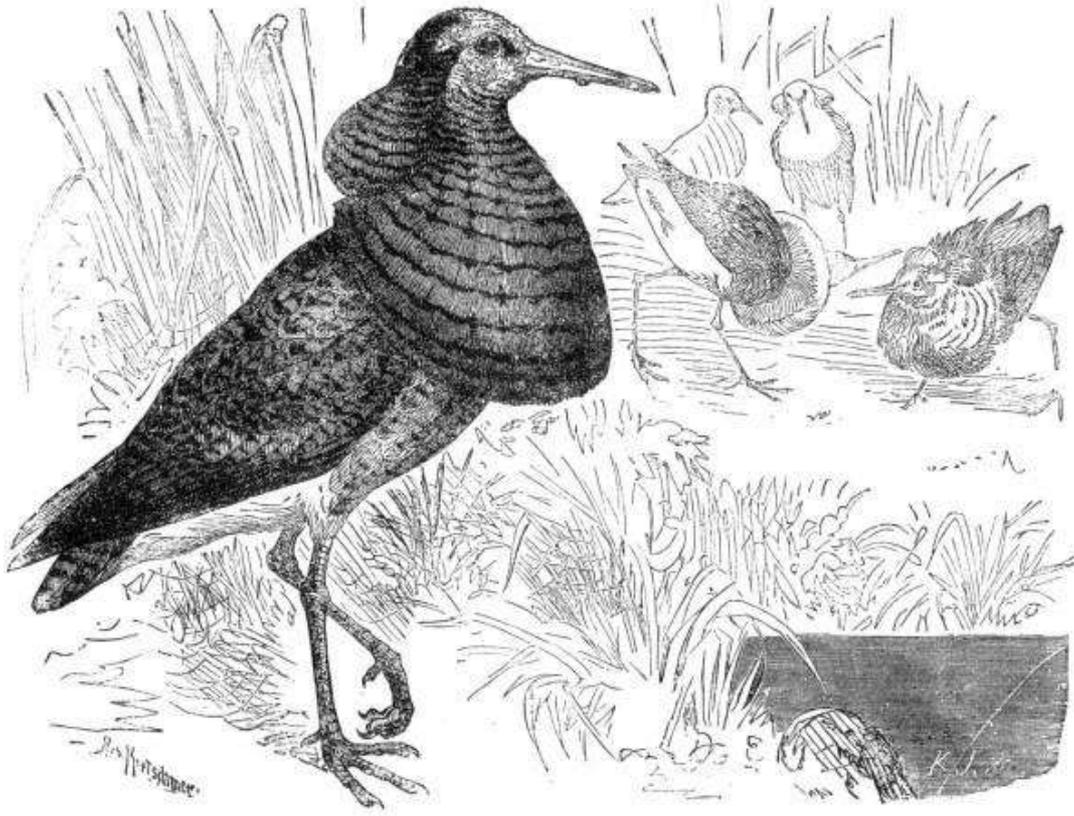


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Carolyn Laubender

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THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: SEXUAL DIFFERENCE, SCIENTIFIC NARRATIVE, AND THE FEMALE GAZE IN CHARLES DARWIN AND SIGMUND FREUD

Carolyn Laubender

Abstract

Drawing together the concerns of both feminist theory and science studies, this article pairs the scientific writings of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud in order to demonstrate how both of their origin stories—one of species-life and the other of psychology—are grappling with the status of sexual difference as it is constituted through narrative. Reading Charles Darwin's 1871 *The Descent of Man* for its narrative about sexual selection and Sigmund Freud's account of the origins of sexual difference, I reveal the way that these two great scientific thinkers interestingly route both of their narratives of sexual difference through the interplay of a specifically female gaze. Both Darwin's and Freud's scientific observations deal with sexual difference and its consequences, and both unexpectedly develop a narrative that positions the female as the watcher, the observer, the looker. This article thus has three main aims: firstly, it affirms a genealogical approach to scientific narratives that understands Darwin's natural science as a significant antecedent to Freud's human psychology. Secondly, it maintains the importance of understanding narrative as central to the process of scientific knowledge production. Thirdly, it argues that both of these narratives articulate theories of sexual difference by and through the operations of a specifically female gaze. By emphasising the centrality of narrative to Darwin's and Freud's thought, this article participates in the recent feminist turn toward new materialism and science studies, offering an important reconsideration of the narratological base of all knowledge production, scientific or otherwise.

Key Words: sexual difference; science; visual; narrative; Freud; Darwin; feminist theory

Under the Influence: The Scientific Narratives of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud

Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) never met. As far as we know, Freud, the Vienna-based progenitor of psychoanalysis, never so much as corresponded with Darwin, the travelling British scientist, whose most famous work was published three years after Freud's birth. Darwin's influence on Freud was a wholly literary and cultural one—based entirely on narrative—as Freud read and re-read Darwin's newly published texts and studied for years with his protégés. By the time Freud fled Vienna in 1938 due to the threat of Nazi advancement and resettled in London (bringing with him, we might note, some nine volumes of Darwin's work), Darwin had already been dead for over fifty years. Yet, in spite of their disparate locales and objects of inquiry, the knowledge production of both scientists was prompted by a similar set of questions about the nature of human origins and the reasons for the continual change and diversification of living beings. The writings of both men emphasise the importance of inheritance, the past, causality, reproduction, competition, sexual attraction, and formal similarity in their scientific explanations of human and animal life. As Adam Phillips writes in his comparative study of both, 'Darwin and Freud as naturalists—as great natural history writers—radically changed our sense of what was worth talking about, and therefore our ways of talking. [...] [They] made it very difficult for us not to use a certain kind of vocabulary when we refer to ourselves'.¹ The two scientists who most radically altered our way of thinking and speaking about resemblance, family, inheritance and relationality themselves form a genealogy of inheritance and transmission, one whose narratives and

vocabulary still constitute some of our most fundamental ways of accounting for modern physiological and psychical life.

Given the purchase that these scientific narratives about transmission and reproduction still have on contemporary understandings of subjectivity and species-life, this article considers the importance of narrative to Darwin's and Freud's scientific writings, specifically insofar as both theorise sexual difference. The legacies of both these scientists have been especially significant to the landscape of contemporary Anglophone feminist theory, which is increasingly turning to the biological, the material, and the scientific for alternative resources for theorising gender and sexuality. In the wake of feminist hopes about the radical political efficacy of social constructivism, feminists in science studies, new materialism, and the neuro-scientific and medical humanities are newly considering the purchase of scientific inquiry for humanistic thought, using research done by physicists (Barad 2007), geneticists (Fox Keller 2010), natural biologists (Grosz 2011), and pharmaceutical companies (Wilson 2015) to re-imagine the entanglements of nature and culture—determinism and agency—that have been so significant for past social theories of gender and sexual difference.

With this context in mind, I turn to the writings of Darwin and Freud together in order to show how both of their origin stories—one of animal species-life and the other of human psychology—are trying to grapple with the status of sexual difference as it was imagined by and through scientific knowledges. Reading Charles Darwin's 1871 *The Descent of Man* for its narrative about sexual selection along with Sigmund Freud's account of the origins of sexual difference, I trace the way that these two great scientific thinkers interestingly route both their narratives of sexual difference through the interplay of a specifically female gaze. Both Darwin's and Freud's scientific observations deal with sexual difference and its consequences, and both unexpectedly develop narratives that position the female as the watcher, the observer, the looker. In the scientific narratives of both, the female gaze becomes not only a marker for the relation between the sexes, but in fact offers an alternate account of the genesis of sexual difference.

By returning the recent feminist interest in science back to questions of narrative and visibility (which characterised feminist thought in the 1970s-1980s), my point is not to reframe the current conversation within feminist science studies according to outdated dichotomies. Indeed, I think feminist science studies has usefully rearticulated the status of agency, especially insofar as it has been habitually aligned with culture, by showcasing the intransigence of culture and the malleability of biology. However, I do want to emphasise (or perhaps re-emphasise) the importance of analysing the function of narrative within scientific literature, a topic that although once popular has now fallen out of favour. I contend that a keen focus on the often fraught and incoherent world-making performed by Darwin's and Freud's scientific *narratives* allows us to re-approach the relationship between sexual difference, the visual, and agency in a way that productively resists the tidy alignment of the gaze with agency and presses for a recognition of the longstanding involvement of culture within scientific narratives of agency and sexual difference. Darwin and Freud were both writing at a time of widespread scientific and political interest in the social status of women (especially as recognisable rights-bearing liberal subjects), a fact that, I suggest, makes the status of sexual difference in their work especially fraught. As I argue, their scientific narratives constitute the operations of the gaze as the site of much of this over-determination, using it to index the importance—and incoherence—of the relationships between agency and sexual difference.

The Birds and the Bees: Charles Darwin and Sexual Selection

Charles Darwin published his final major study on the origin and development of the species in 1871. This text, boldly titled *The Descent of Man*, arrived in two volumes and tackled head on a claim that his earlier *The Origin of Species* had only suggested in passing: it explicitly

placed man within the trajectory of species evolution that characterised all other animal development. Yet, while this book's published aim was to locate the human being within the operations of natural selection, *The Descent of Man* surprisingly expends most of its critical energy theorising not natural selection but sexual selection, a process Darwin had only ever briefly discussed in earlier work. The last fifty pages of the first volume and the entirety of the second volume consider how sexual selection works and what its relationship to natural selection is, offering extensive examples of its function across the range of species- life.

As this text develops it, sexual selection is a process tucked within the operation of natural selection that both enables it and (as Darwin himself admits with some perplexity) frequently thwarts it. According to Darwin, natural selection is the logic that guides the continuation and survivability of any given species, attuning naturally occurring variation to the specific demands of any given environment. The animals whose naturally occurring variation is most suited to the current environmental conditions will survive, reproduce, and pass on their traits to future generations within the species. However, as Darwin comes to recognise, the success of natural selection is contingent upon the success of reproduction and therefore natural selection depends on the dynamics of courtship and mating. Understanding species evolution and inheritance is contingent on understanding which animals reproduce successfully and which ones do not. In other words, successful reproduction is the condition of possibility for natural selection; the individual procedures of reproduction are the lynchpins of generational species evolution.

'Sexual selection', then, is the term Darwin gives to the way in which each species goes about finding mates and reproducing. It names the particular behaviours and protocols that surround the attainment of mates within each species. Its laws are the laws of attraction and repulsion—of sexual appeal and sexual disgust—not of survival and extinction (as is the case with natural selection). In other words, whereas natural selection propels macrocosmically toward environmental compatibility and species survivability, sexual selection is more specifically geared toward success in mate selection and attainment. Although the two processes rely on each other, their objectives are not identical nor are they necessarily mutually supportive.

As Darwin's terms already suggest, 'selection,' or some form of 'choice,' characterises the way he reads the sexual relations of the higher intelligence animals—birds, mammals, human beings—and determines which pairs of animals successfully find mates. In his rubric, the males of most species compete with each other to win the attention, approval, and interest of the female who then selects the male she finds most pleasing. As Darwin writes, 'the female, though comparatively passive, generally exerts some choice and accepts one male in preference to others. [...] The exertion of some choice on the part of the female seems almost as general a law as the eagerness of the male'.² Within sexual selection, males are characterised by competition (either in the form of physical fights or combative displays of ornamentation) while females are characterised by discrimination and selection.³ Much of what Darwin posits about sexual selection is determined by his conviction about the ubiquity and importance of 'female choice' throughout the ranks of animal life. For Darwin, the female's preference—her choice, her selection—ends up all but deciding the trajectory of a species' evolutionary development.

Thus, Darwin's theorisation of sexual selection is centrally concerned with understanding the existence, function, and effects of a specifically 'female choice'.⁴ Much of his inquiry is directed at imagining what, exactly, makes a male attractive to a female. Is it his especially efficacious adaptation to his surroundings? His chances of survival? His sexual potency or reproductive prowess? Extrapolating from the superfluity—yet ubiquity—of male ornamentation, Darwin ultimately hypothesises that none of the criteria guiding natural selection is paramount when it comes to the logic of sexual selection. Females do not choose mates for practical reasons, for their chances of survival or their oh-so-functional evolutionary

advancements. According to Darwin, females select mates based on *aesthetic* appeal, on the beauty of a piebald tail-feather or the rondure of an overlong tusk. In discussing birds specifically—a section replete with Darwin’s own excesses of description and detail—Darwin observes that ‘[t]he case of the male Argus pheasant is eminently interesting, because it affords us good evidence that the most refined beauty may serve as a charm for the female, and for no other purpose’.⁵ Female birds select mates based on beauty and aesthetic display, a process that fosters increased adornment in males and indicates the selectivity of females.

Put another way, we might say that Darwin, using the language of selection and display, implicitly imagines a form of sexual difference in and through his account of sexual selection. Here, I am using the term ‘sexual difference’ to signal a way of thinking about sex that understands it as *the* formative difference in the world, one that is binary and intractable. My use of this term is meant to signal an approach to sex that is neither liberal (based on ‘equality’ as guaranteed by fully-conscious, rights-bearing citizens) nor post-modern (emphasising the thoroughgoing transitivity or fluidity of sex), but rather based on a foundational and constitutive difference between male and female, a difference that has been especially significant for materialist and psychoanalytic feminists.⁶ Thus, for Darwin, selection and display—or choice and aesthetics—characterise not only the relation between the sexes, but more importantly mark their formative (sexual) differences. As Elizabeth Grosz argues in her study of Darwin, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (2011), by splitting sexual difference into positions of display and selection, ‘Darwin provides perhaps the most systemic and elaborate explanation for the genesis and near ubiquity of sexual difference[...].’⁷ Grosz’s point is that aesthetic discernment and the artistic dimension of life emerge from the relationship between the sexes, from how the irreducible differences between them—here characterised by selection and display—constitute the origins of novelty and creative production. It is only because of the founding difference between the sexes—where males display and females select—that aesthetics emerges.

While Grosz’s analysis of Darwin argues for the way his observations suggest the ontological emergence of aesthetics from the existence of sexual difference, I instead want to hone in on how Darwin’s narrative posits a specifically female gaze as the lynchpin of his account of sexual difference. As might already be clear from the very language Darwin deploys, the realm of the visual is the primary site he attends to in hypothesising the workings of sexual selection, and thus of sexual difference. For him, males display and, importantly, females observe, watch, and select, discerning the beautiful and alluring from the common and uninspiring. The female animals in Darwin’s annals are all presumed voyeurs, looking on at the ornamental displays of their male suitors. To return to Darwin’s beloved birds, readers can see the way in which the visual undergirds the operations of sexual selection.

The case of the male Argus pheasant is eminently interesting, because it affords good evidence that the most refined beauty may serve as a charm for the female, and for no other purpose. We must conclude that this is the case, as the primary wing feathers are never displayed, and the ball-and-socket ornaments are not exhibited in full perfection, except when the male assumes the attitude of courtship. The Argus pheasant does not possess brilliant colours so that his success in courtship appears to depend on the great size of his plumes and on the elaboration of the most elegant patterns. Many may declare that it is utterly incredible that a female bird should be able to appreciate fine shading and exquisite patterns.⁸

The language of display, exhibition, and ornamentation that suffuse all of Darwin’s descriptions of sexual selection places his account of the differences between the sexes squarely

in the terrain of the visual. As he notes a few pages later, ‘birds possess acute powers of observation’ that females in particular use in their assessment and selection of a mate.⁹ Through a specifically visual dynamic, female Argus pheasants ‘appreciate [the] fine shading and exquisite patterns’ that adorn their display-oriented male suitors, are ‘charm[ed],’ and make selections based upon the appeal of the visual.

The visual relay of the gaze in this scene is then doubled by Darwin’s own ‘scientific gaze’ as he observes the birds’ behaviour from the side-lines. Like many natural scientists, Darwin’s primary methodology is patently a visual form of observation, through which he gathers the empirical evidence for his larger theoretical claims.¹⁰ In an inversion of the scenario that Darwin imaginatively attributes to female animals’ observation of the males, Darwin (the male scientist) here ‘passively’ and ‘objectively’ watches the courtship behaviour of the female Argus Pheasant, who is then in turn narrated as more actively watching and judging the visual displays of other male Argus pheasants. Darwin’s own unacknowledged positioning in this scene as yet another viewer produces a dense triangulation of visual observation between Darwin and the birds of each sex, one that interestingly places Darwin in a kind of visual identification with the position of the female bird (via their shared role as observers). Darwin’s narrative voice is both inside and outside of this scene of observation—in the same way that we might say that all scientists are actually interior to the observation from which they understand themselves to be more ‘objectively’ removed—as he interestingly identifies with the gaze of the female pheasant, projecting into her the evaluation of aesthetics that he himself clearly appreciates in the plumage of the male pheasants. Here, the scientific gaze works on two levels—one having to do with a scientific method, and the other having to do with the scientific object—that, when taken together suggest the interweaving of eroticism with knowledge production. Darwin’s narrative identification suggests the eroticisation of the gaze of the masculine scientist and the anthropomorphised scientification of the female animal’s stare of aesthetic evaluation. This narrative layering is interesting when considered in connection with the fact that, in Darwin’s story, the female animal’s discriminating look is the vehicle of her agency, her ‘selectiveness’. The female gaze, routed as it is through Darwin’s narrative of ‘female choice,’ is part of the origin story that Darwin constructs about the implications of sexual difference. In other words, his latent theorisation of female agency is inextricable from his own scientific desire for representational agency over the life worlds his eye beholds.

Recent works on Darwin (such as *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture* (2009), an edited collection by Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer) have begun to emphasise the visual dimension of Darwin’s work. Essays within this collection come from across a range of fields and all address vision or the visual in Darwin. Some contributions, like Janet Browne in her contribution to the collection ‘Darwin in Caricature: A Study in the Popularization and Dissemination of Evolutionary Theory,’ analyse the forms of illustration and visual representation that accompanied and facilitated the dissemination of Darwin’s thought. Others, like Phillip Prodger’s ‘Ugly Disagreements: Darwin and Ruskin Discuss Sex and Beauty,’ recount intellectual debates, tracing how ‘the arguments of Ruskin and his allies concerning beauty were inherently visual, and Darwin’s use of illustration was informed by these arguments’.¹¹ In perhaps the most interesting contribution, James Krasner’s “‘One of a long row only’: Sexual Selection and the Male Gaze in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*’ uses Darwin’s theories to understand literature’s own visual practices. In his chapter, Krasner analyses the illustrations published with the graphic edition of Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* in order to draw out how Darwin’s theory of sexual selection was informing Hardy’s organisation of the gaze vis-à-vis sexual difference in his novel.

Krasner’s more recent contribution developed out of his longstanding interest in Darwin, vision and narrative, which he expanded on in *The Entangled Eye: Visual Perception*

and the Representation of Nature in Post-Darwinian Narrative (1992). There, Krasner looks at the scientific approaches of post-Darwinian naturalists and novelists, arguing that Darwin's 'entangled' accounts of nature affected the narrative representation of the natural world by drawing constant attention to the limits of the human eye. As Krasner writes, '[n]arrative portrayals of nature become narrative portrayals of the perception of nature in which the limitations of visual perception determine the structure of the representation'.¹² Having absorbed the effects of Darwin's style of scientific observation which emphasised the limitations of the human eye as the perceptual and interpretative organ of scientific knowledge production, post-Darwinian narratives constructed the contours of their (natural) worlds differently, foregrounding limitation and illusion far more than their predecessors. As Krasner proposes, Darwin's entanglement with the visual had as much to do with narrative representation as it did with visual culture more explicitly.

Krasner's attention to the importance of narrative to scientific writing is key since, as Darwin's anthropomorphised language of female 'choice' already suggests, the conventions of literary narrative condition and structure much of Darwin's scientific theorising. To provide some historical context for Darwin's interest in this 'choice' as it has to do with sexual difference, at the end of the nineteenth century the political status of women in Britain was changing quickly and narratives of all kinds—novelistic, scientific, economic, anthropological and so on—began to construct possible alternative lives. Mid-late Victorian writers used language as a vehicle for imagining different political futures, employing the vocabulary of 'choice,' 'equality,' 'freedom'—terms that we would now say are overtly characteristic of liberal modernity—to signal the state's nascent recognition of women's status as equal subjects under the law. Beginning in the 1860s, the early tremors of first wave feminism catalysed not only a considerable interest in women's personal and legal equality with men, but also prompted an array of literature devoted to the exploration of women's consciousness through their struggle for these ideals of 'equality' and 'freedom'. Male authors as well as female authors participated in this surge, crafting some of the most famous female subjectivities, which were often articulated through a desire for sexual equality (we might consider, for instance, Henry James's Isabel Archer from *Portrait of a Lady*). Narratives, especially scientific and literary narratives that featured the operations of vision, were particularly important to this re-configuration of women's status, a fact already demonstrated by James's titular suggestion that Archer is a "portrait," an object for the gaze.

This point is significantly made by Gillian Beer, in her now-classic study of narrative and Darwin, *Darwin's Plots* (1983), where she persuasively argues for the fact that Darwin's theories of evolution rely on—and are only possible through—a distinctly literary and narrative form of language. Darwin's theories, according to Beer, both were produced by and, in turn, produced the conventions of fiction: 'evolutionary theory had particular implications for narrative and for the composition of fiction'; 'Darwin was seeking to create a story of the world—a fiction'.¹³ Darwin, after all, was famous for taking Milton with him everywhere he went during his voyages on the *Beagle*; the 'descent of man' can hardly be separated from Milton's own lapsarian lyricism about man's much more epic 'descent'.

Although scientific writing and novelistic writing are undeniably two distinct genres with their own norms, rules, and conventions organising knowledge production, importantly both forms of knowledge are made by and through linguistic representation; both are conditioned upon language and thus share certain similarities in form and content. The ideational content and form of each is shaped by the frequently poetical conventions of language, such as metaphor, simile, paragraphing, and active or passive voice. As George Levine writes in his own study on Darwin and literature, '[t]he power of Darwin's story is self-evident, and that it is a 'story,' or a cluster of 'stories,' should be clear as well. Like other great stories—Milton's, for example, or Freud's—it did not emerge from nowhere and its emergence

is clearly related to the special historical conditions of the time'.¹⁴ Working within a historicist methodology, Levine's work traces the miasma of cultural influence—rather than direct influence—that Darwin's work had on major nineteenth century authors like Dickens and Trollope who may not have read Darwin directly but whose stories were clearly steeped in a culture obsessed with science. Speaking to the co-dependency of scientific and literary narratives, Beer then assiduously observes that '[w]hat is remarkable about the mid- and late-nineteenth century is that instead of ignoring or rebutting attempts to set science and literature side by side, as is sometimes the case in our own time, both novelists and scientists were very much aware of the potentialities released by the congruities of their methods and ends'.¹⁵ The epistemic worlds created by Darwin and his literary contemporaries were far more similar in terms of narrative construction and convention than they were different. Darwin's scientific knowledge production can be read as a narrative fiction of sexual difference, which relies on a female gaze for its articulation. These narratives were influenced by, and would have longstanding influences on, both scientific and literary production alike.

Like Beer, many feminist theorists in science studies and new materialism are turning to the importance of scientific writings for thinking about gender and culture. However, unlike her, their emphasis is less on the significance of an always-already literary narrative to the world-making of this scientific thought, an emphasis that, in Darwin's case, imagines agency through a dynamic visual relay not unlike that found in the opening pages of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Despite the revitalised concern with vision and observation in feminist science studies (a topic that crested in popularity during the 1970s-1980s feminist debates about cinema),¹⁶ no scholarship has yet addressed the way Darwin specifically constructs a narrative of an active female gaze as the means through which he imagines agency. This gaze, which mirrors Darwin's scientific gaze and places him squarely in a (homo)erotic identification with a female animal aesthetically evaluating males, might seem at first glance to suggest a progressive sexual politics. However, precisely this cross-sexual identification gives readers cause for pause as the female animal's position is (perhaps inevitably) scripted according to narrative perimeters determined by Darwin's own subjective position. The female animal, in Darwin's arrangement, is narrated according to the idioms of agency characteristic to the male scientist, observing and selecting her (sexual) objects in the same way that Darwin selects his own objects of study. Indeed, it is my suggestion that what this identificatory layering of gazes discloses is the fundamentally incoherent line between nature and culture, wherein narratives about nature (biological or otherwise) are always mediated through the mediating form of language, a fact that makes scientific thought always already a matter of culture. This is an entanglement that Sigmund Freud makes particularly plain in his own scientific narratives that use Darwin's biological origin stories to speculate about the origination of the psychic life of sexual difference.

Knowing Looks: Sigmund Freud and Sexual Difference

In the first chapter of Peter Gay's biographical study of Freud, suggestively titled 'A Greed for Knowledge,' Gay discusses the intellectual climate of Freud's early scientific studies and hones in on Darwin's importance in Freud's *mise-en-scène*:

The self-assurance of Brücke [Freud's early mentor] and his band of like-minded colleagues was buttressed by their reliance on the epoch-making work of Darwin. In the early 1870s, although it had secured many influential supporters, the theory of natural selection still remained controversial; the intoxicating aroma of a sensational and dangerous innovation still clung to it. [...] In the rigorous historical work on the nervous system that Freud did for Brücke, he was participating in the vast collective effort of demonstrating the

traces of evolution. For him, Darwin never ceased to be ‘the great Darwin,’ and biological investigations charmed Freud more than tending patients [...].¹⁷

As Gay lays it out in his chapter on Freud’s own epistemophilia, Freud’s origins as a neurologist and psychologist emerged from ‘the Great Darwin’ whose work Freud had read in medical school and by which he was ‘charmed’ (much in the same way, we might note, that Darwin described his female birds as being ‘charmed’ by their male suitors). Freud’s understanding of his debt to and descent from Darwin followed him throughout the rest of his career, famously leading him, in his 1916-17 *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, to align himself with Copernicus and Darwin as instigating the three great decentrings of man.¹⁸ Although Freud would eventually distance psychoanalysis from its medical origins, he never renounced Darwin’s natural science as the first cause of his own sprawling knowledge projects.

Much like Darwin, then, Freud’s ‘scientific’ work is similarly concerned with the narrative posturing and sequentialisation of ‘origin stories’. His language, like Darwin’s, is littered with the literary. From the Greek myths of Oedipus and Narcissus, to the erotic fiction of de Sade and Sacher-Masoch, and through the medical form of the case study, the ‘invention’ of what would come to be known as ‘psychoanalysis’ was substantially informed by these widely amalgamated literatures. As Shoshana Felman writes in the introduction to her collection *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, literature ‘is the language which psychoanalysis uses in order to speak of itself, in order to name itself. Literature is therefore not simply outside psychoanalysis, since it motivates and inhabits the very names of its concepts, since it is the inherent reference by which psychoanalysis names its findings’.¹⁹ In a fitting paradox, the ‘talking cure’ only finds its own speakability—its own possibility for enunciation—on and through the vocabulary that literature had already constructed.

Freud was often anxious about the similarities between his work and literature, most especially the lurid and licentious sensation fiction that catered to wide public readership at the turn of the century. Uncertain about his own scientific standing in a community that thought only in terms of biological physiology, Freud regularly invoked his texts’ relation to literature only so as to then disavow it. Indeed, Freud’s introduction to his 1905 ‘Dora’ case performs just such a literary comparison: ‘I know that, in this city at least, there are certain doctors who—repellently enough—would choose to read a case-history of this kind not as a contribution to the psychopathology of neurosis, but as a *roman à clef* written for their own amusement’.²⁰ Nervous about his narrative’s genre (and about the professional and social connotations of that genre), Freud dismisses as merely ‘amusing’ the *roman à clef* with which he nevertheless clearly senses an affiliation and chastises those ‘repellent’ doctors who would lasciviously read such a text for its sensationalising scandal rather than for its sober science.

Yet, for many the fictive nature of Freud’s ‘stories’—case histories and meta-psychological papers alike—have long been self-evident. For decades now, psychoanalytic feminists of all stripes have been acutely aware of the way that Freud’s claims to ‘scientific objectivity’ not only facilitated pernicious forms of sexism but in fact perpetuated them. In fact, we can even read his very refusal of literature in favour of science as itself constituting a refusal of the feminine in line with his mystification of femininity as unknowable, ‘a riddle,’ or ‘a dark continent’. Freud’s approach to the haunting but constantly disavowed role of literature throughout his oeuvre mirrors his treatment of femininity, which functions as the ever-present but under-theorised bedrock of his Oedipal schema. Relying on a logic of competition and sexual selection consonant with Darwin, Freud holds that, universally, the triangulated family relation between Mommy-Daddy-Me (a phrase famously coined by Gilles Deleuze) fosters a desire within the (male) child for exclusive possession of the mother and a combative rivalry with the father. The little boy—who is the paradigmatic centrepiece of Freud’s theories of childhood subjectivity until the 1920s—develops hostile feelings toward his father, whom he

murderously yens to supplant in order to position himself as his mother's sole love interest. However, if infantile development progresses smoothly, this childhood insurrection is ultimately foiled by the father's threat of castration and the little boy is forced to recognise that his father's superior strength might deprive him of his penis, the source of his 'narcissistic pride'. The pertinence of this fear is then only further confirmed by the little boy's own experience of sexual difference (via visual encounters with female playmates, siblings, or his mother) which, to his mind, provides empirical—that is to say, visual—proof of his father's power to castrate. The little boy visually registers that he 'has,' that he 'possesses,' the desirable organ and is riddled by fears that he might, if he transgresses the paternal law against incest, one day lose it. Sexual difference, in this strictly Freudian sense, is determined by genital anatomy, which is imagined to unambiguously correspond with a binary sex system organised around the 'presence' or 'absence' of the penis. In this narrative of female embodiment, female sexual difference is therefore only formulated in relation to the universal male: its existence only serves to bolster the little boy's own 'narcissistic' fears of masculine injury and never exists as a positive presence in and of itself. As feminists like Luce Irigaray have argued, femininity and female sexuality in this psychoanalytic rubric are consonant with lack, with absence.

One of the points that I want to draw attention to in the narrative of the Oedipus complex is the extent to which the instantiation and legibility of sexual difference in this rubric is inextricable from a visual dynamic. Visual scrutiny condenses around the physical body in the same way that it does around a hieroglyph: the body, particularly in its genital configuration, becomes a meaningful and privileged site of interpretation. Readers can see an early example of the reliance on vision to articulate sexual difference in a fantastical fictive allegory that Freud offers by way of introduction to his short article 'On the Sexual Theories of Children' (1908):

If we could escape from our physical existences and, as merely thinking beings—from another planet, for example—see the things of earth with a fresh eye, perhaps nothing would strike us as much as the existence of two sexes among human beings who, otherwise so similar to one another, nevertheless stress the outward signs of their difference.²¹

This pseudo-sci-fi story, which prefaces Freud's early discussion of the link between childhood sexuality and curiosity, imagines an otherworldly scenario complete with aliens, space-travel, and multi-planetary life.²² But it also showcases Freud's thoroughly visual conceptualisation of sexual difference: 'see[ing] the things of earth with a fresh eye,' what would 'strike' Freud's intergalactic travellers most of all would be 'the existence of two sexes' who strangely play up 'the outward signs of their difference'. These differences are registered and recorded visually, with a 'fresh eye,' and importantly require the alienating effects of distance—here metaphorised through the conventions of science fiction—in order to be rendered legible. Indeed, what the scene emphasises most, what it most theatricalises and embellishes, is the necessity of distance for the visual encounter with sexual difference. This passage pronounces how much the configuration of sexual difference in the psychoanalytic rubric is routed through an explicitly visual exchange, one that requires the space between two objects through which the look can circulate. As with Freud's narration of the Oedipus complex, sexual difference is only fully realisable in the gap between two subjects (or between subject and object) that the gaze mediates.

As I have mentioned, most of Freud's accounts of the Oedipus complex find him narrating from the position of the little boy who is figured as the default subject of the scrutinising gaze while the little girl is its object; it is he who sees her in her nakedness and lack and registers her imagined 'castration'. However, in his later papers on femininity, amidst his

unflinching attention to the little boy, Freud elaborates a few interesting passages about the little girl and her experience of sexual differentiation. Under pressure from the growing psychoanalytic community, whose membership was increasingly comprised of women with a keen interest in female psychosexual development, Freud dedicated much of his writing in the mid-1920s to more carefully thinking about the psychic origins of sexual difference and femininity. Not only is the visual dimension of the establishment of sexual difference through the Oedipus complex made explicit in these passages, but (because of the increased attention to femininity) the little girl surprisingly becomes, for the first time in Freud, the agent of these sexual looks. As Freud writes:

There is an interesting contrast in the behaviour of the two sexes. When a little boy first catches sight of a girl's genital region, he begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest; he sees nothing or disowns what he has seen [...] A little girl behaves differently. She makes her judgment and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it.²³

Formulating this scene as one of 'contrast,' Freud (unsurprisingly) begins with the position of the little boy who 'catches sight'; this passage aligns with most typical psychoanalytic formulations that place the male voyeur on the side of anxiety, repression, fetishism, and disavowal. As Mary Ann Doane notes in her own reading of this passage in her essay 'Film and the Masquerade,' '[t]he boy, unlike the girl in Freud's description, is capable of re-vision of earlier events, a retrospective understanding which invests the events with a significance which is in no way linked to an immediacy of sight'.²⁴ Through a process that Freud terms 'disavowal,' the boy refuses what is before his eyes until, later, the threat of castration forces him to re-play and interpret these scenes, coming to knowledge only through a delayed return.

But Freud makes an interesting transition as he moves from his identification with the boy to the girl who, for a brief moment, becomes the subject of her own discriminating look: she 'has seen it' and 'makes her judgment and her decision in a flash'. Whereas the experience of sexual difference for the boy results in the disavowal of knowledge, for the girl, on the other hand, the sudden revelatory vision induces an inexplicable kind of clairvoyance, an almost magical attachment to conscious knowledge and epistemological work: 'she knows that she is without it and wants to have it'.²⁵ A primarily visual exchange hence produces knowledge, specifically the knowledge of sexual difference and the girl's own 'lack'. 'The knowledge involved here is a knowledge of sexual difference as it is organized in relation to the structure of the look, turning on the visibility of the penis'.²⁶ In Freud's rendition of this formative experience, the visual encounter with sexual difference is inextricable from the valences of knowledge: if the boy is the agent of the look, the result is epistemological uncertainty whereas if the girl is the agent, then the result is an almost magical certainty (of absence). Freud's narrative articulation of sexual difference through the gaze also theorises the existence of alternate female epistemologies.

In addition to these descriptions, readers can see the importance of the visual dynamic and the female look in an earlier passage that specifically focuses on the little girl's apprehension of anatomical sexual difference: 'They [girls] notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions [and] at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ [...]'.²⁷ In this now infamously sexist account of penis-envy as it results from the girl's experience of the Oedipus complex, Freud draws attention to the 'striking visib[ility]' of the male genital organ in comparison to the female genitals. And importantly in this paper, unlike many of Freud's other analyses, the figure doing the comparing—the scopophilic looking—is a little girl. It is through the gaze that sexual

difference and, consequently, knowledge are produced within Freud's narrative. Freud theorises the little girl's look as an interestingly productive one that galvanises her relationship to curiosity, catalyses her epistemophilic urge. The little girl is introduced into culture and comes to have a relationship to it—comes to be a purveyor of it—through the epistemophilia engendered by her discriminating gaze. She comes to know through the act of *looking*, by *seeing* that she is without.

Re-View

Much like his predecessor Darwin, then, Freud too posits a scenario in which the female's gaze is imagined as a significant form of exchange between the sexes. Darwin and Freud together generate scientific narratives that implicitly position the female gaze as the point of departure for the establishment of sexual difference. The female's look mediates the relationship between the sexes and, by and through this mediation, actually marks the origination of that difference as such. For Darwin, the female gaze is an evaluative one that accords female animals ostensible choice and agency whereas, for Freud, the female gaze has an intimate relation to knowledge and only ever registers her inevitable 'lack' and social inferiority. Unlike Darwin's work, which narrates a pleasing affective response in the female observer, Freud's vision is a deeply traumatic one that engenders the urge toward knowledge as a compensatory project. Both however not only understand vision and the visual as the primary field through which to determine sexual difference, but unexpectedly posit a version of the female gaze that marks this division. Basically, each scientific author produces two different genealogies of the gaze, genealogies that both constellate around the female as the imagined centrepiece of visual scrutiny, and thus of sexual difference.

My point in foregrounding these scenes in Darwin and Freud is not to claim that they provide unrecognised sites or strategies of agency within the oeuvres of either writer, as though we might claim them as redemptive moments symptomatic of either individual or social progressiveness. Both Freud and Darwin sit in an uneasy relationship with the sexual politics of their time and have been used, since then, for both leftist and conservative ends in the history of women's liberal political struggles. The fact that they both, within their scientific narrative, place the female in the position of observation—a position traditionally associated with social power, authority, and agency—does not immediately mean that their narratives are politically desirable. My hope, rather, has been to suggest a larger point about how the fictional world-making of scientific knowledge production is a fraught and often incoherent one, and that at a time of growing concern with the social and political status of women, the gaze marks the difficulty for scientific narratives of grappling with sexual difference. These two writers form an intellectual genealogy when it comes to the history of natural biology and psychology, but their writings also form another kind of genealogy through their early acknowledgement of—and struggles with—the relationship between narrative, the gaze, and sexual difference. Through different forms of scientific narrative, both reveal how sexual difference is constituted by and through the eye of the beholder.

Notes

¹ Adam Phillips, *Darwin's Worms: Life Stories and Death Stories* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p.6.

² Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, vols I-II (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), vol. I, p.273.

³ One of the abiding difficulties of Darwin's work on sexual selection is the persistent heterosexism that subtends its mode of inquiry. In focusing so exclusively on species propagation and evolution, Darwin reinvests in the importance of attending to the reproductive dimensions of sexual relations (which only result from male-female couplings). Although, as Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, his account of sexual selection can be read as distancing sexual appeal from the ostensible prerogatives of reproduction—that is, in Darwin's account the 'need to reproduce' is never posited as a motivating factor in mate-selection—his analysis still fundamentally presumes the 'naturalness' of an exclusively hetero-sexuality.

⁴ The emphasis on sexual selection, or 'choice,' which Darwin proposes in *The Descent of Man* stands in contrast to the version of selection offered in *On the Origin of the Species*. There, Darwin emphasises 'natural selection' rather than sexual selection, and consequently removes any kind of agency from the individual. This emphasis permitted many coeval interlocutors to read Darwin in terms of a theory of natural theology, which was very popular at the time because it allowed for the new discoveries of natural scientists to sit comfortably with a Christian theology that placed God as the ultimate and governing force in creation. With natural selection, which accounted for species change but did not focus on the agent of that change, Darwin's work could still be interpolated into a theological system. However, with his turn to sexual selection, the 'choice' accorded to female animals became the motor of evolutionary change and individual animals replaced a divine force.

⁵ Darwin, vol. II, p.93.

⁶ The purpose of this article is not to provide a comprehensive definition of the term, nor does it aim to theorise this concept particularly. For a more specific theorisation of 'sexual difference', which has been important for feminist and psychoanalytic theory (and which differs from my own more colloquial use), see Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁷ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 155.

⁸ Darwin, vol. II, p.93.

⁹ Darwin, vol. II, p.109.

¹⁰ Although *The Descent of Man* is full of various drawings and illustrations, readers of Darwin's oeuvre get an especially salient instance of his reliance on the visual in his last text, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, which published an array of evocative portraits as evidence. This text was one of the first published books to incorporate the new technology of photography into its pages as evidence and the text was popularised in large part because of the sensationalism that the images produced in the reading public.

¹¹ Phillip Prodger, 'Ugly Disagreements: Darwin and Ruskin Discuss Sex and Beauty' in *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, ed. by Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), pp.40-58 (p.41).

¹² James Krasner, *The Entangled Eye: Visual Perception and the Representation of Nature in Post-Darwinian Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.6.

¹³ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1983), p.7; 99.

¹⁴ George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.2.

¹⁵ Beer, p.91.

¹⁶ We might think for instance of the feminist film theory of the 1970s, which analysed the gaze and the sexist representation of women's bodies in cinema by deploying psychoanalytic theories about the operations of vision, identification, and subjectivity formation. Film theorist Laura Mulvey is perhaps most famously associated with this body of work since the publication of her 1975 article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' which acerbically critiques the fetishisation of women's bodies in film as an effect of a patriarchal disavowal of sexual difference. Following Mulvey, Theresa De Lauretis in her 1984 text *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, and Cinema* uses Mulvey's landmark analysis to launch her own diagnosis of the state of sexual difference in filmic representation, particularly in and around language and narrative. Taking yet another feminist psychoanalytic perspective on film, Mary Ann Doane's *Femme Fatales* offers a collection of essays from 1981-1990 that together approach the link between knowledge and sexuality as it manifests in cinematic representations of sexual difference in the figure of the 'femme fatale.'

¹⁷ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp.35-36.

¹⁸ In his 1916-17 *Introduction Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, Freud writes, '[i]n the course of centuries the naïve self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the center of the universe but only a tiny fragment of a cosmic system of scarcely imaginable vastness. This is associated with the name of Copernicus, though something similar had already been asserted by Alexandrian science. The second blow fell when biological research destroyed men's supposedly privileged place in creation and proved his descent from the animal kingdom and his ineradicable animal nature. This revaluation has been accomplished in our own days by Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors, though not without the most violent contemporary opposition. But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow

from the psychological research of the present which seeks to prove that the ego is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind' (p.353). In this epic series of analogies, 'the hands of science' have issued three blows to the self-love of men throughout the course of human history: the first blow came with Copernicus's decentering of the planetary centrality of the earth; the next came with Darwin's decentering of man within species-life; and the third and final was produced by Freud himself who 'prove[d] that the ego is not even master in his own house' and must bend to the operations of the unconscious. Although Copernicus is a bit outside the scope of this article, Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud are its rather ironical centres.

¹⁹ Shoshana Felman, 'To Open the Question' in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. by Shoshana Felman (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp.5-10 (p.9).

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p.3.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, 'On the Sexual Theories of Children' in *The Psychology of Love* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), pp.221-238 (p.225).

²² A footnote in one of Freud's later papers (1925) on femininity issues a corrective to 'On the Sexual Theories of Children' and asserts that sexual difference, not reproduction, is the actual origin of the epistemological urge. 'I believed that the sexual research of children, unlike that of pubescents, was aroused, not by the differences between the sexes, but by the problem of where babies come from. We now see that, at all events with girls, this is certainly not the case [...]' ('Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', p.177, fn 3). Affirming the importance of the enigma of sexual difference as the origin of both childhood sexual researches and all later knowledge projects that will take these early investigations as their model, Freud eschews his earlier interest in the obscurity of reproduction. In this revision, it is the experience of sexual difference particularly that precipitates knowledge, curiosity, and the urge toward epistemology.

²³ Sigmund Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1997), pp.173-183 (p.177).

²⁴ Mary Ann Doane. *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p.23.

²⁵ The particular form that Freud will claim this 'desire' takes is, infamously, (penis) envy. Combined with epistemophilia, envy will be one of the main characteristics of the psychic topography of women while fear and anxiety (*à la* castration anxiety) distinguish the boy.

²⁶ Doane, *Femme Fatales*, p.23.

²⁷ Freud, 'Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes', p.177.

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Biography

Carolyn Laubender is completing a PhD at Duke University in the Program in Literature, where she is also completing certificates in Feminist Studies and College Teaching. Her research and teaching interests include psychoanalytic theory and history, gender and sexuality studies, modern British history, and science studies. Her writing is published or forthcoming in *Feminist Theory* and the *Journal of International Women's Studies*.

