

Peter W. Graham, *Jane Austen & Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* (Ashgate, 2008)

The Charles Darwin bicentenary has seen a giddy proliferation of monographs on all things Darwin. Of these, Peter W. Graham's *Jane Austen & Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* is one of the more unorthodox, not so much for the conjoining of naturalists and novelists (studies of natural history and the novel have been keeping company at least since Gillian Beer's *Darwin's Plots* [1983]), as because Charles Darwin was all of eight years old when Jane Austen died. It is impossible to make a case for his influence on her, and although 'Lady Cath. de Bourgh' figures briefly in a letter from Emma Darwin to her cousin-husband, difficult to make a case for Austen's influence on him.

Graham is relievingly alive to the fact that his title creates 'a relationship that did not actually exist' (xi). He argues for the marriage of Regency novelist and Victorian naturalist on the grounds that Austen's observational methods, her capacity to grind generalities from minutely detailed data, are the methods of Darwin; moreover, that Darwin relies on a novelist's strategies ('selective and artful manipulation of detail, pace, chronology, diction, and narrative voice' [xii]) in 'narrating' his observations.

Historicist hackles will not be entirely smoothed by Graham's case for reading either Darwin through a literary lens or Austen as a beneficiary of Enlightenment ways of knowing: why not examine Austen against natural historians she could actually have encountered, or Darwin alongside the literature we know he read? But while the pairing seems, at the very least, mischievous, it offers some felicitous results. The most interesting are those that involve using Darwin's theories of natural and sexual selection as tools for the analysis of competition, inheritance, and variation in Austen's fictional communities.

While Darwin becomes, like Freud or Deleuze or Kristeva, a set of ideas via which any of the right sort of data can be interpreted, he is obviously more to Graham than a theory – this book alert to the conceptual inconsistencies in Darwin's oeuvre (Lamarckian formulations in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, for instance) – and fascinated by the tensions between the work and life of both its subjects. The first of the book's four interlinked essays does not invoke Darwinism at length, but Darwin's ways of observing, and their analogue in Austen's famous account of her preferred subject matter, '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village'. Austen's professed preference (should we take this unregenerate ironist at her word?) for the microenvironment, 'the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory', coincides with Darwin's habitual attention to the miniature, his eight years labour on barnacles, his final published work on the formation of vegetable mould through the action of worms. In his autobiography of 1876, Darwin defines science as 'grouping facts so that general laws or conclusions may be drawn from them' (13). Austen's minute attentions to English society do likewise:

Like Darwin's lifelong series of projects, in one way or another all of Austen's novels concern themselves with the problem of understanding larger things

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through observing smaller ones with correcting perspectives or revising hypotheses in light of carefully observed and fairly judged evidence. (29)

Not only does Austen share Darwin's method, Graham argues that Austen's use of free indirect discourse, or her habit of focalising on a scene through a particular character, foregrounds the ways characters observe. Austen is not only an observer, but also a keen student of observation – a theorist as well as an empiricist.

Graham's account of the parallels between Darwin's 'ideas on adaptive variation (how species diverge to fill unoccupied niches in a particular environment)' and the family (47) has a strongly anthropological flavour. Frank Sulloway's *Born to Rebel: Birth Order, Family Dynamics, and Creative Lives* (1996) subjects sibling relations to the apparatus of evolutionary psychology, configuring siblings' struggle for parental attention as a struggle for their own reproductive future. Graham pits this view against the institutions of primogeniture and entailment, offering up Austen's novels as case studies in sexual selection and its impediments. Bad parents (Austen world is full of them, a phenomenon Graham attributes to Jane Austen's own status as the less loved of her mother's daughters) cause alterations in 'normal patterns of sibling divergence' with 'children being less likely to adopt their parents' values, firstborns being more likely to invest emotionally in their younger siblings at the expense of their parents' (68).

This quasi-Darwinian account of Austen's depiction of sibling relations leads, predictably, to a Darwinian account of Austen's marriages, except that first Graham offers us an Austenian account of *Darwin's* marriage. Darwin's notebooks include a characteristically jaunty pro-and-con consideration of the marriage question: should he or shouldn't he. His answer, by the way, is 'Marry-Mary-Marry'. The argumentative, logical tenor of the note invites comparisons with Mr Collins's proposal to Elizabeth Bennet, a proposal – who could forget? – accompanied by a series of reasoned, if prolix, arguments, and a presumption that they will be accepted. Such comparisons are not favourable to Darwin, except that Graham draws out carefully the respective ironies in Darwin's and Mr Collins's recitations of marital agenda. Having said this much for Darwin's marriage, Graham assigns himself the difficult task of adding to what has been said on Austen's marriages. Darwinism allows him to skirt the well-rehearsed tensions between Romantic love and economic necessity by reframing those tensions in terms of sexual selection.

These tests of Darwinian theory upon Austen's fictional populations produce fascinating results, some of which Austen cannot have anticipated: Lady Catherine de Bourgh's terror that Darcy's outbreeding will 'pollute' the shades of Pemberley, for instance, acquires an extra irony in light of later research into the genetic perils of consanguineous unions. In his final chapter, Graham places Darwinism as a serious interpretive apparatus aside, bringing Austen and Darwin together in far more fanciful ways. 'Variations on Variation' offers an engaging summary of Darwin's work plotting the variation of animals and plants, pigeons and orchids, under domestication. An unaccountable segue deposits us before the subject of the blush in Austen's works. Variation in the facial colour of an individual organism (such diverse organisms as Catherine Morland, Harriet Smith, Frank Churchill, Emma Woodhouse, George Knightly, Elinor Dashwood, Henry Tilney, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Maria Bertram – blushers all) has very little to do with variation in the colouration of different

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organisms within the one species. While Graham's catalogue of blushes in Austen's texts, and his analysis of what they signify (about proper sensibility, shame, feeling), is a welcome addition to our reading of Austen, Graham is deliberately misapplying Darwin's terminology, and unfortunately the pleasure of reading the localised discussion is dissipated by the absence of an overarching argument.

But this work is, as Graham forewarns us, an idiosyncratic thought experiment, premised on a brazen anachronism. The undisciplined uses of Darwin's vocabulary are a minor sin by comparison, and one resulting in spectacular bursts of close reading, and some new and compelling interpretations.

Alexis Harley