

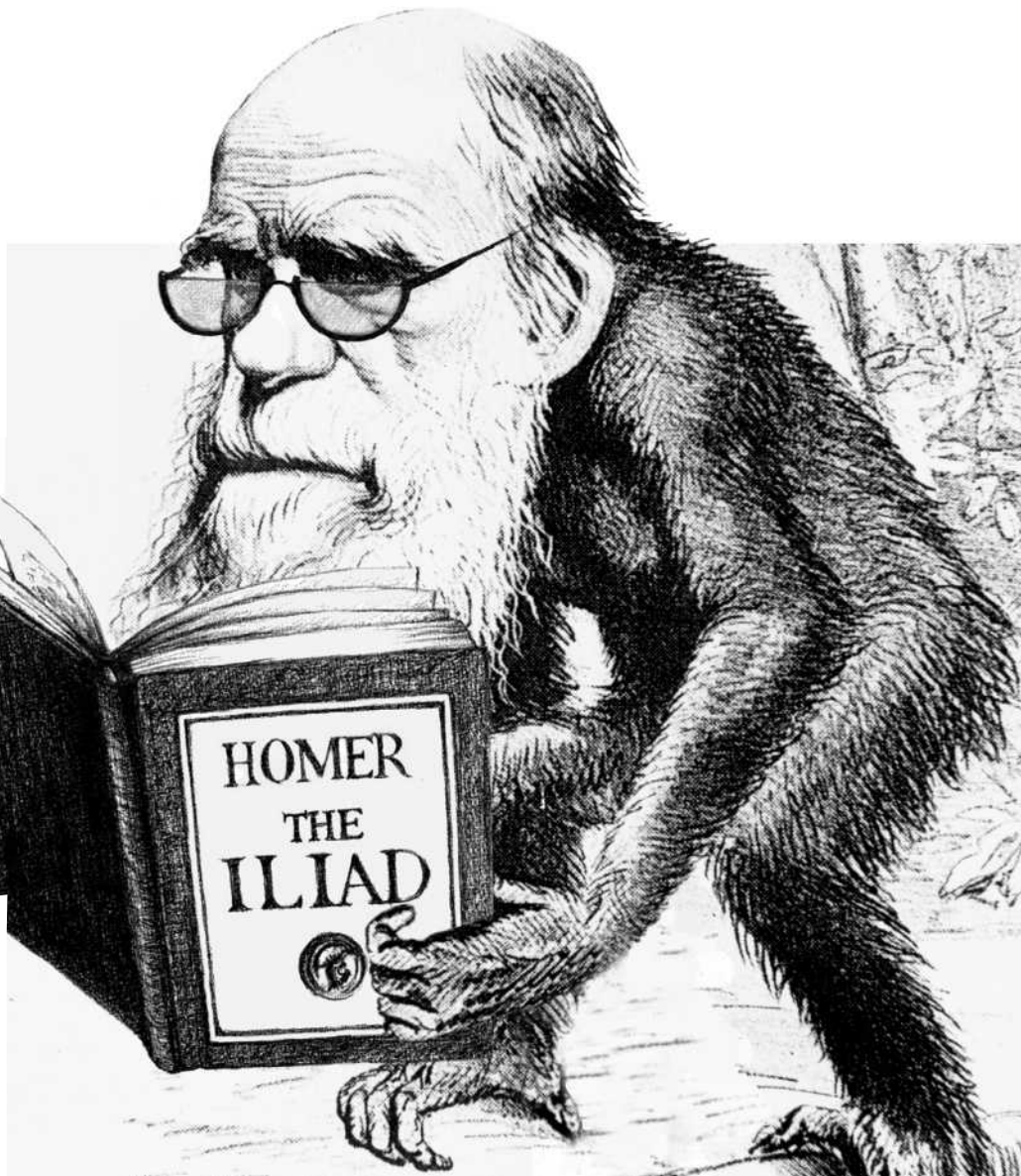
# TEXTUAL SELECTION

Can reading the classics through Charles Darwin's spectacles reawaken literary study? **John Whitfield** reports.

**W**hen, at the beginning of *The Iliad* — and Western literature — King Agamemnon steals Achilles' slave-girl, Briseis, the king tells the world's greatest warrior that he is doing so "to let you know that I am more powerful than you, and to teach others not to bandy words with me and openly defy their king"<sup>1</sup>. But literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall believes that the true focus of Homer's epic is not royal authority, but royal genes.

Gottschall is one of a group of researchers, calling themselves literary darwinists, devoted to studying literature using the concepts of evolutionary biology and the empirical, quantitative methods of the sciences. "Women in Homer are not a proxy for status and honour," says Gottschall. "At bottom, the men in the stories are motivated by reproductive concerns. Every homeric raid involves killing the men and abducting the women." The violent world of the epics, he says, reflects a society where men fought for scarce mates and chieftains had access to as many women as slaves and concubines<sup>2</sup>. And he thinks that everything written since Homer is open to similar analysis.

Literary darwinism is a mode of analysis; it's also a bit of a crusade, an attempt to shake up literary criticism. "Literary theory requires a theory of human nature, because literature is shaped by human motives and cognitive biases," says Joseph Carroll of the University of Missouri, St Louis. The problem, say the literary darwinists, is that for the past few decades the humanities have, in the case of critics deconstructing texts, denied the need for a theory of human nature, asserting that the study of texts can be concerned with nothing outside those texts. Or else they have been stuck on theories of human nature that are rooted in the subjective and the social.



Those influenced by freudianism, for example, might read a novel looking for hints of a child's sexual desire for its parent. A marxist would seek out economic and class conflicts. Carroll has no truck with this: "The theories up to this point have all had a little bit of the truth, but have also all been fundamentally flawed," he says. "None comes to terms with the fundamental facts of human evolution."

Literary darwinists believe that literature reflects a universal human nature shaped by natural selection, and as a result, read texts in terms of animal concerns such as mate choice, relations between kin, and social hierarchies. Such a scientific approach can meet with hostility. "At one meeting of the Modern Languages Association, someone stood up and called me a proto-fascist," says Nancy Easterlin, an expert in Romantic literature at the University of New Orleans, Louisiana, who uses ideas from cognitive science in her analysis of the mother-child bond in William Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

The tide may be turning, however. "The ideological resistance is crumbling pretty fast," says

the British author Ian McEwan, who has used scientific ideas in several of his novels. "Now things are spoken of that would have routinely got you called a Nazi a few years ago." The English department at Texas A&M University, in College Station, has recently approved a seminar on literary darwinism — the first university course on the subject, says Brett Cooke, the course leader and an expert in Russian literature.

## Man to beast

So what does it mean to read literature through a darwinian lens? At one level, it can seem remarkably obvious. In their recent book *Madame Bovary's Ovaries*<sup>3</sup>, evolutionary psychologists David and Nanelle Barash argue that a darwinian understanding of female mate choice shows why the eponymous adulteress takes lovers who are more attractive and accomplished than her mediocre husband. This may sound crass, but Carroll argues that the approach is capable of subtlety. A darwinian analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, he says, goes beyond the simple idea that

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women look for fortune in men, to show how such animal concerns are filtered through the vast flexibility of human behaviour, cultural conditions and individual variation.

"I don't look at *Pride and Prejudice* and try to sort out what is biological and what is cultural," says Carroll. "I look at it and examine the way underlying biological dispositions are organized in a specific cultural ecology. Nobody in the novel escapes the problems of mate selection, status and forming alliances. But the characters also integrate these concerns with human qualities, such as intelligence, character, morals and cultivation." The noble, romantic characters, such as Elizabeth Bennett and Darcy, integrate successfully, hiding their reproductive issues beneath their social graces. The more comic characters, such as Elizabeth Bennett's mother, do not (although in marrying off her daughters, she is quite the evolutionary success).

Romantic comedies play upon the audience's pleasure at seeing reproductive strategies rewarded; tragedies appeal by invoking recoil from maladaptive acts. "Stories that focus on non-normative behaviour, such as when Medea kills her children, take their punch from the audience's understanding that this is not how humans behave," says Gottschall.

Not everyone in the movement is equally keen on reductions to a purportedly universal human nature. "I've always had a love-hate relationship with evolutionary psychology. It's very interesting as far as it goes, but it marginalizes culture and other open-ended processes," comments David Sloan Wilson, a biologist at Binghamton University, New York. Wilson is also the editor, with Gottschall, of *The Literary Animal*<sup>4</sup>, a recent collection of essays on literary darwinism. But, Wilson adds, literature is an immense source of data on human behaviour: "It's the natural history of our species."

Anything that wakes literary study up to the idea of a shared human nature, reflected throughout literature, is to be welcomed, says McEwan, one of whose lectures is reprinted in *The Literary Animal*. "To think in evolutionary terms about human nature has helped me as a novelist, and to some extent as a reader," he says. An evolutionary emphasis might also help the study of literature to reverse its journey into obscurantism and irrelevance. "It's a tragedy, the way that literary criticism has lost its place," he says. "I don't read much literary theory, especially of the kind that has dominated the academy for the past few decades: there's been a great flatus of nonsense and pseudoscience."

But even if literary theory is starting to get over its objection to evolution, it may be more



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Achilles (Brad Pitt) ponders the mother-child bond before heading off for some mate selection in *Troy*.

resistant to the other main item on the darwinist's agenda — quantitative research methods. "Among literary folk, the fear of quantification is greater than the fear of evolution," says Wilson. Gottschall agrees: "All literary scholars think they're mathematically disabled."

### A common tale

Gottschall has analysed a database of folk tales from around the world to test the idea that a focus on beautiful princesses in need of rescuing and dashing hero is not just a product of patriarchal attitudes in European societies, as some feminist critics have claimed. He found that all around the world, the majority of folk tales feature brave heroes marrying beautiful heroines, with the two living happily ever after<sup>5</sup>.

Gottschall and Carroll, collaborating with psychologists, are also currently analysing the data from an online questionnaire that gathers people's responses to characters in nineteenth-century fiction; they aim to see how these compare to the personality categories and goals defined in evolutionary psychology<sup>6</sup>.

By borrowing the scientific method, says Gottschall, literary scholars can work out what a story is 'really' about, not in some ultimate, metaphysical sense, but in the sense of whether a wide range of people interpret a work in the same way. Such an approach, he says, is needed if literary scholarship is to create testable, durable knowledge — and to prevent arguments being settled solely by who deploys the sharpest rhetoric and the best memory.

**"Literary critics are looking for patterns of meaning, rather than trying to produce an overarching theory of life." — David Amigoni**

David Amigoni, a specialist in Victorian prose at Keele University, UK, agrees that there can be value in darwinian interpretations, as well as in reading Darwin. But he insists that attitudes and readings are mutable. "Proving claims of truth is not necessarily what literary critics are looking to do. They're looking for patterns of meaning, rather than trying to produce an overarching theory of life." He doubts that graphs and statistics can say much about literature: "The emphasis on hard data will probably be a bit strange to a lot of literary critics. I have a concern that something that ends up in numbers hasn't really taken account of literary value."

Gottschall, though, wants to move beyond literary value — or for that matter, traditional literary criticism. Literary scholars may adopt their theories from other branches of knowledge, but they also push them outwards, using their theoretical frameworks to analyse philosophy, science, history and gender politics, for example. Ultimately, the theories of human nature that become widely held in a society will influence how that society believes people respond to their environments, and how they should be treated. "Literary scholars aren't harmless," Gottschall says. "When we get it wrong it matters."

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2. Gottschall, J. *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer* (Cambridge Univ. Press, in the press).
3. Barash, D. P. & Barash, N. R. *Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature* (Delacorte, New York, 2005).
4. Gottschall, J. & Wilson, D. S. (eds) *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (Northwestern Univ. Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2005).
5. Gottschall, J. in *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*. (eds Gottschall, J. & Wilson, D. S.) 199–224 (Northwestern Univ. Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2005).
6. <http://survey.ehap.isr.umich.edu/carroll-intro>