

A Darwinian Approach to Judith Sargent Murray's "On the Equality of the Sexes"

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Abstract

The article explores the conjunction between the rhetorical tropes in Judith Sargent Murray's essay "On the Equality of the Sexes" and the complex interactions concerning social status and biological imperatives. Darwinian literary analysis is used to apply models of evolutionary psychology to analysis of the author's motivation and to the anticipated reaction of her readers. This analysis considers both the forces of evolution and how those forces interact with ever-changing social and cultural conditions. Murray's use of both romantic and dialectical irony mask the more radical aspects of her advice on educating young women. Thus, the article also examines how advice literature, in particular, encourages the reader to consider altering his or her behavior to affect a particular end. Since the objective of this genre is often social change, the ideas introduced in advice literature essentially function as cultural variants, introducing an adaptive change that will enhance the fitness of the reader for a particular cultural role.

Keywords: Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes," evolutionary psychology, Darwinian literary theory

Section 1: Darwinian Literary Theory

The rhetorical tropes Judith Sargent Murray employs in her often anthologized essay "On the Equality of the Sexes" succeed because, according to Galewski (2007), the romantic and dialectical irony exploited by Murray through her examples of women's intellectual capacity belie "the subversiveness normally associated with learned ladies" (p. 84). While the usual feminist critical response to Murray's essay is that it depends too heavily on promoting domestic roles to advance education for women, Galewski recognized what critics of eighteenth century proto-feminists often miss: that any argument for educating women en-masse had to overcome the dominant urge for the status quo. Even though Galewski's case for the rhetorical power of Murray's essay is solid, it overlooks the evolutionary psychological underpinnings of Murray's essay, particularly the confluence of the somatic and the reproductive efforts that occurs when women in a patriarchal society attempt to initiate new approaches to improved social status.

Social status is one of the concepts that Darwinian literary analysis is best suited to consider—the other being sex roles. The Darwinian approach to literary analysis by and large attempts to apply models of evolutionary psychology to analysis of an author's or a character's motivation or to the anticipated reaction of readers. According to Carroll (2004), this includes an examination of mental states that gives "a comprehensive explanation of motives and concerns" and provides "a taxonomy of themes in literary representation and also explain[s] why people read and write and how literature affects them" (p.107). Unlike traditional psychological methods of examining literature, evolutionary psychology allows the scholar to consider both the forces of evolution and how those forces interact with ever-changing social and cultural conditions. Analyzing the concepts in a work of literature as those ideas take part in the evolution of cultural norms can generate greater insight into how the work of literature either takes part in or challenges those norms. The behaviors associated with achieving high social status and with defining accepted sex roles in a given culture change over time. As these changes are recorded in the literature of a culture, clues develop about the interplay of evolutionary pressures and the constraints and obligations placed on individuals by communal norms. Many novels explore just these conflicts. Carroll (2005) aptly explained the advantages of applying evolutionary psychology in his analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

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For a novelist like Austen, whose female characters seem to achieve social status within the strictures of their milieu, the primary focus of the narrative involves exploring the limits of acceptable behavior as those boundaries influence the reproductive opportunities and social status of her characters. According to Carroll (2005), Darwinian literary criticism is the most logical approach to exploring how works created by the human mind reveal the influence of biological pressures on human behavior in a given environment:

Darwinian literary criticism is grounded in the large facts of human evolution and human biology, facts much larger and more robust than the conception that characterize the various branches of postmodern theory. Darwinian psychology provides a scientifically grounded and systematic account of human nature. (p. 103)

Particularly, the complex interactions between social status and biological imperatives allow evolutionary psychology to serve as a valuable analytical tool when assessing the purposes and cultural messages of literary artifacts.

Artistic creation—of narratives, poetry, and rhetorical structures along with music and the visual arts—is a universal human activity. For practitioners of the Darwinian approach, Boyd (2005) has asserted that art in our ancestral environment was not just a product but also a behavior. Boyd's approach emphasizes the importance of art and literature in understanding the development of human culture. Art as a behavioral adaptation means that art serves some fitness enhancing function, which Boyd defined as a "*design* that increases reproductive or survival advantage" (p.150). This claim suggests that artistic creations explore the basic drives of human nature and attempt to resolve the conflicts between cultural mores and biological impulses. Much of literature is devoted to depictions of individuals struggling to reconcile their basic natures with the constraints imposed on them by society: culture versus nature. Examining the responses to cultural pressures as those responses appear in the literature of a particular period, the Darwinian scholar is privileged to view the evolution of cultural norms in concert with the acknowledged universal aspects of human social and psychological development. Although no single text reflects all approaches to conflict between biological pressures and social norms, the nearly constant influence of biological drives on human behaviors leads the practitioner of the Darwinian approach to look for beliefs, behaviors, and values that may enhance the inclusive fitness of literary characters as they interact with a variety of cultural situations in a text.

The Darwinian approach does not replace traditional literary analysis but rather enhances it. Galewski's (2007) discussion of irony in the essay "On the Equality of the Sexes" considered the impact of cultural expectations on the reader and how the author used irony to ameliorate those expectations within the text. The Darwinian approach adds to Galewski's analysis the consideration of biological incentives underlying Murray's support for a classical education for women and an investigation of Murray's contemporary reader's expectations and reactions to the idea of education for women in the late eighteenth-century United States. The irony on which Murray builds her argument would be most successful with those readers who were aware of the cultural conflict the irony addresses: whether and how much to educate women if their primary sphere was to be the home. The more concerned with this conflict a reader was, the more likely she was to fall into Murray's target audience of self-aware women trying to improve their social and reproductive opportunities.

Murray's essay appears to be heavily weighted toward encouraging inclusive fitness: that psychological function that ensures the promotion of profitable mechanisms for behavior, which Boyd (2005) believes to be part of the impetus for creating art. Murray's female readers are encouraged to seek education as a way to enhance their mating potential. Unlike later, more definitively *feminist* writers, Murray did not choose to craft a claim encouraging education solely around the individual concern for support and survival, the "somatic effort," which is what Carroll (2004) has termed one of the "two basic forms of life effort" (p.108). Instead, Murray overtly focused on the other primary form of psycho-biological reasoning available to explain human motivation: the reproductive effort, which biologists view as including both mating and the bearing and rearing of young. Yet, while emphasizing the importance to a female reader's reproductive success, Murray subtly suggested that education improved not only reproductive success but also a woman's social status; Murray argued that the self-fulfillment a woman might feel from a mind engaged in lofty thoughts could translate into a better marriage and more profitable mothering. In Murray's argument for educating women, education enhances a woman's fitness as a potential mate. However, this approach masks Murray's belief in the power of education to transform the lives of individual women in ways only tangentially related to domestic duties.

Section 1.1: The Place of Literature in Cultural Evolution

By disguising the idea of education for personal fulfillment in the motive of education to create a better mother, the irony in Murray's (1790) essay disarms open opposition to education for women. Redefining the individual's role in society and offering advice for individual improvement were much the business of the eighteenth century writer. Many of these writers produced advice literature or conduct books for men and women. Although the first American conduct book for women titled *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion* was written by Puritan minister Cotton Mather in 1692, many others followed his model of Christian virtue as the standard for women (Newton, 1994). In her survey of conduct books in America before 1900, Newton (1994) argued that "[w]hile it is true that all conduct writers encourage a religious foundation for secular human behavior, this stance is particularly provocative in books written for girls and women" (p. 66). Most of these attempts rely heavily on the maternal role as the core of the perfected woman's new self. The Christian mother in the colonial and early national periods served as a precursor to the Victorian "angel of the house." The marriage of the maternal role with civic responsibility could only be conceived of as part of a Christian woman's domestic role. Newton (1994) has noted that in addition to the religious undertones, many works of advice literature confined the woman to the domestic sphere as the proper place for her skills: "Submission, humility, and obedience—these are the qualities that God the Father demands of a young girl; they are also precisely the duties that, in the secular world, God's surrogates—fathers and husbands—require of the woman" (p. 69). Thus, early American advice literature tended to focus on reinforcing the submissive and entirely domestic female role.

In the mid-eighteenth century, reason was another important criterion applied to the measure of a woman's behavior, in some cases usurping the place of religious hierarchy, in others merely strengthening it (Newton 69). In John Gregory's (1774) *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, Gregory advised that a young woman may ensure her happiness in marriage by avoiding "the terrible conflict of passions" and choosing her suitors from men who come from the "level of common life" (p.127). Gregory's advice, while full of condescension, encourages his young, female reader to take a practical, rational approach to marriage. He argues in several instances in the chapter on marriage that it is "despicable" for a woman to think that she can only be happy if married (p.115). Though his advice aims at assisting young women in making happy marriages, he contends that happiness is not automatically assured once a marriage is made and that a marriage of equal minds and temperaments should be the aim of young women of good sense.

Along with male writers whose advice guided young women in conventionally accepted paths toward marriage and motherhood, some female writers were attempting to adapt the rational rhetoric of the Enlightenment to redefine customary roles for women. The late colonial and early national periods in America saw radical changes in both political structure and in the conception of American identity, including the role that women played. Kritzer (1996) has defined the period just after the American Revolution as one in which educated women were trying "in various ways to renegotiate dominant definitions of the American woman" (p.150). The eight years of the American Revolutionary War were a time when many women were left to tend farms and run businesses alone. After the war, the business of rebuilding the economic structure of the new United States and building a new nation was seen as a task for all Americans, men and women. Galewski (2007) has pointed out that the American Revolution "constituted a turning point that helped make changes in female education possible. In a time of conflict, under the force of necessity, women tested and transgressed long-standing social conventions in order to protect themselves and their families" (p.91). While in England, feminist emancipatory impulses tended to be concentrated among the elite, upper-class women, the early American feminist mindset grew from both middle-class and upper-class women's participation in the American experiment in nation building.

Many women, who under less trying circumstances would have been wholly confined to the domestic sphere, were forced by the exigencies of war to take on traditionally masculine responsibilities. This transgression of accepted sex roles was a contravention which Murray witnessed and in which she participated. In Murray's (1790) essay, the impact of the ironic reversal that Murray introduced allowed the reader to question the status quo. Murray directly addressed the role of women in the new republic and attempted to define what is now referred to as Republican Motherhood, the quasi-civic role of mothers who were to prepare their children, especially sons, to be productive and knowledgeable citizens. Although the paradigm of Republican Motherhood encouraged the hardening of separate spheres in the nineteenth century, reform-minded writers in the late eighteenth century embraced a limited civic role for women that incorporated their traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers and offered a cultural adaptation that seemed to improve women's status (Tock, 2005).

Thus Murray's emphasis on how education would improve the performance of women as wives and mothers is a rhetorical stance that advances transformation of the sex role from within the bounds of accepted community standards. Even though considerable discussion has transpired among Darwinian literary critics about the place of narrative in cultural evolution, less attention has been paid to the adaptive function rhetoric serves. With narrative, Darwinian theorists like Wilson (2007) claim that the purpose of narrative is adaptive, that it helps us adjust to and manage our current environment. If understanding and adapting to social environments is one of the functions of narrative, then, social commentary, too, has a role in influencing human behavior in response to social norms. In her exploration of why we read, Zunshine (2006) explained that "[i]t may mean that our enjoyment of fiction is predicated—at least in part—upon our *awareness* of our 'trying on' mental states *potentially available* to us but at a given moment *differing* from our own" [italics in the original] (p.17). The same may be said for the essay form. Advice literature, in particular, encourages the reader to consider altering his or her behavior to affect a particular end. Since the objective of this genre is often social change, the ideas introduced in advice literature essentially function as genetic cultural variants, introducing an adaptive change that will enhance the fitness of the reader for a particular cultural role. As Wilson (2007) has asserted about fiction, "stories often play the role of genes in non-genetic evolutionary processes" (p.35). Advice literature and social commentary serve a similar, perhaps even more directly influential, function with readers. As with Wilson's suggestion that narratives have "genelike properties" that allow them to be transmitted from person to person and generation to generation with little variation, essays, too, function to encourage a modification in behavior (p.29). The staying power of an essay may be more confined by its place in a particular historical moment, but its potential adaptive influence is greater in the short term.

Attempts at cultural change are more likely to succeed if they insert their suggestions for change into recognizable prototypes (Hogan, 2003). The possibility of wider acceptance of education for women in the eighteenth century was enhanced by just such associations. Using a process that Nettle (2005) has compared to the evolutionary process of transmitting genes for effective adaptations, advice literature writers who embedded new ideas into accepted rhetorical patterns could expect their suggestions to meet with less resistance than new ideas proposed outside of established genres. The social insecurity fomented by drastic political upheavals like the American Revolution also presented an opening for new prototypes. Writers, essayists in particular, often responded by offering new viewpoints or approaches to problems. The American Revolution and the social and political instability in its aftermath is one such far-reaching transformation that reframed individual identity in terms of communal goals. In the early national period in the United States, the reframing was really a combination of approaches to defining the obligations of citizenship in a democracy. For women, the new approach tied the domestic with the civic in the concept of Republican Motherhood; although that sobriquet was not applied until the latter part of the twentieth century, the pairing of education with improved mothering abilities was already a concept that was repeatedly applied in arguments for women's education during Murray's lifetime. If the desired outcome of effective rhetorical arguments is to mold what the reader perceives as important, then in a time when men and women were psychologically transforming to integrate the concept of individual liberty with communal responsibility, the cultural effect of a well-formed argument on that shift may have been wide-reaching. The attempt to redefine opportunities for women while embracing accepted stereotypes was a resourceful way of introducing a sweeping new approach to the model of sex-role education. Using this technique, Murray's essay begins by embracing stereotypical views of women and their failings in order to appropriate that stereotype as a vehicle for introducing the educated woman as the ideal ruler of the domestic sphere.

Section 2: The Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology of Murray's Irony

Murray's ability to combine both the somatic and reproductive effort into one essay is accomplished through the rhetorical tropes Galewski (2007) highlights. Public discourse on the appropriate form of education for women in advice literature would have been well-known to Murray's reader.

This discourse most often took a form that wholly supported the status quo with regard to sex roles, though occasionally urging expanded educational opportunities for women, creating an ideal backdrop for the irony in Murray's essay. Galewski's primary argument was that Murray employed two forms of irony to support her call for a classical education for women—romantic and dialectical irony. What Galewski defined as romantic irony is Murray's use of negative stereotypes of women's behavior to prove women's intellectual capacity. These devices are essential in disarming readers who might object to classical education for women. As Galewski recognized, the setting in which Murray wrote was one undergoing a shift in attitudes toward education for women.

A subset of the advice literature genre, many with a decidedly defiant tone, included a number of discourses on the need for expanded education for women. These treatises had appeared beginning in the mid-seventeenth century and included Bathsua Makin's (1673) polemic "An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen," Hannah Woolley's (1675) *The Gentlewoman's Companion*, Judith Drake's (1696) "An essay in defence of the female sex," Mary Astell's (1706) *Reflections Upon Marriage*, and François Fénelon's (1708) *Instructions for the Education of a Daughter*. Contentions about the intellectual capacities of women were part of public dialogue by the late the eighteenth century. Since public discussion of more formal education for women was becoming more common, Murray had some awareness of the arguments against such a change. Those arguments quite often included the concern that educated women would no longer be fit wives. For example, a pamphlet published in 1739 titled *Woman Not Inferior to Man: Or, a Short and Modest Vindication of the Natural Right of the Fair-Sex to a Perfect Equality of Power, Dignity and Esteem with the Men*, authored anonymously under the pseudonym Sophia, was answered by a Gentleman (1739) in *Man Superior to Woman Or, A Vindication of Man's Natural Right of Sovereign Authority Over the Woman*, in which the Gentleman made clear that women are to serve men as wives, a position that required little intellectual training.

These assorted attitudes toward women's education often presented education as an either/or selection—either a woman was classically educated and unfit for marriage or she was trained as a notable housewife. The irony Murray develops permits her to introduce new mental states to her readers while lessening the readers' concerns that the essay may be suggesting a fundamental alteration in sex roles, allowing the reader to see women in roles beyond those outlined by social norms without entirely rejecting accepted conventions. An educated woman, according to Murray (1790), can be an excellent wife, offering agreeable transactions in "domestick affairs" (p.224). Although Murray's arguments for women's capacity for reason and for the need to educate women were not unique to Murray, what was unusual about Murray's discourse was her contention that education is necessary to repair flaws in the female character, flaws whose source was not the female mind but the unstructured environment in which the female mind was allowed to roam while it matured. The romantic irony Murray employed, which reversed the expectations of the reader, created a vacuum, filled by the dialectical irony—the certitude that if women have adequate intellectual gifts to benefit from education and if education would make them better wives, then failure to educate women was a flaw in societal standards. Poorly educated women, according to Murray, were unable to maximize their reproductive effort or find personal happiness. According to Murray, the fault for this failure lay with the child-rearing paradigm employed by parents, who should be attempting to make their daughters successful in marriage or, according to the terminology of Darwinian theory, parents should have been attempting to maximize their offspring's reproductive and survival advantages.

Despite its foundation in life or death matters, the advice Murray gives in her essay has little of the philosophical or political fire of her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Murray's (1790) essay, its provocative title notwithstanding, belongs to the category of advice literature for young women or their parents or guardians. The light tone with an accent on preparation for domestic utility signaled to the reader the genre of this essay. Knowing the category to which a text belongs saves readers the energy of having to decipher the layers of authorial intention (Zunshine, 2006); thus, Murray was able to co-opt her readers' expectations about this genre to provide images of women that fit the traditional pattern and that prepared the reader for the switch from romantic to dialectical irony so essential to Murray's ultimate purpose. Late eighteenth century readers, both male and female, would have anticipated an argument for female virtue and perhaps sentiment as a basis for the equality that the title and the head poem introduce.

However, postulating that human intellectual faculties fall into the four categories of "imagination, reason, memory and judgment," Murray took advantage of the reader's recognition of the genre of advice literature by playing with stereotypes—accepting some, adjusting others, and exploding a few (p. 133). Murray's first demonstration of women's right to be considered equal arose from her argument that women were equal to men in the faculty of imagination, when she advised readers to "[o]bserve the variety of fashions (here I bar the contemptuous smile) which distinguish and adorn the female world: how continually are they changing, insomuch that they almost render the wise man's assertion problematical, and we are ready to say, there is something new under the sun" (Murray, 1790, p.133). Murray followed this illustration with the suggestion that women's ability for creative gossip was a well-known instance of their imagination. As Galewski (2007) suggested, Murray played on accepted ideas of female behavior in an ironic way, by reconstruct "the slanderous fashionable coquette as surprising empirical evidence of women's potential" (p.86). Murray appropriated the foibles of women to disarm the reader who might use those shortcomings as instances of intellectual deficiency.

She presented education as a path that could lead young women away from the less desirable outcome of coquetry and toward an adaptation that would prepare them for the changing requirements of marriage and motherhood. The use of humor to disarm the reader when discussing mating choice also fits well with a theory in evolutionary psychology. Nettle (2005) has suggested that the conventions of comedy and tragedy are paired with humor over mating and seriousness over status. A well-known example that fits this pattern includes Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies, in which characters engage in humorous banter or take part in comic situations as the plot of the plays moves inexorably toward marriage. Therefore, readers expected humor regarding sex roles to be tied, ultimately, to support for marriage. Even research on mating patterns in humans suggests that humor is a significant determinant in a female choice of mates (Bressler & Balshine, 2006; Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011). In "On the Equality of the Sexes," this trend appears as a humorous look at women's behavior, the romantic irony just examined, and a serious look at women's status, the shift to the final dialectical irony which moves learned ladies into the preferred position.

The second device that Galewski (2007) discussed was a more conventional use of dialectical irony by Murray in highlighting the wasted potential of women—the potential having been established by the earlier ironic turn—and the use to which a classical education could be put in fulfilling that potential. Since Murray was working within an eighteenth-century tradition in which, according to Galewski (2007), "the female mind was discursively reconstituted," Murray was both part of the status quo her ideas would help transform and a voice for a cultural adaptation to changing circumstances (p. 85). In the second half of the essay, part of which was written in response to a letter by Murray's nephew arguing against education for women on Biblical grounds, Murray invoked the reproductive and somatic advantages of an educated woman. Having established that women were equally as adaptable as men, Murray set out the advantages of education for women in a traditional life. In marriage to an educated man, Murray (1790) noted that an uneducated woman "is not qualified to accompany [her husband]" in pursuits that edify him because education has separated their equal souls (p. 224). By contrast, an educated wife could better regulate her husband's "domestick affairs" and would be "assiduous to promote his happiness" (Murray, 1790, p. 224). Individual happiness and security were benefits normally claimed by men in the eighteenth century. Norton (1996) has explained that the purpose of marriage was to assure the husband's happiness and productivity. Murray's (1790) essay argued that because an educated wife is more likely to be happy and productive, her husband will benefit since the wife's "leisure for sedentary pleasure" would include "useful reflections" instead of "fashion and scandal" (p. 224). The emphasis on *domestic* felicity for men and women, a point with which few of Murray's contemporaries would have argued, cements the concept of education for women into the consciousness of the reader as a necessary improvement for married women.

In her essay, Murray (1790) did not suggest that men and women were identical but that they were equal in their ability to adapt to their environments, differing environments being the source of their apparent intellectual differences. She acknowledged physical superiority as belonging to men, reminding her reader that "it is for mental strength I mean to contend, for with respect to animal powers, I yield them undisputed to that sex, which enjoys them in common with the lion, the tiger, and many other beasts of prey" (p. 224). Murray seemed eager to placate readers who might be unsettled by the idea of women's educational equality, yet she could not refrain from slipping in a gibe about men's supposed superiority. About women's ability to reason, she wrote: "Are we deficient in reason? we can only reason from what we know, and if an opportunity of acquiring knowledge hath been denied us, the inferiority of our sex cannot be fairly deduced from thence" (p. 133).

The starting point of Murray's arguments may have been an attempt to synchronize a combination of basic evolutionary drives and cultural expectations, but Murray was very much a social constructivist, arguing that environmental changes could correct obvious flaws in women's behavior and suggesting that men and women differ only because of the treatment by society. When Murray asked from whence the difference between men and women arises, she answered her own question thus:

May we not trace its source in the difference of education, and continued advantages? Will it be said that the judgment of a male of two years old, is more sage than that of a female's of the same age? I believe the reverse is generally observed to be true. But from that period what partiality! how is the one exalted, and the other depressed, by the contrary modes of education which are adopted! the one is taught to aspire, the other is early confined and limited. (1790, p. 133)

By underscoring the relationship between reason and education, Murray transformed her earlier use of romantic irony into an argument for women's education. Yet, later in the essay, Murray addressed the suggestion that education is not the only source of individual accomplishment. To further bolster her claim that men and women have equal natural mental faculties, which she mostly referred to as equal souls, Murray pointed out that "from the commencement of time to the present day, there hath been as many female, as males, who, by the *mere force of natural powers*, have merited the crown of applause; who, *thus unassisted*, have seized the wreath of fame" (1790, p. 34). Not only were women by birth men's intellectual equals, Murray even hinted that since in the natural world a creature with little physical strength often develops greater cunning, that perhaps women, as the physically weaker sex, have been given greater mental faculties.

Section 2.1: Reproductive Versus Somatic Effort in "On the Equality of the Sexes"

Murray's awareness of the need to acknowledge and to consent to conventional attitudes toward women allowed her suggestions for amending female education to appear less radical and more concerned about the fitting task for a woman: motherhood. The evolution of social behaviors, like expanding educational opportunities, continued to be both driven and limited by how closely those behaviors hewed to and supported inclusive fitness. In both biology and psychology, inclusive fitness refers to the ability to pass along positive traits that ensure the reproductive success of one's genetic material. If education improved status or access to mating opportunities or the success of a woman's children in achieving status or reproduction, then education improved her reproductive success and the inclusive fitness of her entire social group. As Carroll (2004) has noted, "Generally, the closer one comes to the elementary principles of inclusive fitness—the closer to survival and reproduction (including family relations)—the deeper and more compelling the concern" (p.128). Here, Carroll asserted that human motives are easier to identify if they are primary to inclusive fitness. Murray's emphasis on making women better partners and mothers through education served as an instance of moving a *non-standard* behavior in a direction that indicated its inclusive fitness. Murray cited as acceptable ends of education for women both the gratification of a woman's mate and the improvement of a woman's own life, when she wrote, "A mind, thus filled, would have little room for the trifles with which our sex are, with too much justice, accused of amusing themselves, and they would thus be rendered fit companions for those, who should one day wear them as their crown" (1790, p. 134). Murray appropriated classical education for women in order to improve their inclusive fitness while still confining women to what she and her contemporaries would consider their proper sphere: "Now, was she permitted the same instructors as her brother, (with an eye however to their particular departments) for the employment of a rational mind an ample field would be opened" (p. 134). Always keeping an "eye" on the "particular departments" while educating women would help them avoid the charged of excessive erudition. A classical education, chiefly a masculine prerogative, was viewed by many in the late eighteenth century as an impediment to female domestic economy and a potential burden for a woman whose most likely role in life was as wife and mother. The appellation of "learned lady" itself was invested with the suggestion that the woman so trained was not fit for domestic employment. Galewski (2007) has observed that the final irony in Murray's essay was that Murray asserts that women can find happiness as "learned ladies," a final readjustment of type focused less on the reproductive benefits of education and more on the enhancement of individual happiness (p. 98).

The subtle shift Murray applied in her line of reasoning—from urging education to prepare women for marriage to urging education to prepare women to improve their status—comprised part of what sociobiologists have come to see as the human capacity to be "adaptation executors" (Carroll, 2004, p. 82). For an eighteenth century woman to advise others on improving marriage and motherhood would be easily accepted in advice literature. Yet, for a real change in women's reproductive success to occur, the ultimate purpose of education would need to be a change in women's status. In other words, the primary proximal effort of proto-feminist push for female education was not as reproductive effort but as activities meant to maximize somatic effort. Murray's (1790) essay, while appearing to focus on reproductive effort, actually argued for education as a way to enhance a woman's social status: "Females would become discreet, their judgments would be invigorated, and their partners for life being circumspectly chosen, an unhappy Hymen would then be as rare, as is now the reverse" (p. 134). However, even as woman might overcome the failures of her sex through education, she was expected to focus this new intellect on obtaining a suitable partner. The symbiotic relationship between the somatic and reproductive drives becomes clearest when Murray (1790) discussed courtship:

It is expected that with the other sex we should commence immediate war, and that we should triumph over the machinations of the most artful. We must be constantly on our guard; prudence and discretion must be our characteristics [sic]; and we must rise superior to, and obtain complete victory over those who have been long adding to the native strength of their minds, by an unremitting study of men and books, and who have, moreover, conceived from the loose characters which they have seen portrayed in the extensive variety of their reading, a most contemptible opinion of the sex. Thus unequal, we are, notwithstanding, forced to the combat. (p. 223)

For a woman to have success and status, she must be able to succeed in courtship, to even overcome her potential mates in a battle of wits. Murray's humorous position on courtship disguises the fact that reproductive advantage was inextricably tied to somatic advantage. In several passages, like the following, Murray used language that clearly presented the effects of education on social status. She explained, "And if we are allowed an equality of acquirements, let serious studies equally employ our minds, and we will bid our souls arise to equal strengths. We will meet upon even ground, the despot man; we will rush with alacrity to the combat, and, crowned by success, we shall then answer the exalted expectations, which are formed" (Murray, 1790, p. 223). While in some places in the essay man was woman's protector or friend, in this passage he was seen as a competitor, engaged in "combat" with woman. Woman must use "prudence and discretion" to ensure that she "should triumph over the machinations of the most artful" of male competitors. Although directly after this passage, Murray suggested that education would allow woman to offer man "the hand of amity," she has revealed that the true goal of education would be to allow women to compete with men for status, even if the goal of the competition is merely for equality within the marriage (1790, p. 223).

Appreciating evolutionary pressures in the literature of reform that became so popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can help literary scholars and historians understand better the environmental solutions that writers of the time suggested. When Wilson (2007) pointed out that the maladaptive behavior we see in ourselves in the contemporary environment is due to changes in social structure that outstrip the pace of biological change, he is suggesting a larger truth—that human behavior changes with the variations in cultures and environments but that those changes are under-girded by biological pressures. Thus, sociobiology and evolutionary psychology allow the Darwinian approach to literary analysis to explore human motives and behavior in literature in a way that enhances the traditional critical approaches. For this analysis, Galewski's (2007) study of irony in Murray's (1790) essay serves as an excellent starting point for understanding how the cultural and biological pressures women like Murray faced are expressed in their literature.

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