

REVIEW OF GEOFFREY MILLER,
*THE MATING MIND: HOW SEXUAL CHOICE
SHAPED THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN NATURE*

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Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature*.

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Geoffrey Miller is currently Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Economic Learning and Social Evolution at University College, London. His background is in cognitive psychology, and his many publications, and conference appearances – he is a well-known speaker on evolutionary topics – have given him a reputation within the fields of evolutionary psychology, biology, and anthropology. With this volume he becomes a public figure, almost certainly a controversial one. However, it is not as the popular face, the all-too-easily comprehended self-misrepresentation, of an otherwise technical thinker that *The Mating Mind* should be regarded. This is a subtle and multi-chambered argument that can be read with interest by both amateur and professional. Its nearest relative is *The Selfish Gene*, and while it hasn't the intensity ('magic naturalism,' it might be called) of Dawkins' early work, which is in a class of its own and a special case, Miller's handling invites and survives comparison. However, one point of difference should be emphasized at the outset. Whereas Dawkins was presenting a synthesis of established consensus, Miller offers an hypothesis of such a consensus, an exploration of a possibility. Clearly he thinks there is something in the proposal, otherwise why bother to write so careful a book on it, but everywhere in the argument itself, and in its tone, there is an awareness of the provisional character of its assertions, even when these assertions are as forceful as only those of a first book can be. On this latter ground alone *The Mating Mind* deserves attention; it is a stylistic curiosity. At a time when the dramatic surge of notable science writing has begun to give way to a dull tide of slack and uncommitted bureaucratic summaries, here is a reminder of what a truly interested mind can make of the genre.

The text consists of eleven chapters (over 140,000 words), a glossary, and notes together with guidance for general reading in connection with each of the chapters. The thirty-six-page bibliography is unusually full for a book aimed at a broad readership (it cites substantial numbers of journal articles) and could easily be used as a brief for a course in sexual selection theory. Beginning with an overview of this theory and of evolutionary psychology (Chapter 1: 'Exhibition Road'), Miller then passes on to a detailed consideration of sexual selection (Chapter 2: 'Darwin's Prodigy'). Here the meat of the book begins. Having introduced the theory, and suggested that it might account for certain features of the mind and its products, Miller considers and eventually rejects runaway sexual selection as a strong candidate (Chapter 3: 'The Runaway Brain'), and in Chapter 4 ('A Mind Fit for Mating') he turns to an alterna-

tive presentation of sexual selection, the suggestion that sexual ornaments advertise each sex's fitness to the other sex. Beginning with a helpful consideration of the evolution of sex itself (Miller does his best to help the inexperienced reader along, but is generally writing for a reader with more than basic knowledge), he concludes that there is good reason to proceed with the working assumption that the 'human mind evolved as a bundle of fitness indicators' (p. 135). Chapter 5 ('Ornamental Genius') considers sensory bias as a possible explanation of why some fitness indicators evolve and not others, and rounds off the account with the suggestion that sexual selection may play a significant role in evolutionary innovation, particularly in relation to the evolution of the mind. In Chapter 6 ('Courtship in the Pleistocene') Miller fills out the details of the sexual selection pressures by developing various Pleistocene scenarios, with some reference to sexual relationships and choice in other primates. Chapter 7 ('Bodies of Evidence') surveys the question of physical attractiveness, arguing for the relevance of sexual selection in accounting for many of the body's features, but is really only an introduction for Chapter 8 ('Arts of Seduction'), where Miller advances the suggestion that 'sexual choice has given us the behavioral abilities and aesthetic tastes to extend our sexual ornamentation from our bodies to our works of art' (p. 257). Chapter 9 ('Virtues of Good Breeding'), one of the most original sections of the book, extends this view to ethics, and counters previous evolutionary accounts of moral intuitions and consequent actions, which have usually seen the behaviour in terms of nepotism and reciprocity. In its place we are asked to consider the possibility that 'human morality is much more likely to be the direct result of sexual selection' (p. 292), that

our ancestors... were not satisfied with a few tokens of romantic generosity. They selected instincts to provide for the common good even at high personal risk. They selected principled moral leadership capable of keeping peace, resolving conflict, and punishing crime. They selected unprecedented levels of sexual fidelity, good parenting, fair play, and charitable generosity. [p. 340]

This position is unusual in that where previous evolutionary theories of ethical intuitions have presented us a special kind of 'hypocrite' – sincerely moral, but only so on average, when it served our interests – Miller suggests that we are a species of 'prig,' sincere moral exhibitionists.

In Chapter 10 ('Cyrano and Scheherezade') the display of fitness is brought to bear on the evolution of language – 'Language evolved as much to display our fitness as to communicate useful information' (p. 390) – and of verbal art.

Chapter 11 ('The Wit to Woo') rounds off this tour of mental abilities and features with a discussion of creativity, arguing that 'evolution favours unpredictable behaviour in many animals,' and suggesting that 'these capacities for randomness may have been amplified into human creativity through sexual and social selection' (p. 392) culminating in the claim that the ideological content of much, if not most, human culture is to be so explained:

Sexual selection usually behaves like an insanely greedy tabloid newspaper editor who deletes all news and leaves only advertisements. In human evolution, it is as if the

editor suddenly recognized a nice market for news in a few big-brained readers. She told all her reporters she wanted wall-to-wall news, but she never bothered to set up a fact-checking department. Human ideology is the result: a tabloid concoction of religious conviction, political idealism, urban myth, tribal myth, wishful thinking, memorable anecdote, and pseudo-science. [p. 425]

Science itself is excepted from this plausible slander, and closes the chapter as the book's hero-or-heroine: 'scientific traditions are ingenious ways of harnessing human courtship effort to produce cumulative progress towards world-models that are abstract, communicable, and true' (p. 425). A short epilogue anticipates and attempts to ward off criticisms of debunking – 'Understanding the origins of human morality, art, and language is unlikely to diminish our appreciation of ethical leadership, aesthetic beauty, or witty conversation' (p. 427) – and makes what must be one of the first pleas for a right-on evolutionism:

This book has focused on the traditional and hippie modes of display: body ornamentation, rhythmic dance, irreverent humour, protean creativity, generosity, ideological ardour, good sex, memorable storytelling, and shared consciousness. I hope that the sexual choice theory increases your confidence that people can appreciate your mind's charms directly, in ordinary conversation, unmediated by your ability to work, save, shop, and spend. [p. 430]

There is little in this work that does not bear in some way on issues related to gender, and Miller's attitudes are an indication that you can mix a stern recognition of differences between the sexes with an even-handed politics. It might be noted in passing, in fact, that Miller's politics are very much on show, as the plea for hippiedom indicates, and this strategy seems to work remarkably well. Rather than conceal his interests beneath a claim for cool indifference, the potential source of bias is indicated again and again so that the reader may lay in for it. But anyone expecting an easy ride should be warned. Willing though he is to concede that 'mutual display and mutual choice tend to produce sexual equality in the display ability' (p. 376) the punches are not pulled:

If we assume a rich aesthetic sense to be part of human nature, we should not find it surprising that people figured out how to attract sexual partners and gain social status by producing things that others consider aesthetically pleasing. Neither, perhaps, should we find it surprising that sexually mature males have produced almost all of the publicly displayed art throughout human history. Given any set of human preferences about anything, males have more motivation to play upon those preferences to attract sexual partners. [p. 275]

But note that while this may seem to marginalize the suggestions made by generations of feminist critics that females have been excluded from much cultural production, Miller has already

discounted any transcendent value for the arts, and thus the imbalance in cultural production becomes no ground for boasting of male dominion over ‘a higher plane of being where genius sprouts lotus-like above the petty concerns of the world’ (p. 261).

Similarly, when taking up the paradox apparent in the fact that females outperform males on verbal comprehension tests yet ‘Men write more books. ... Men dominate mixed-sex committee discussions’ (p. 376), Miller concedes that ‘Men often bully women into silence’ (p. 376), but he resists the traditionally approved explanation, that males as a group repress women in order to maintain patriarchy. His argument is simple: if males were keeping women out of the discussion in order to benefit the male class then that ‘would qualify as a puzzling example of evolutionary altruism – a costly, risky, individual act that helps all of one’s sexual competitors... as much as oneself’ (p. 377). Such a simple point may seem a mere pinprick, but as anyone who reads the criticism emerging from departments of gender studies knows, its deflationary powers could be considerable.

In short, this is a refined, an intellectually ingenious, and a very civilized discussion of the possible importance of sexual selection for mental evolution. It has few faults. The occasional uncertainty of its humour and the *non sequitur* of the uplift in its final pages are both so common in modern popular science as to be barely worth mention. But they do stand out here, because the rest of the book is so good.