

A Conversation Between Austen and Darwin

Jane Austen & Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists

By Peter W. Graham.
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Reviewed by Amy J. Robinson.

In four interconnected essays, Peter W. Graham's *Jane Austen & Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* creates an "intellectual conversation" between Austen and Darwin, revealing a surprising number of similarities between their "talents and sensibilities." Graham argues that Austen and Darwin were highly skilled at not only observing microscopic particulars but also at understanding the cosmic significance of those small details. Using the terms "naturalist" and "novelist" broadly, Graham explains how, by looking carefully and clearly at the world around them, both Austen and Darwin can be seen as naturalists, just as both can be considered novelists in that they use storytelling to convey their observations to a larger audience. Austen and Darwin's observational skills as naturalists and novelists lead Graham to make a strong case for their being "the two great British empiricists of the nineteenth century." In addition to comparing the ways Austen and Darwin observe, think, and write, Graham's book also highlights the connections between their biographies: both were of the gentry class, came from large families, and were most productive in the peacefulness of village life. Graham's essay style perfectly suits his conversational genre, and one of the many strengths of this rich study is that Graham succeeds in balancing his discussion of Austen and Darwin, rather than simply reading Austen's novels through a Darwinian lens.

Amy J. Robinson is completing her dissertation on comedic portraits of country town life in the mid-Victorian novel at the University of Florida. She is Co-Coordinator of JASNA-North Florida.

Graham's first essay connects Raymond Williams' term "knowable communities" with Austen's comment that "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" is the most fitting subject matter for novels, to show that such a limited, knowable field fostered both Austen's and Darwin's particular talents. Examples of specific knowable communities discussed in this essay include the finches and mockingbirds that Darwin collected on the Galápagos Islands and Austen's fictional Highbury in *Emma*. The second essay, "An Entangled Bank, or Sibling Development in a Family Ecosystem," part of the title of which comes from *Origin of Species*, will be particularly interesting to JASNA members as we turn our attention to the 2009 AGM theme: "Jane Austen's Brothers and Sisters in the City of Brotherly Love." Graham shows how the nuclear family can be seen as a kind of Darwinian "entangled bank," where resources are scarce and siblings must learn to compete and cooperate to gain those resources and find their niche. The essay then proceeds to examine the way siblings, especially sisters, develop in relation to one another and their parents in Austen's novels, reading them in light of Frank Sulloway's Darwinian theory of sibling differentiation. One fascinating example concerns the Ward sisters of *Mansfield Park*, with Mrs. Norris displaying classic firstborn traits, such as her strong will and desire to manage, Lady Bertram showing a laterborn's tractability, and Mrs. Price revealing the youngest child's tendency to rebel. This chapter also includes a helpful table of sibling groups in Austen's novels.

"What do Mrs. Bennet and Charles Darwin have in common?" is the attention-grabbing question that begins the third essay about marriage. Graham answers that both believe that well-off men should marry, and he then describes the letter Darwin wrote shortly before proposing to and marrying his cousin Emma Wedgwood, a letter that takes the form of a "sort of utilitarian calculation of pleasures and pains." Graham then

cleverly and amusingly shows how Darwin's letter is just as self centered as is Mr. Collins's proposal to Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Graham also discusses concepts familiar to many readers of Austen's novels, such as primogeniture and entailment, but allows readers to see these terms in new ways by connecting them to Darwinian thought. For example, Graham notes that Darwin understood that primogeniture can "unfairly handicap" the struggle for existence by enabling eldest sons to marry at the expense of often superior younger sons. The latter section of the chapter discusses Darwin's biological reservations about intermarriage, despite his own, as well as desirable marriages between cousins in Austen's novels, such as the marriage of Edmund and Fanny, and less desirable ones, such as the possible marriage between Elizabeth and Mr. Collins.

Graham's book returns, full circle, in the final essay to the interconnectedness of the small and the vast in Austen's and Darwin's works, arguing that both subscribe to the idea of incremental change that nonetheless has sweeping consequences. The author admits that his essay style prevents him from fully engaging with the scholarly discourses about Austen and Darwin, but this drawback is a negligible one, for Graham's study nonetheless proves a valuable addition to recent scholarship that applies Darwin's theories to literary texts as well as to the growing body of work showing Austen engaged in her times. Paraphrasing Graham, this book will be appealing to those interested in individual or comparative study of Austen and Darwin.

