

Jane Austen, evolutionary psychologist

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Last year, the Bank of England announced that a sketch of Jane Austen will replace Charles Darwin on the ten-pound note. Austen is one of the most popular authors of fiction; her works have been translated into more than 30 languages and adapted for numerous film and television productions. Darwin formulated the fundamental theoretical framework for the life sciences. Two new studies suggest that it would be more fitting if Austen and Darwin appeared together.

Near the 200th anniversary of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's works are so popular today because she had such an accurate understanding of psychology, especially with regard to the challenges women face in romantic relationships and the strategies they develop to deal with them. Written roughly 50 years before Darwin published his seminal *Origin of the Species*, Austen's depictions of her characters bear remarkable resemblance to the descriptions of human mating strategies written by evolutionary psychologists in universities today.

Daniel J. Kruger, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Michigan, remarks that "contemporary college students accurately matched characters to their actual behaviors as portrayed in the novels. They show a remarkable understanding of the character's mating strategies and say that they would interact with these characters in ways that would be ultimately beneficial to themselves."

Kruger conducted the studies with colleagues Maryanne L. Fisher and Sarah L. Strout, and students Shana'e Clark, Shelby Lewis, and Michelle Wehbe. They assembled brief personality descriptions of female

characters from passages in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* and created a survey to assess participants' understanding of the characters.

Although all information on relationship behaviors was intentionally omitted from the sketches, participants were able to sort the [characters](#) behaviors and tendencies that are associated with long-term and short-term female reproductive strategies. For example, "be good with children," vs. "be successful in competing with other women for the same man." Women preferred the long-term strategists as a daughter in law and a companion for their own partner, and thought that men would prefer the short-term strategists for non-committed sex. Men showed a similar pattern, preferring the long-term strategists to be the mother of their children, but shifted towards short-term strategists for sexual affairs.

The authors hope to advance the emerging field of Literary Darwinism, which promotes the use of evolutionary theory for understanding literary fiction, as well as the understanding of women's sexuality.

"Pride and prejudice or family and flirtation? Jane Austen's depiction of women's mating strategies" appears in the current issue of *Philosophy and Literature*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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