CHAPTER 12

The Role of the Arts in Male Courtship Display: Billy Collins’s “Serenade”

Research in the field of evolutionary psychology underlines the importance of masculine display in the mate-selection process. Men seek opportunities to exhibit qualities women find desirable; hence they invite inspection of their resources and status, their physical and mental prowess. They also advertise specialized skills and abilities, including artistic performance and creativity. Men seeking to impress potential mates hope to benefit not only from displaying survival-oriented skills as toolmakers or hunters but also from publishing adeptness in less utilitarian realms such as storytelling, drumming, or carving.1 Exhibition of aesthetic achievement is relevant, therefore, to current inquiries into the adaptive value of art. The poem “Serenade” (2001) by recent Poet Laureate Billy Collins offers indirect reinforcement of the hypothesis that female preference encompasses achievement in the arts. The poem introduces a male speaker who bases his courtship, including his expectation of besting rivals, on musical virtuosity.

Evolutionary theorists generally agree that sexual selection provides one of the most plausible explanations for the evolution of art in human populations: a cross-culturally ubiquitous, costly, and pleasurable activity, art is “unlikely to be a biological accident.”2 In addition to the potentially status-serving function of the arts (including but not limited to enhancement of mate value) the ability to create and appreciate aesthetic designs of varied types very possibly contributes to fitness in other ways. The social value of the arts, for example, has received considerable attention: dance, song, drawing, sculpture, and narrative may promote social cohesion and foster transmission of community norms.3

1 Geoffrey Miller, The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature (New York: Random, 2001), 196.
2 Miller, The Mating Mind, 157.
3 Useful discussion of this topic is provided by Miller, The Mating Mind, 159-61, and by Ellen Dissanayake, Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 72-85.
A related benefit, particularly evident in dramatic and narrative arts, is the opportunity to practice mindreading skills, to rehearse behavioral options, and to hone interpersonal problem-solving skills. In consequence, the arts might assist in “generating adaptive flexibility,” a heightened ability to cope with stressors in physical, mental, and social environments. As evolutionary explanations of the arts grow in sophistication and draw on emergent research from such relevant fields as cognition, ethnography, and psychology, it seems certain that findings will prove multifarious: the evolutionary advantages of human art cannot be reduced to a single fitness benefit.

In sum, enhancement of mate value appears to supply one clearly demonstrable adaptive motive—though surely not the sole motive—for human art-making activity. Even if aesthetic pleasure should prove to be a fascinating byproduct of human mental functioning, as Steven Pinker has argued, rather than an adaptation in its own right, it is a byproduct that has been regularly harnessed in service of courtship behavior and thus rendered adaptive, in effect, through the back door. As Geoffrey Miller points out, “seemingly useless … ornamentation” serves throughout the natural world as a discriminating factor in sexual choice. He compares human art-making activity to the male bowerbird’s patient construction of a symmetrically and colorfully designed nest from grasses, twigs, leaves, and feathers. Like images pecked into rock or sounds arranged in patterns, this avian bower makes no direct contribution to the survival and rearing of offspring. No chicks are sheltered or raised in it. Its only function is to attract females and induce them to mate with those males whose architectural accomplishments elicit most admiration. It is easy to show that much human art is similarly inspired by a mating impulse: love and courtship consistently provide opportunities for showcasing artistic effort. Like bowerbirds, humans appreciate achievements that require exceptional talent, energy, and persistence. High-cost products and performance come to be regarded

4 See Sugiyama, “Reverse-Engineering Narrative,” 186-87; Denis Dutton, The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 105-106; Steven Pinker, How the Mind Works (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 540-43.
5 Joseph Carroll, Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 5. See also John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, “Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction, and the Arts,” in Evolution, Literature, and Film: A Reader, ed. Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 181-82, and Wilson, Consilience, 224-25.
6 Pinker, How the Mind Works, 534-35.
7 Miller, The Mating Mind, 262-65, 267-70.
8 Ibid., 272-74.
as beautiful precisely because they demonstrate hard-won mastery of technique, medium, and form. Every artist attempts to win admiration by exhibiting a level of excellence that less gifted or less dedicated competitors fail to reach.9

The situation presented in “Serenade” is a case in point: Collins’s speaker launches the poem by disparaging the banal tastes and mediocre abilities of “other boys from the village,” employing the familiar tactic of derogating rivals.10 These rivals communicate their “longing” using the most ordinary of instruments (“bean-shaped guitars”), relying on “three simple chords” to communicate their passion (lines 6, 3, 8). Their singing is dismissed as an unrefined, unromantic “yodeling” (line 8). Addressing the unnamed woman who is the object of all this masculine desire, the speaker announces his intention to win her by aspiring to a superior standard of artistic excellence. He will undertake serious “study” of unusual or difficult musical instruments such as the zither and the miniature bassoon, devoting years to “lessons” and “practice” (lines 12, 11, 16). Recognizing that many “hours of life” are required to achieve a high performance level, he commits himself to a long musical apprenticeship and, by extension, to a protracted courtship: he is willing to “bide [his] time” (lines 17, 10). Because he is motivated by a determination to outperform competitors by mastering musical instruments others cannot play, the aspiring suitor confronts the special challenges posed by a “double-reed” and “a row of wakeful strings,” perhaps reaping advantage from the handicap principle (lines 9, 21).11 The zealosity of his dedication to music, together with his capacity for comprehending and reproducing intricate sound patterns in more than one medium, will display to prospective mates a number of qualities associated with fitness: prominent among these are “health, energy, endurance, hand-eye coordination, fine motor control, intelligence, creativity, access to rare materials, the ability to learn difficult skills, and lots of free time.”12

The multidimensional investment of effort required to achieve technical excellence in the realm of music also may suggest a capacity for long-term commitment in the interpersonal realm. Collins’s speaker manifests an unwavering devotion to his musical goals that surely will appeal to female

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9 Ibid., 281, 282.
10 Billy Collins, “Serenade,” in Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems (New York: Random, 2001), 152-53, line 1. Citations refer to this edition. For discussion of derogation as a courtship tactic, see Buss, Evolution of Desire, 97-98.
11 See Pinker, How the Mind Works, 500, and Miller, The Mating Mind, 221-22.
12 Miller, The Mating Mind, 281.
preference for faithful and dependable partners.\textsuperscript{13} He hints briefly, too, at family status and resources, obviously important fitness indicators, when he refers to practicing in the “music room” of a home containing a “corridor” filled with “the fierce portraits of my ancestors” (lines 14, 13, 15).\textsuperscript{14} Such details remind potential mates that artistic activity correlates strongly with socioeconomic privilege.\textsuperscript{15} So far as readers know, the sole purpose of his artistic endeavors is to impress a much-sought-after female. Music provides a venue for showcasing his genetic quality and socioeconomic assets. All his choices and actions are guided by the unstated premise that musical accomplishment, particularly when focused on the rare and the demanding, constitutes evidence of high mate value.

As the poem continues, readers observe that the speaker is prepared to make increasingly spectacular musical displays if his initial endeavors should prove insufficient to win the woman’s regard. “If this is not enough,” he assures her, “I will apply myself to the pyrophone, / the double-lap dulcimer, / the glassarina, and the tiny thumb piano” (lines 22, 25-27). The increasingly far-fetched line-up of musical instruments he is ready to learn in order to ensure the success of his “serenade” emphasizes his determination to distinguish himself at all costs from other suitors—those ordinary guitar players. The most exotic instruments he names are the pyrophone and the glassarina, eighteenth-century inventions with properties that prove suggestive when considered in conjunction with courtship. The pyrophone is an especially telling choice, since it utilizes fire to create sound. Resembling an organ or calliope, it features a set of pipes. The combustive power of heated gas produces vibrations in these pipes, creating “singing-flames”: a “serenade” driven literally by fire.\textsuperscript{16} In outdoor, night-time performances, pyrophonic music may be enhanced by visual effects such as cascading flames.\textsuperscript{17} The explosive heat associated with this instrument aptly communicates the sexual ardor driving the speaker’s courtship efforts.

The glassarina, presumably a reference to the water harmonica or water organ, provides an elemental contrast to the pyrophone: it uses water, rather

\textsuperscript{13} See discussion in Buss, \textit{Evolution of Desire}, 33, 41-43.
\textsuperscript{14} Buss analyzes the importance of status and resources in mate selection in \textit{Evolution of Desire}, 24-26.
\textsuperscript{15} Pinker, \textit{How the Mind Works}, 126.
\textsuperscript{16} See M. Dunant, “The Pyrophone,” \textit{Popular Science Monthly}, vol. 7 (August 1875): 444-53, and G. E. Kastner, “Improvement in Pyrophones,” Patents: US 164458A (June 15, 1875); IFI Claims Patent Services. https://www.google/patents/US/64458.
\textsuperscript{17} Allan Milnes, “Valley Fiesta in Brisbane, Australia,” \textit{Demotix: The Network for Freelance Photojournalists} (September 10, 2010).
than fire, to produce sound. In the version invented by Benjamin Franklin in the 1760’s, “a set of glass bowls is mounted concentrically on a spindle.” As the spindle turns, it moistens the rims of the bowls continuously in a trough of water positioned beneath them. Working the spindle with a foot-treadle, the instrumentalist can use the fingers to touch several glass-rims simultaneously, playing chords as well as individual notes. This instrument has a historically distinguished history: a number of important composers, most notably Mozart, wrote pieces especially designed for it. Its cool, ethereal fragility stands in obvious juxtaposition to the fiery heat powering the music of the pyrophone. In choosing two such different instruments to convey his feelings, the speaker reveals that his beloved stimulates a wide range of emotional responses—from the forceful to the delicate, from the sensual to the spiritual. The polar oppositions in his ambitiously shifting choice of musical medium indicate that he desires her, and hence will woo her, in every possible way. A related point concerning the water harmonica is that the “continual friction of the edge of the glass on the fingertips ... combined with the singing whine of the glasses, sent many of its practitioners mad.” Collins’s speaker is willing to endure nerve-shattering agitation and even put his sanity at risk, evidently, in order to create musical effects that might please the woman of his dreams.

He caps his enumeration of future accomplishments by promising to create uniquely new music, “sounds no woman has ever heard,” to be played on a musical apparatus of his own devising: “a nameless instrument / it took so many days and nights to invent” (lines 36, 42-43). He will take aesthetic novelty to the highest possible level, devoting his “days and nights” not only to the mastery of existing forms and vehicles of musical art but to the invention of new ones. Making extraordinary music—the something “special” that constitutes art, as Ellen Dissanayake compellingly argues—he hopes to demonstrate that he himself, in his role as suitor, is as special as the music he creates. There is unmistakable hyperbole in his selection of increasingly esoteric means of musical expression: he insists that he will play obscure instruments, difficult instruments, long forgotten instruments, a yet-to-be invented instrument. He vows to make utterly new patterns of sound. All this aesthetic eccentricity and elaborate ambition he dedicates, with great enthusiasm, to the woman who is

18 Jeremy Montagu, The World of Baroque and Classical Musical Instruments (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press 1979), 124.
19 Ibid., 124-25.
20 Ibid., 124-25.
21 Dissanayake, Homo Aestheticus, 49-63.
the object of his desire. “I will be the strange one,” he tells her, “the irresistible misfit” (lines 28, 34).

His attitude toward the addressee is characterized throughout by reverent admiration, his pursuit of her by seriousness of purpose, but he is amazed, even amused, by the extravagance of his own behavior. See what bizarre things men will do to win a woman, he seems to say, inviting readers to laugh at his unremitting quest to set himself apart from rivals. His witty self-portrait anchors what Stephen Pinker calls “the otherwise inexplicable oddities of the arts” in the drive to defeat sexual rivals. To win fame, fortune and, not least of all, women, artists in every medium strive for aesthetic novelty: they “avoid the hackneyed” and “challenge jaded tastes.” The introduction of new forms, techniques, and theories enables them to enjoy the attention (and potential mating benefits) that elite, high-cost creative achievement attracts.

The final, ironic twist in Collins’s poem is that its speaker’s musical accomplishments remain unrealized. He woos his beloved with declarations of future intent: “I will …,” “I will …,” “I will …” (lines 10, 13, 25, 28, 34) Since he has not mastered even one of the musical instruments he names, the “serenade” with which he hopes to win his lady love cannot yet be performed. He occupies the entire space of the poem, forty-two lines in all, describing a virtuosity he has not even begun to attain. In the present moment of the poem, readers recognize, there is no evidence that he possesses the creative talents to which he lays such confident claim. Because his courtship display relies on hypothetical rather than actual achievement, the extravagance of his stated ambitions appears even more ridiculous. He is a show-off with nothing to show. With his dramatic promises and improbable plans, he illustrates a familiar masculine display tactic, projecting a self-assurance that emphasizes braggadocio over substance.

It is the poet, Billy Collins, rather than the fictional character he creates, who succeeds in exhibiting artistic flair. The as yet untrained musician’s “serenade” remains unsung, but the poem recounting the tale of his immoderate ambition is complete. It demonstrates its maker’s mastery of literary language and form; it displays exhilarating intelligence and wit. The aesthetic satisfactions and novelty it offers are fully realized; it delights the reader with unexpected content just as the speaker means to delight his beloved with unusual musical effects. The poem is as “irresistible” as its speaker boldly hopes to become (line 34). Humor is positively associated with intelligence and creativity, as emerging

22 Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 522, 523.
23 See Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*, 107-109.
research shows, and this constellation of traits plays a role in sexual selection. Working in a different medium, and indirectly acknowledging the roots of poetry in song, the poet rescues his speaker’s indefinitely deferred, wholly hypothetical courtship display, converting it into a successful exhibition of verbal fluency and creative intelligence. While it remains entertaining in spirit and jocular in tone, the poem succeeds in communicating serious reflection on a topic of enduring human interest, namely, the intersection of art and desire. Leavened by self-deprecating wit directed toward masculine boastfulness, the poem illustrates an indisputably important evolutionary motive for aesthetic striving.

Fitness benefits Billy Collins, the human artificer, might hope to reap from his exertions cannot be ascertained by examination of textual content. Such benefits are surely more varied than those aspired to by the speaker in the poem, more subtly linked to the passing on of genes. Some evolutionarily significant profit is likely to be garnered by readers as well. The poem clearly provides opportunity for analysis and rehearsal of behavioral options, as well as practice in mindreading. Readers are prompted to consider an intriguing behavioral cluster of intersexual competition, female choice, male courtship display, mate value, and false—or hyperbolic—self-presentation. Recognizing recurring human aspirations and conflicts in the stuff of the poem, a content rendered more potent by the playful originality of its presentation, readers may engage in adaptively advantageous reflection or projection. Any pleasure they derive from such engagement typically elicits admiration, boosting the author’s reputation and status. Since fame tends to enhance mate value, it follows that the poem may be regarded, indirectly, as a courtship display on the part of the poet. It functions as a generalized rather than a targeted display, and its accomplished virtuosity sets it apart from the unrealized ambitions of the poem’s speaker. Employing the same means chosen by the fictive “I” of his poem—namely, extraordinary achievement in the arts—the poet is poised to win social rewards, potentially including the romantic success still eluding his counterpart in the imaginary universe of the poem. This disparity between poet and speaker constitutes a final amusing irony for readers to savor.

24 Scott Barry Kaufman, Aaron Kozbelt, Melanie L. Bromley, and Geoffrey F. Miller, “The Role of Creativity and Humor in Human Mate Selection,” in Mating Intelligence: Sex, Relationships, and the Mind’s Reproductive System, ed. Glenn Geher and Geoffrey Miller (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2007).