Sociobiologists and feminists agree that men in patriarchal social systems seek to control females, but sociobiologists go further, using Darwin’s theory of sexual selection and Trivers’s ideas on parental investment to explain why males should attempt to control female sexuality. From this perspective, the stage for the development under some conditions of patriarchal social systems was set over the course of primate evolution.

Sexual selection encompasses both competition between males and female choice. But in applying this theory to our “lower origins” (prehominid ancestors), Darwin assumed that choices were made by essentially “coy” females. I argue here that female solicitation of multiple males (either simultaneously or sequentially, depending on the breeding system) characterized prehominid females; this prehominid legacy of cyclical sexual assertiveness, itself possibly a female counter-strategy to male efforts to control the timing of female reproduction, generated further male counter-strategies. This dialectic had important implications for emerging hominid mating systems, human evolution, and the development of patriarchal arrangements in some human societies. For hominid males who will invest in offspring, there would be powerful selection for emotions, behaviors, and customs that ensure them certainty of paternity. The sexual modesty that so struck Darwin can be explained as a recent evolved or learned (perhaps both) adaptation in women to avoid penalties imposed by patrilines on daughters and mates who failed to conform to the patriline’s prevailing norms for their sex. Other supposedly
innate universals, such as female preferences for wealthy husbands, are also likely to be facultative accommodations by women to constraints set up when patrilines monopolized resources needed by females to survive and reproduce, and passed on intergenerational control of these resources preferentially to sons.

KEY WORDS: Coyness; Female sexuality; Modesty; Patriarchy; Primate evolution; Sociobiology.

WHY WOULD A PRIMATE REQUIRE YOUTH AND BEAUTY IN HIS MATE?

"Was she beautiful or not beautiful?"

Daniel Deronda, George Eliot (1876)

According to nineteenth-century social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer, it was the natural function of woman to be beautiful. "Nature's . . . supreme end, is the welfare of posterity . . . as far as posterity is concerned, a cultivated intelligence based upon a bad physique is of little worth, seeing that its descendants will die out in a generation or two" (Spencer 1859:395). Privately practicing what he publicly preached, Spencer rejected a liaison with a woman he much admired—Mary Ann Evans—on the grounds that she was more intelligent than she was beautiful. "Physical beauty is a sine qua non with me" Spencer wrote, perhaps in reference to his own choice (1904:445).¹

Like Spencer, some contemporary evolutionary psychologists are convinced that they have discovered a "species-typical" universal male preference, insisting that "Beautiful young women are sexually attractive to men because beauty and youth are closely linked with fertility and reproductive value. In evolutionary history, males who were able to identify and mate with fertile females had the greatest reproductive success" (Buss 1994b:244, caption for figure showing young girls in a pickup bar). Somehow, in both the scholarly and popular literature on this topic, fertility is equated with youth, so for example Buss predicts that "men would prefer younger women as short-term and long-term mates" (1994b:244).

There is no disputing that, as Buss points out: "A fourteen-year-old woman has a higher reproductive value than a 24-year-old woman, because her future contribution to the gene pool is higher on average" (Buss 1994b). Along with symmetry and other indices of past and current developmental health, researchers have documented human male preferences for neotenous or "baby-faced" features. These include large