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The first chapter of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is entitled "The Perforated Sheet." Aadam Aziz, a physician in the Kashmir valley in 1915, is summoned by the wealthy local landowner to see his daughter Naseem, who seems to be suffering from a stomachache. When Dr. Aziz steps into the young woman's bedroom, he is surprised to find her bed flanked by three female bodyguards with a white sheet concealing the patient—but not entirely. In the center of the sheet is a hole, seven inches in diameter, through which the physician must examine the afflicted body part without seeing the entire patient. Comically, the landowner will not allow his daughter's modesty and honor to be violated, not even by the physician's gaze (which he recognizes is, ultimately, a male gaze). But he keeps having Dr. Aziz come back to examine other parts of Naseem's body, symptomatic or not, until the doctor has seen all but her face and private parts in bits and pieces. He finally sees her face (and she his) when she complains of a headache. Reader, she married him.

Rushdie's perforated sheet is a potent symbol of the originary masculinity and ocularcentrism of medico-scientific knowledge. In her groundbreaking book *Sexual Visions* (1989), Ludmilla Jordanova argued that Enlightenment science was always a gendered enterprise, "designating nature as a woman to be unveiled, unclothed and penetrated by masculine science" (24). For Jordanova, veils are an important touchstone for this penetrative function of science. Much like Rushdie's perforated sheet, they "reveal and conceal at the same time... This combination of hiding and revealing accounts for the erotic dynamic of veils. It also implies a form of truth beneath a layer which only certain people (generally men) may reveal" (90). But I shall argue in this essay that

many writers employ the language of veils and illusion to subvert or complicate the putatively hegemonic vision and paternalism of the masculine physician, especially through narratives of marital infidelity. If we are relatively familiar with the doctor as lover, we are less so with the doctor as cuckold.

Rushdie's tableau of the perforated sheet is in fact a parody of a longstanding literary tradition of what I would call "Hippocratic courtship": a doctor, usually presented as an eligible bachelor, makes a house call. Either a family member or the bride-to-be is sick. The doctor's masculine (read: heterosexual) gaze and clinical gaze conflict and converge (Foucault 1994). Courtship begins under the pretexts of real or feigned illnesses. Often a patriarchal figure of the family, like the landowner in Rushdie's novel, encourages the courtship in order to marry a daughter away. In *Madame Bovary* (1856), Monsieur Rouault's broken leg brings to him Charles Bovary, who then becomes his son-in-law; in *Middlemarch* (1872), Dr. Lydgate meets Rosamond Vincy after treating her brother for typhoid fever; in *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), Dr. Juvenal Urbino is called to the house of Fermina Daza to examine her for cholera (it turns out to be something else). But what is less often acknowledged is that, in such texts, Hippocratic courtship is always in tension with the possibility of marital infidelity. If a successful courtship results from looking through a perforated sheet, an action that indexes the physician's expert clinical vision, his cuckoldry evinces a deep anxiety in the cultural archive around his imperfect vision and his capacity for error.

In *Midnight's Children*, Dr. Aziz's mother chides him for his lack of insight into the landowner's motives: "So clever, my child, but he doesn't guess why that girl is forever ill with her piffing disorders. Listen, my boy: see the nose on your face for once: that [landowner] thinks you are a good catch for her. Foreign-educated and all" (27). In scolding her son for his obtuseness, she picks up on a trope that consistently rears its head in the narratives I shall examine below: the literary doctor's otherwise acute visual perception fails him in matters of the heart: he can pierce through some veils but not others.

No essay on the doctor-cuckold would be complete without Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), whose Charles Bovary is in many ways the model for other literary texts with physicians' marriage plots. Flaubert's depiction of the incompetent country doctor remains influential, and his inability to see his wife Emma's psychological distress and resultant infidelity is largely a comment on his mediocrity as a physician. Emma begins to tire of Charles and the mundanity of her rural life. She is "eaten up with desires, with rage, with hate. That dress with the narrow folds hid a distracted heart, of whose torment those chaste lips said nothing" (96). Elsewhere, Flaubert compares her will to "the veil of her bonnet, held by a string, flutter[ing] in every wind; there is always some desire that draws her, some conventionality that restrains" (81). In these passages, the folds of Emma's dress and the veil of her bonnet signify her husband's inability to see his wife's inner turmoil, presenting as barriers to insight. But Charles goes so far as to inadvertently become an accomplice in his wife's infidelity: when the philandering landowner Rodolphe offers to take Emma horseback riding, the latter demurs but is encouraged by her husband. He is concerned about her "palpitations of the heart" and agrees with Rodolphe that riding would be "just the thing" for her—he tells her, "Health before everything" (137)! Charles, like many physician-husbands in literature, cannot extricate his

work from his marriage. He can only see his wife's distress as pathology—palpitations—so that his blinkered vision of her “health” destroys “everything.”[1] In the end, when her affairs and her debt to the moneylender have brought ruin to her home, Emma seeks oblivion in a bottle of arsenic from which even the Paris-trained doctors Canivet and Lariviere cannot save her.

But perhaps all this happens because Charles is mediocre, a mere country doctor. After all, the last straw for Emma is the professional humiliation which befalls Charles after his failed attempt at “curing” a man's clubfoot, producing gangrene and requiring amputation.[2] Perhaps a more competent doctor is more insightful when it comes to marriage? Hardly. Tertius Lydgate of *Middlemarch*, clever and ambitious, is similarly unable to interpret his wife Rosamond's desires.

At first blush, Lydgate would seem to stand among Bovary's more cosmopolitan rivals—Canivet, Lariviere—but it is his scientific competence that is the problem: he thinks in generalities. His search for the “primitive tissue” (148) bleeds into his “strictly scientific view of woman” (153): “it is the way with all women” (592), he muses. In her presentation of Lydgate, Eliot—herself well-versed in the medical research of her day—critiques the “power of generalizing which gives men so much superiority in mistake over the dumb animals” (592). The primitive tissue of Lydgate's imagination, generalizing all women as alike, serves as a veil preventing his insight into Rosamond's feelings. She, like Emma, tires of the provinciality of her circumstances and yearns for a more passionate, glamorous life, until she falls in love with the charismatic Will Ladislaw. Although she never pursues this romance because Will does not return her affections (and she in fact becomes the primary vehicle through which Will and the protagonist Dorothea are brought together), her “distracted heart”—and Lydgate's inability to sense it—serves to undercut the putative ascendancy of the masculine clinical gaze.

Veils also appear in *Middlemarch*, but more so in the lexicon of “sewing,” “tissues,” and “webs,” thereby signifying much more than the straightforward motif in Flaubert. Veils appear here as the tissues of scientific research and the “fabric” of social relations.[3] As Gilbert and Gubar note in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979; repub. 2000), Rosamond “is always either literally or figuratively sewing...like Eliot, she is a spinner of yarns, a weaver of fictions” (520). Just as Lydgate searches for the “primary webs or tissues” (148) of the body, Rosamond spins “industriously at the mutual web” of their courtship (346). Interestingly, Lydgate dies at the (relatively) young age of fifty of diphtheria, which, according to Mary Carpenter, is a curious choice on Eliot's part because the disease “causes death by a ‘primary web’ of thickening tissue that grows into the throat and suffocates the victim” (523). That “gossamer web” of “young love-making” (Eliot 346) which brought them together eventually proves deceptive, flimsy and, ultimately, fatal. Rosamond remarries a wealthier doctor.

By the 1920s, in the wake of the New Imperialism and the widespread acceptance of germ theory, the cuckolded physician also becomes the cuckolded bacteriologist, a professional more familiar with the etiologies and symptoms of infectious disease (and, as it happens, cuckoldry). In W. Somerset Maugham's *The Painted Veil* (1925) a British bacteriologist, Walter Fane, marries the superficial Kitty Garstin, who had only accepted the proposal in order to gain ascendancy over her

sister. Dr. Fane is stationed in Hong Kong where Kitty becomes involved in a torrid love affair with the Assistant Colonial Secretary. But unlike Bovary or Lydgate, Fane intimately knows both his wife's personality and of the affair. In one episode, Walter almost walks in on the lovers but decides not to—in other words, he doesn't "lift the painted veil" he had conjured about his idyllic married life.

But lift it he must at some point. He decides to take Kitty with him to fight a cholera epidemic on mainland China as punishment. When he tells her he knows of her infidelity, he says: "I had no illusions about you... I knew you were silly and frivolous and empty-headed. But I loved you. I knew that your aims and ideals were vulgar and commonplace. But I loved you" (66). Maugham, a lapsed physician himself, attempts to redeem the cuckolded physician; unlike Bovary or Lydgate, who seem blithely unaware of or willfully overlook their wives' infidelities, Fane has always known. In fact, the burden of illusion is placed on Kitty who, after witnessing her husband's heroics in fighting cholera and eventually succumbing to it himself, realizes that she "alone had been blind to his merit" (125). If Flaubert leaves Bovary as a cuckolded fool, and if Eliot tells us that Lydgate died while thinking himself a failure and that his wife moved on immediately thereafter, Maugham uses the contexts of colonial medical humanitarianism to resuscitate Fane's thwarted masculinity. He ensures that Fane remain sympathetic to the end.

And yet, Fane, too, with all his training, is not immune to illusion: "It was strange that Walter with all his cleverness should have so little sense of proportion. Because he had dressed a doll in gorgeous robes...and then discovered that the doll was filled with sawdust he could never forgive himself nor her" (132). And though he dies of cholera, the implication is that he died of a "broken heart." [4] What all these narratives show is that the keenest of visions, like the physician's, are liable to errors of judgment. Veils and webs are intimately bound to distracted and broken hearts. Through these narratives of physicians and marital infidelity, the authors sometimes critique the hegemonic masculinity of the medical gaze or, in the case of Maugham, reinforce it.

Notes

[1] See Jean Améry's recently translated *Charles Bovary, Country Doctor* (2018), in which the author comes to Charles's defense and takes Flaubert to task for his "unrealistic" depiction of him. He even gives Charles the opportunity to avenge himself on Emma's lovers, Leon and Rodolphe.

[2] In Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* (1915), the protagonist who grows up to be a physician has clubfoot. There are moments of cuckoldry in this text too, and it would be interesting to see if Maugham is alluding to Flaubert.

[3] George Eliot's more influential work on veils and perception is her horror novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859), published two years after *Madame Bovary*. It follows Latimer, who has the unenviable gift of "prevision," that is, clairvoyance: all his visions come true. He foresees marrying, and eventually does, the beautiful but homicidal Bertha and can hear her thoughts. Gilbert and Gubar (1979)

argue that Rosamond is possibly another incarnation of Bertha. Lydgate's limited vision stands as a foil to Latimer's prevision.

[4] Also see Anton Chekhov's "The Grasshopper" (1892) in which a doctor named Dymov is deceived by a similarly superficial, cheating wife. Interestingly, after finding out about her infidelity, he dies after "sucking up the mucus through a pipette from a boy with diphtheria." Moreover, "the doctors watching by his bedside would learn that diphtheria was not the only cause of his sufferings. They would ask Korostelev [Dymov's friend]. He knew all about it, and it was not for nothing that he looked at his friend's wife with eyes that seemed to say that she was the real chief criminal and diphtheria was only her accomplice." Dymov's death is a portmanteau of Lydgate's and Fane's—the former's diphtheria and the latter's broken heart.

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