

the kind deeds of others by calling that sensitivity “unprofessional”—as if to be “professional” is to be frozen and unfeeling.

THOUGHTS ON DRUCILLA CORNELL'S
THE DREAM CURE

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Our Doctor-protagonist will bring greater solace to her profession, over time, than to herself. In the apparently hard, logical world of the physician—or the attorney for that matter—a woman's insistence on what I like to call “romantic realism” will some day make a difference. If she can survive the acculturated myopia of the American professional world, epitomized in this little scenario by her Mentor, her understanding that the heart is *always* part of the solution will progress from her individual practice to the textbooks as well.

What the Mentor calls her “one serious weakness as a doctor” is, of course, her unique strength. Considered romantic, her attention to the holistic reality of her patient surpasses the tiny range of mainstream medicine's self-flattering perspective. Eventually—in the cyclical patterns that define our sense of professionalism—the Doctor's idiosyncratic weakness will reemerge as the core of cure.

Meanwhile, though, how has such a person managed to graduate from medical school? How has she attained her present reputation, which—but for her empathy—is solid? The scene offers us counterfactuals to the Doctor's success. An affair with a mentor; *he* calls it off. *She* persists. These fits of passion are not strange to a Wordsworth; to an upwardly mobile health care professional, if not to the playwright who has created her, they are *anathema*.

Living her fantasies, with all the courage and no small part of the foolishness of an Emma Bovary, she unsurprisingly contributes to the fantasies of her dying Patient. Playing Cyrano to the absent lover-Christian, the Doctor conjures for her Roxanne a male lover who will be kinder and gentler. So as the central symbol in this scene, flowers are being sent everywhere—to a wife who is not loved, and to a woman who has no lover—but the Doctor receives none. Cast (literally) in the role of spurned woman, she re-casts herself as the perfect lover *she* desires. In so doing, she (like the playwright?) creates through art a world in

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which her (feminine) values of empathy become situated in the (masculine) mainstream. Resolving some of the guilt she may feel toward her rival (another woman spurned, after all), she permits the Mentor's flower-sending to be complemented by that of a conjured lover who is both exciting and considerate.

No wonder her Mentor feels uncomfortable with such a script. Of course, he cannot accept the challenge that the Doctor's individualized care poses to his own smug professionalism. To his understanding, after all, the occasional conquest of a budding professional is *ethical*: it simply reconfirms male dominance of the field. So the converse, an emerging persona who has both masculine and feminine traits, who both diagnoses and genuinely cares, will not do. He must nip his tutee's fantasy in the bud.

Nor is the Mentor completely wrong. The lapse of honesty embedded in the Doctor's role playing may or may not eventually harm her patient. (For the moment, it seems to be helping.) But it will surely disserve the Doctor, for she cannot fully comprehend how existentially vital such a scenario is *to herself*. The giveaway is her confiding in her dying patient about her own lover's misdeeds. This confusion is truly unprofessional, for it will prevent the Doctor from self-understanding, from growth. Until she faces squarely her own situation, uncomplicated by that of other people, she will never bring to herself the realism that (as her Mentor cannot comprehend) she *does* bring to her profession.

What can we see in the Doctor's future? Very much alive to her physical self, she enjoys a lover's touch too much to abandon it. But must she stay with *this* lover? To do so would symbolize a continuing inability to grow away from authority. To do so would confirm a repressed allegiance to leaving things as they are. At the moment, no one really takes her potentially rich approach to medicine seriously. For, although the playwright has told us that the Doctor has a "well-worked-out professional persona," everybody has surely pierced that veil by now. As with a self-proclaimed workplace feminist who in fact adopts the worst aspects of male professionalism, the Doctor guarantees her own subservient place in the profession (despite her "persona") by prolonging her affair with a hierarchical superior; neither the first type nor the second will become a truly feminist innovator until she—like Portia in Act V of *The Merchant of Venice*—drops her various masks and both seeks and speaks *herself*.

It will not all happen at once. Abandoning the role of second-choice woman, eschewing the fantasy of a perfectly empathetic male lover, she might try on a new mask. Still switching

sexes, she might for a time decide to emulate the worst aspects of her still male-dominated profession. Outdoing the boys at their own game, she might mold her considerable skills to the goal of making it instead of changing it. Should that occur, her patients would be released from their Doctor's empathetic fantasy into a far worse world where male indifference is exaggerated by female imitation.

We do not have the rest of the script. If the protagonist is to change herself *and* her profession, we must look to the playwright to find out how. Particularly given Ms. Cornell's theme, male critics should avoid the kind of re-fashioning attempted by the Mentor, even though ordinarily postmodern theater encourages the fullest range of audience participation in plot and character.

Maybe the actor playing the Mentor is destined (as the Photographer this time) to wind up with the Doctor. His benign androgyny would merge with her double-edged feminine strengths. Oh the possibilities! But this would be a *deusexmachina*—you choose the syllabification—and not a realistically romantic resolution.

Can we hope for more than this happy coincidence of two (four?) individuals who have somehow learned the hard, yet softening, lessons of sexual stereotypes? Perhaps through his/her art, the Photographer will project into mass consciousness the need for a caring pragmatics, a romantic realism, in the professions. But we do not have as yet before us this "Dream Cure."