

Fa(c)ulty Towers?

Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005)

By providing a general overview of the last fifty years' campus novels, *Faculty Towers* (2005) is, in many respects, a good start for filling a gap long due in literary history. Though it lacks an international context, it discusses over 30 novels, using sufficient quoted material in only 150 pages, so it could easily be set as a reference work for students of the Anglo-American academic novel.

Complying with the request of the original commissioners of the book to be a personal account of a literary and cultural phenomenon that keeps the critic's mind engaged, *Faculty Towers* is, at the same time, informative, instructive and anecdotal. The personal voice does not only reveal a sense of humour but also allows for self- and metareflexive comments, which Showalter makes an estimable use of. She points out in the introduction, for example, how dubious the following enterprise in her position really is: "Perhaps it's the ultimate narcissism for an English professor to write literary criticism about novels by English professors about English professors. . ." (3).

Her reading of autobiography into fiction and fiction into autobiography in

a chronological time frame makes the genre of Showalter's text an interesting subject for speculation. As the obviously dissatisfied *TLS* critic of *Faculty Towers* rightly states: "This is not exactly literary criticism, and it is not literary history either."¹ What is it then? It may be argued that what seems a critical account of the history of the academic novel, reads more as the *Bildungsroman* of a female academic called Elaine Showalter. Just like *Jane Eyre*, it is written in the first person singular, and the author-narrator makes it clear in each chapter which point of her career she is at (getting her PhD: 50, participating in an MLA convention: 66) and what she benefits from her experience: "the Milton scholar Isabel MacCaffrey . . . who had been my professor and role model when she taught at Bryn Mawr" (87) and readings: "That piece of inside information spared me another humiliating conversation with my male colleagues, who all somehow knew this already" (70).

The gradual development of Showalter's identity from a faculty wife to a tenured university professor goes hand in hand with the evolution of the campus novel. Her audience are "women who appear in the background, as students, as eccentric dons and dames, and especially as faculty wives" (16). Thus, it is made clear that the *Bildungsroman* is aimed at women, whichever stage of their career they are

at, who are, like her, both personally and professionally affiliated with the university as an institution and community, and need to know what is going on there for their own benefit.

It is both funny and instructive how fiction and (auto)biography are intertwined in the text. Depending on her self-perception perhaps, Showalter shows different reactions to critical associations of fictional characters in campus novels with her own self: she delights in being related to a male power freak celebrated for his academic achievements (135) but, more than once, refuses the seemingly most feared identification with middle-aged frustrated female characters, who are even called "Elaine" (1, 132). From this it emerges how Elaine Showalter, the author-narrator would picture herself or even (mis)behave as Elaine Showalter, the character. She actually reflects on how fiction and fact may affect each other in case of another person, Stanley Fish, whose publication of a major work was regarded as a long expected outcome of the biography of the fictional character he has been identified with, Morris Zapp, featured by David Lodge's academic novel, *Changing Places* (81). In other words, if you are a well-known academic, a campus novel is another tool to keep up or ruin your reputation.

However, the university novel may not only serve as a manipulative means

of power at a personal level but also at an institutional one. It is very obvious, for example, how protective the author is of Princeton. Having spent most of her academic career at this institution, Showalter's bias and loyalty towards it are not surprising: she declares preference of one novel over the other just because it takes place on Princeton's campus (37). Yet, she may seem suspect for the same reason when she simply uses her authority to save the university's reputation against the accusation, voiced in one of the campus novels, of selecting MLA interviewees on the basis of their treatment of the coffee machine: "In Princeton's defense, I can guarantee that these rumours are false" (109).

As far as the organisation of *Faculty Towers* is concerned, it is broken up into six chapters, each surveying the output of academic fiction per decade, from the fifties up to the first years of the twenty first century. This structuring is certainly beneficial from a literary historical point of view, as it makes the evolution of campus novels easy to follow, and it is a must if one accepts reading the account as a *Bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, as Showalter also admits, chronology may not be the best organising principle (15). It actually seems to limit the discussion of university novels to describing plots and enlisting characters and not leaving much room for thematic issues. This is

also pointed out by the *TLS*-critique, which, after sarcastically reducing *Faulty Towers* to a banality, hints at some topics which could have been dealt with in more detail, such as the university's relationship with utopianism or its lost commitment to education.²

Besides the evaluation of some of the fifties' academic novels as accounts of idyllic, self-enclosed campuses, the university as a (failed) utopian community re-emerges in the conclusion only, in connection with the utopistic Hazard Adams-novel, *Home* (2001). Here, Showalter discusses issues like the possible decline and fall of English departments and staff's refusal to confront it, the reasons for this destruction by both outer forces, such as business, other sciences and technology, and inner ones, like the loss of purpose of humanities (149-152). If these problems received the attention they deserve, the title would not just ring the bell of the popular BBC sit-com series, *Faulty Towers*, as explained in the introduction (6), but also of a book bearing the same title, which was written by two economists on the weaknesses of the structure of higher education. In *Faulty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education*, Ryan C. Amacher and Roger E. Meniers challenge the common assumption that tenure means lifelong employment for academics and plead for changing the structure of colleges and universities in a way that

these institutions also function as profit-making entities.³

Two more thematic issues are raised in the introduction, which seem interesting enough to have been developed further: one is the duality characterising the temporality of scholars' life, and the other concerns the Victorian precursors of the campus novel. The section on academic time (9-15) outlines the double time frame academics encounter: the circularity of the seasons characterising the academic year, on the one hand, and the linearity of a lecture, a day or, for that matter, of academic progress itself, on the other. Maybe unconsciously, but even Showalter's reflection on the evolution of the subgenre of the campus novel follows this duality: as a result of the linear, chronological progress of the last fifty years' university fiction, "its scribes have moved from hope to endurance to anticipation to cynicism and around to hope again" (15). Thus, as she reinforces in the conclusion, the academic novel is "back to where it started, with some changes that reflect the historical evolution" (143-4).

It would be tempting to examine what connections there are between the tension arising from this double time frame and both the utopistic enclosedness of universities against other "realities" and the apparent genre hybridity that characterises campus novels, including the circular romance and the

linear (industrial or social) Victorian novel. Showalter claims that the most successful campus novels are rewrites of Victorian texts (9), which is a statement to be verified and found reasons for. Again, there might be a relationship between nostalgically reintroducing certain Victorian conventions and the utopistic nature of universities.

One Victorian text is analysed in detail, however, or, to be more precise, one character of a Victorian novel: Mr. Casaubon of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the importance of which is carefully constructed and often reinforced. Casaubon embodies the myth of the male scholar: "the spirit of all that is sterile, cold, and dark" (7), against which different counter-images of the female academics can be created. After abundantly projecting his character into those of male professors of the campus novels discussed (27, 48, 114), and thus exercising strong criticism of the patriarchal practices still prevalent in the academia, in one of the last remarks of the text, this type of scholar is plainly declared unwished for in future university staff (152).

Through the consequent structuring of most analyses of individual novels, following the general description of the plot and male characters, the focus on female characters receives an emphatic final position with a good chance of sticking in readers' mind. However, since the observations are rarely longer

than few sentences, they do not pass the level of thought-provoking remarks. Robert Bernard's *Deadly Meeting*, for example, is described from a feminist perspective enlisting male chauvinist characters from the real macho to the closet homosexual, accompanied by a range of female stereotypes from the boring faculty wife, through the sexy student to the mad medievalist, and the only conclusion Showalter draws is a personal one: if she had read this novel earlier, she would not have asked its author for professional advice (65). Or, when describing Morris Zapp of *Small World*, she calls attention to the lack of his female alterego (78), which is reiterated by the closing remark of the analysis pointing out that these "female counterparts were still struggling" (83). But how, in which positions, and with what results?

These questions are reflected on in case of two novels, Carolyn Heilbrun's *Death in a Tenured Position* and Joyce Carol Oates's *Marya: A Life*, but the interpretations seem, in both cases, somewhat hasty: the suicide of the heroine, in the former text, is judged unrealistic (because in real life a woman in such a position would have looked for and found another position), and the protagonist's ignorance of her department's institutional events of the latter novel receives the same verdict (90-91). These readings seem as if there was a proper behaviour for female pro-

professionals. Maybe, this point of view would not seem critically unreflected or prescriptive, if the author had chosen female character types as an organising principle for her analysis of the academic novel, with a more contextualised display of the feminist perspective.

All in all, *Faculty Towers* seems a thought-provoking work, which is most likely to enhance endeavours to contextualise the subgenre of the campus novel in postmodern fiction, to place it in an international context, and, hopefully, to start discussions on thematic issues raised in connection with the university novel, and, more importantly, with academia on the whole.

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Notes

1. Ruth Morse, "On the Canonical Campus: Book review of Elaine Showalter, *Faculty Towers*," *Times Literary Supplement* (16 September 2005), 20 June 2006 <<http://tls.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,25363-1886083,00.html>>.

2. Morse.

3. Synopsis of Ryan C. Amacher & Roger E. Meiners, *Faulty Towers: Tenure and the Structure of Higher Education*, The Independent Institute, 20 June 2006 <http://www.independent.org/publications/books/book_summary.asp?bookID=14>.