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Media: Chronic Hystericity Syndrome

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This past July, MLA's outgoing president, Elaine Showalter, published part of her "Diary" in *Harper's* magazine. The entry to which we were privy-taken from an earlier piece in the *London Review of Books*-chronicled a part of Showalter's improbable book tour for *Hystories*, a much talked-about reinterpretation of fin-de-siècle maladies suffered, according to Showalter, by swathes of the American population made susceptible to hysteria by media manipulation and plain old millennial angst. As Showalter sees it, today's chronic fatigue sufferers, Gulf War syndrome victims, subjects of satanic ritual abuse, and alien abductees are more or less latter-day witch-hunters, anorexics, and McCarthyites, whose illnesses are more about their psychic needs than somatic functions. Needless to say, Showalter was not always warmly received on said tour. As she tells it, one audience in Seattle was "packed with enraged veterans waving flags, wild-eyed alien abductees, and self-proclaimed victims of satanic ritual abuse." Her literary escort, Agnes, evidently amazed at Showalter's steely resolve to face them all, proclaimed after her appearance, "Lady, you have balls!"

Agnes wasn't the first to suggest that Showalter's career had been borne on a certain kind of gutsy adventurousness. *Lingua Franca* recently ran a cover story titled "Who's Afraid of Elaine Showalter?" and Emily Eakin's take on Showalter was peppered with talk of her "pathbreaking," "trail blazing" and "pioneering" work-as if this "doyenne of American feminism" (as she has been called) had, indeed, hitched up the horses to the covered wagon with her little wife in tow, and made it west to the land of academic success-despite the best efforts of apaches, grad students, feminists, deconstructionists and gulf-war veterans to get in the way of her otherwise manifest destiny.

Notwithstanding Showalter's desire to diagnose the aforesaid communities in the language of psychoanalysis, I was struck by her subsumption of graduate students and feminists into those hordes whose infirmities were "real, but in their heads," as she summarily characterizes alien abductees and chronic fatigue sufferers. In the diary, Showalter claimed that feminists called her names after her column in last November's *Vogue* appeared, and that graduate students were mad at her because they "didn't like" what she wrote in the *MLA Newsletter*. Likewise, Eakin's *Lingua Franca* piece gave short shrift to the content of the arguments put forward by the GSC about the job crisis and the MLA leadership, though Eakin conceded that Showalter's attitude toward graduate students was probably not based on "a clear-eyed understanding of the American economy and the university's place within it" so much as a "grandiose, if benevolent projection."

What interests me about all of this is not so much the construction of MLA-president-as-celebrity in the mainstream (or just outside of mainstream) press, although the dossier that I hastily point to has "star system" written all over it. I'm much more interested in the way that Showalter's sometime political, professional, and intellectual opponents are positioned in these narratives by and about Showalter when she begins to travel through the public sphere. For while the "diary" piece could be understood as one of several gestures of strategic self-promotion, it also plays on mass-media clichés about activists (and feminists in particular) while it implicitly endorses these views in the name of the MLA. Moreover, it's also unfortunately consistent with Showalter's construction of her own position in her recent academic

work. The diary piece not only rehearses the argument of *Hystories*, it replicates the narrative positions that Showalter describes as constitutive of hysterical episodes. On the one hand, there is the gifted, charismatic theorist/doctor (Showalter); on the other, the hysterical muses (Gulf War veterans, name-calling feminists, outraged, unrealistic graduate students); and, finally, the cultural environment that's conducive to outbreak (about this, Showalter here, as elsewhere, has very little to say). Through all of this, Showalter never responds to feminist arguments about her position taken in *Vogue*--as if it were unthinkable, for example, that someone might object on principle to her cavalier ignorance about the sweatshop production of haute couture. Likewise, and as Eakin grudgingly notes, she never responds to graduate students' characterization of the political economy of higher education, but instead makes our objections into a matter of taste--as if our "not liking" what she wrote was evidence of lack of cultivation, rather than some semblance of intellectual and professional integrity.

It might be objected that I am, indeed, making too much of the diary--although at a moment when "the personal is political" has become the evident *raison d'être* for corporate and state surveillance of everything, it's hard to imagine taking this personal testament too seriously. And, of course, there's the fact that Showalter herself published the piece in two prominent mass circulation literary journals. In that context, one has to wonder about her motivations: it's as if, by dragging her intellectual and professional opponents into her narrative about personal celebrity, they become one more hurdle to be overcome or an annoyance to be put up with, rather than folks whose legitimate objections she ought to take seriously. Indeed, Eakin's *Lingua Franca* piece tells much the same story. According to "Who's Afraid?", while Showalter was "once stung" by the criticism of her academic colleagues, "today [she] appears not to care." Strangely enough, while her piece in *Vogue* from last year suggested that she cares very deeply about fashion, in *Lingua Franca*, she dismisses academic engagement altogether by calling it fashion: "I don't pay attention to academic fashion at all," she says.

More distressing than any of that, perhaps, is the way that Showalter, though in every way beating a hasty retreat from any positions that might be construed as feminist, constructs her position so as to take advantage of the gender codes of public appearance. The entire diary piece--and Eakin's *Lingua Franca* article--indeed, reads as an explanation or a footnote to Agnes' quip, "Lady, you've got balls!" As a piece of self-promotion, of course, the inclusion (or invention) of this quote is masterful. By appealing to it, Showalter gets to have it both ways. On the one hand, she gets to play the gutsy babe (dressed like Diane Sawyer, she didn't hesitate to brag in *Vogue*) that goes public, the one who faces down the unwashed masses and lunatic fringe with her defiant assumption of (pseudo-)scientific authority. On the other hand, she gets all the plausible deniability that comes with being "brave" enough to wade into the untidy morass of publicity; when things go wrong she can always accuse the media of distorting what she said, or of transforming her entirely ("Oh my god! What's happened?! Suddenly, I've got balls!").

But there's something deeply cynical about this move, and indeed, the entire construction of this public persona around Showalter's intentional "daring to offend." For while the ambition to move through mass-mediated public spheres as an intellectual remains, at this moment, all too rare and for that reason laudable, Showalter has done so after having had a full (tenured) academic career, and all the while abandoning anything that could have made her an even marginally interesting, moderately critical public intellectual. Moreover, the way this construction displaces intellectual acuity in favor of "moxie," the way it downplays meaningful dialogue for celebrating "chutzpah," does more to entrench the image of the loopy literary profession than any attack by the NAS or George Will. Even if one wanted to defend Showalter's liberal condescension as evidence of her (and, implicitly, the MLA's) cultivation or "civility," it's hard to imagine how that defense could be accomplished in the register that she invokes here.

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All of that's not to mention that Showalter's image of graduate students comes straight out of central casting. Of course, graduate students have been getting accustomed to playing the delusional, too-

politicized masses to beneficent, reasoned faculty in the last few years: certainly Margaret Homan's assertion that the Yale graduate students didn't suffer enough to have a union put them (and us) right up there with victims of satanic abuse, whose angst, we are to believe, is invented as much as real. And John Guillory's stated desire a few years back to isolate the "merely fantasmatic" in grad students' political dreams betrayed a discomfoting paternalism from this otherwise astute institutional critic. However, the prospect of playing hysteric to the doctors of the humanities is perhaps matched by the promising allure of the career-image drawn around our MLA president in the last year and a half: according to this narrative, she duked it out with the angel (i.e. she went on *Crossfire*), lived to tell the story, and even got a little publicity from the whole deal. Now she has a modest flat in London, writes for *London Review of Books*, has had a book tour and is the honorific target of a nasty, well-placed rumor: namely, that it's all been a cannily constructed publicity stunt anyway.

The implicit promise (or threat) that we might also turn out that way will always loom in media representations of humanities academics, at least so long as the desire for a job in one of these fields remains a political desire. In a culture as disenchanting with "politics" as ours, that's always a liability--we can (and probably will) always be cast as the unruly masses at the gate or workers whose relative privilege ought to lead us to "know better" about being political. However, those caricatures aren't in themselves a reason to pull back from the media--anymore than the president's "example" might be. Indeed, it's because of the media's fascination with the counterfactual fantasies of folks like Yale's redoubtable Peter Brooks that we enjoy some modicum of public "success" in the present. The more folks like University of California-Irvine's Vice Chancellor Frederic Wan go on infantilizing the academic labor movement, the more ground we gain with our publics outside the universities. (Wan recently responded to the idea of an organizing drive at UCI by asking, "If the children want better pocket money, do the parents negotiate with them? Over the issue of whether they wash dishes and mow the lawn, should the parents bargain with them formally?") Indeed, we can take some satisfaction in stories like the one that appeared in *Chicago Tribune* about a year ago, "'Underclass' Heads Class." The story chronicled the growing reliance of Illinois universities on low-wage adjunct labor, despite the high demand for the kind of work that teachers and writers do. This, and much other recent coverage of the academic labor movement makes one thing clear: however downright irritating media fantasies about graduate students and academics, their articulation can still be opportunities for us to sharpen our public rhetoric, focus our political practice, and connect with public constituencies. It would be a mistake not to take this risk, even if we can't agree on one set of ultimate goals. At the very least, I should hope one day that the GSC and academic labor will be remembered, in part, as an incredibly successful series of timely and effective publicity stunts.

That's not to say that we shouldn't have reservations about the media or academic publicity machines. Indeed, truly pernicious representations of graduate students still circulate with some frequency even among us. For example, *Salon* magazine's Sean McMeekin recently cast the University of California strikers in a currency minted by Peter Brooks himself: according to McMeekin, the striking graduate students in the U.C. system are really the spoiled children of higher education, whose demands for decent working conditions make it all that much worse for adjuncts, who have to take up the fiscal slack caused by union negotiated contracts. Of course, McMeekin never questions administrative or legislative policy that puts the squeeze on higher education at a moment when California demographics seem to demand the opposite. For McMeekin, as for Showalter, the administrative status quo should be ignored (at least as a political object), the better to be preserved.

So, however grateful grad students are for the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* sympathetic coverage (by Courtney Leatherman, among others), we need to respond its most resilient fictions: for example, the increasingly popular notion that university endowments thrive because of stock market gains--a tautology that the *Chronicle* never tires of repeating. The stock market, like university endowments, has increased in value because of the race to the bottom among service and goods producers in the U.S. and the North. Such gains have, at least for the past twenty-some years come at the ideological and material expense of labor. To forget this is to forget that the seeming prosperity of the United States during the current global

meltdown has been paid for by the nearly half of Indonesia's population living in poverty; it is also to forget that the Yale Corporation's ludicrous 7 billion dollar endowment has skyrocketed in value as it refused to recognize the lawfully elected bargaining representative of the graduate students and as it has for decades waged a war against its physical plant laborers to keep them from getting benefits. While it's actually not a surprise that this point of view doesn't appear in the *Chronicle*, it ought to be one point of contention, among others, that we should exploit.

We live in a profoundly anti-political moment, when it's easy to play activism off for laughs, or to make demands that once might have seemed reasonable-like, for living wages-appear like the radical rantings of a lunatic fringe. So be it. It's also a moment when the implicit and explicit social bargains enjoyed by another generation of workers are being denied to academic and non-academic workers alike. We can and should capitalize on this disillusion, even if it puts us in the political company of our latter-day hysterics: at least conspiracy theorists know liberal condescension when they see it.

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