

ACADEMIA INVISUS. A REPRESENTATION OF ACADEMIC LIFE IN FANTASY

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Abstract: The representation of academic life in SFF is a very popular ancillary or episodic topic. It usually mixes two subgenres, the so-called school story with fantasy or science fiction, where the university supplies the necessary and fascinating background for the narrative. In some cases real universities gain fictitious training programmes, professors or students, for example, Oxford (the most popular university in the genre) in all Connie Willis stories on historians who use time travel as a research tool or practicum for undergraduates, in the *James Asher* series by Barbary Hambly, in *All Souls* trilogy by Deborah Harkness, in *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman, or Toronto in *The Fionavar Tapestry* by Guy Gavriel Kay, and Pittsburgh in *Steel Rose* by Kara Dalkey. However, completely made-up universities prevail in SFF for example, Butler University in Newford City (both invented by Charles de Lint), the colleges on the twin planets of Yeowe and Werel (created by Ursula K. Le Guin as part of her Hainish cycle), the University in *The Kingkiller Chronicle* by Patrick Rothfuss, and Armedius Academy in *The Rithmatist* by Brandon Sanderson, to mention but a few.

The mode of representation often criticises, even parodies academia, particularly 'academese' and the strife for positions (see Sohár 2017). Here I shall focus on the famous Unseen University in the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett: how it developed throughout the series from mere parody into an important model of both inquisitive intellects and civil behaviour and what this representation of academe tells us about the general public's perception of higher education.

Key words: fantasy, humour, comedy, parody, satire, literary representation

Being an academic as well as both a researcher and a translator of speculative fiction (including a dozen Discworld novels), I have always been interested in how the world of (higher) education is perceived by outsiders, how it is represented in literature – in the so called campus novel or university fiction cf. the “Campus Trilogy” by David Lodge, or *Porterhouse Blue* by Tom Sharpe) –, particularly in science fiction and fantasy, hence this research project. Besides appeasing a personal curiosity, it may also be in the public interest to reflect upon the clichés, beliefs and fallacies which surround academia; knowing how we appear in the public eye will raise our awareness of problems (e.g., why are we so often unseen?), and may lead to solving these problems and better communication with the populace.

Two years ago I examined how two American authors, Sheri Tepper and Connie Willis, presented academic life in some of their works (Sohár 2017), and now I’m going to look at a university invented by a British writer, Sir Terry Pratchett (1948–2015), “[...] a humorist whose targets are often the pretensions of academics or scientists, but who values knowledge, understanding, and story.” (Sawyer 2002, 62).

Terry Pratchett’s Discworld

Since 1983, the publication of the first novel in the series, Terry Pratchett’s creation, the Discworld has been greatly admired by an ever increasing and surprisingly varied audience.

This immense popularity has spawned a small spinoff industry: theatre, film, television and radio adaptations, board, card, video and computer games, comic strips, guide books, maps, quizbooks, a cookbook and many other types of merchandise, including an Unseen University diploma, UU student notebook, UU Library Print, and eventually lead to a few¹ scholarly papers investigating the various aspects of this seemingly simple comical fantasy world (e.g. Alton and Spruiell 2014, Held and South 2014, Michaud 2016, Rzyman 2017, Rana 2018).

The series consist of 41 novels and several short stories, all of them are immersive fantasies (Mendlesohn’s categorisation, 2008, Introduction). They are set on the flat Disc which is carried by four elephants who stand on the shell of a huge turtle, and the whole caboodle swims in space while a tiny sun and moon orbit around it, its ocean ceaselessly pours into space

¹ As Rzyman points out “Oddly, as of 2013, there is just about one, widely acclaimed, full length thoroughly scholarly publication on Pratchett as a writer: *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*, whose second edition came out in 2004, looks into the various facets of Pratchett’s writing.” (2017, 2)

at the edge causing a rimfall, and the Hub in its centre creates huge amounts of magic to keep everything together and working.

All narratives parody or satirise aspects of Western civilisation holding up a sort of distorting mirror in which our attitudes, customs, stereotypes, beliefs, and convictions reflected hilariously and, if we are so inclined, thought-provokingly. (For more details either about the author or his works, see Butler 2001, Cabell 2012, Sohár 2018, Colin Smythe webpage, WikiVisually or the L-Space Web.)

Unseen University evidently plays an important role in the series as it puts an appearance in 29 out of the 41 Discworld novels, all four Science of the Discworld volumes, all companions, plus *The Streets of Ankh-Morpork*, *The Compleat Ankh-Morpork*, *The Unseen University Cut-Out Book*, *The Unseen University Quizbook*, *The Discworld's Unseen University Diary 1998*, as well as the volumes of collected illustrations, *The Pratchett Portfolio* and *Imaginarium*. It may have been named after “the Invisible College of Elizabethan magician and mystic, John Dee” (Butler 2011). It seems that the author had a lot to say about – or through – this educational institution.

In what follows, I shall sum up all relevant information about this university, focus on the faculty, and describe how they gradually transformed in the course of time as the series progressed.

The Disc's premier college of wizardry: a short introduction

NVNC ID VIDES, NVNC NE VIDES
motto of the UU

Institutionalisation has frequently been brought into play in our history to get rid of the unwanted, and this is exactly the reason for founding a college of wizardry. Magic is a natural force which encloses and keeps together the whole Discworld, it is therefore unsafe, able to wreak havoc with or even destroy it by those who have too much ability or skill at their disposal. Magic tends to concentrate, like heavy metals in certain plants, so the eighth son of an eight son is a wizard squared, that is, a sourcerer, thus the celibacy requirement: wizards are not supposed to have any offspring. Unseen University, founded by Alberto Malich, the greatest wizard of his age, is a means to tame this power: in order to steer a different course, it offers the highly competitive wizards first a hierarchy with lots of infighting, later a pampered life and getting in one another's hair. According to Pratchett,

knowledge is power, uncontrolled power corrupts totally, thus the powerful wizards have to be assembled, and their energies diverted into consuming huge meals and bickering, so the institution has had to come into being.

The central role of the university is reflected in its location: the campus is partly placed on the river bank in the centre of Akh-Morpork, an important city-state on the Discworld, it has an actual address there, Sator Square², and partly on unreal estates. Several of its buildings, the Great Hall, the Library, the Tower of Arts, the High Energy Magic Building (home of Hex, the university computer, and the experiment with a round world, the only building less than a thousand years old), and the Uncommon Room in the main building are the key venues of events in many novels, others are just referred to, like the University Clock Tower with its silent bell, Old Tom, the Wizard's Pleasaunce, or the University Gardens. The campus is walled off, a curfew has been in force for centuries, so teachers and students alike have to climb the walls if they want to spend an evening in the city.

The university is incredibly rich (rents, fees for magical services etc.), and receives regular donations from the citizens who, very sensibly, try to keep the wizards replete, and thus the space-time continuum intact.

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Alma Pater: Faculty, staff, students

UU is based on the British university, particularly Oxbridge traditions which are widely known not only in the British Isles or the English-speaking world, but internationally, therefore eminently suitable for travesty.

² A double palindrome, and a typical Pratchett joke for those in the know.

³³ A double palindrome, and a typical Pratchett joke for those in the know.

Pratchett combines the well-known elements with his equivocal attitude towards higher education when describing the wizards' college. After unhappy school years, he finished his studies early, went to learn journalism as an apprentice, and had an ambivalent relationship with formal education all his life (Pratchett, 2014). He attributes his vast knowledge to compulsive reading for which he thanks fantastic fiction, not any schooling: "The fantasy books led me on to mythology, the mythology led painlessly to ancient history ... and I quietly got an education, courtesy of the public library." (Pratchett 2014, 114). Butler writes that using faculty for teaching staff clearly demonstrates Pratchett's outsidership (cf. current parlance in British tertiary education, 2011, 14). It is exactly the outsider view what makes the portrait of UU so intriguing and provocative. Most campus novels in speculative fiction ignore the staff who run a university, and only focus on the academics and students; but Pratchett reveals the workings in the underside of the institution from Mrs Whitlow the housekeeper to Modo the gardener, from the bedlows to the Candle Knave, and he relates the interactions between the two sides with relish (see e.g. *Reaper Man*, or *Unseen Academicals*).

In the early books which feature the Unseen University, there appears to be a different cast of wizards each time, certainly a different Archchancellor, with the Librarian [...] as the only constant – indeed, the Librarian appears in most of the books even if the other wizards don't. By the time of *Moving Pictures*, the wizardly personnel settle down. (Butler 2011)

First, let's look at the university organisation. The head of the University is called Archchancellor. In the beginning of the series this position was highly contested, the council of highest ranking wizards, the heads of the eight orders, elected the person chosen by the gods – and goddesses –, and the Archchancellor hat, usually the most senior wizard who never lasted very long: *Sourcery* begins with the 304th Archchancellor of the 2000-year-long history of UU (Butler 2011). However, after the all-out magical war in that novel which almost destroys the world, the wizards decide to have a period of stability, and elect a retired country wizard (Mustrum Ridcully), who leads the university all along the series afterwards, and radically changes its character: "[...] this had worked quite well, because, although Ridcully was an impossible manager, the University was impossible to manage and so everything worked seamlessly." (*TLC*, 19)

Nobody knows how many faculty members exist, the novels usually feature just a handful,⁴ who do not have real characters, just a few qualities and habits. For instance, the Bursar becomes deranged in *Moving Pictures*, so afterwards he needs taking medication to hallucinate that he is sane. The Dean always makes nasty and snobbish remarks except when he is allowed to chase something, the Senior Wrangler swoons in female company, and knows an unbelievable amount of trivia. Rincewind embodies cowardice and survivability while saving the world, or at least playing a key role in paving the way for the happy ending. And so on. That is, the wizards have these recurrent leitmotifs which combined constitute one of the leading themes in the Discworld symphony and fugue.

Faculty members have various titles, ranks and letters after their names designating their specialty. This provides the author with an inexhaustible fount of mockery and mirth:

Ponder Stibbons, a wizard in the Discworld series with the **unfeasibly grand title of Head of Inadvisably Applied Magic, Praelector and Reader in Invisible Writings, the Master of Traditions, the Camerlengo of Unseen University**. (Sawer, 2015, my emphasis)

But what Rincewind has always sought is some secure, safe position somewhere, and he seemed to get this when he was appointed as **Egregious Professor of Cruel and Unusual Geography** (even though the previous incumbent was probably eaten by a giant lizard) The post has no salary and total insecurity of tenure, but he does get his laundry done for free, a place at mealtimes and, because of a quirk of the coal porter, seven bucketfuls of coal every day. He also gets his own (superheated) office, and no one chases him much. **Despite the fact that he is the least senior member of the UU faculty he is also, now, Chair of Experimental Serendipity, Reader in Blood Dynamics, Fretwork Teacher, Chair for the Public Misunderstanding of Magic, Professor of Virtual Anthropology and Lecturer in Approximate Accuracy. He has in fact accumulated all those jobs that require absolutely nothing more than that something in theory is doing them.** (*TR*, 242, my emphasis)

Pratchett brilliantly blends real titles (like Praelector of Oxbridge and Camerlengo of the Curia) and invented ones with ridiculous job descriptions and wordplays emphasising their absurdity: Professor of Dust, Miscellaneous Particles and Filaments; Professor of Post-Mortem

⁴ The Dean, the Bursar, the Senior Wrangler, the Chair of Indefinite Studies, the Lecturer in Recent Runes, the Librarian, Ponder Stibbons, and Rincewind. Note that most of them, although have proper names, are referred to by their academic ranks which supports my argument that they are not real people, just (stereo)types.

Communications; Reader in Woolly Thinking; “Ladislav Pelc, D.M.Phil, Prehumous Professor of Morbid Bibliomancy” (*GP*), to say nothing of the above quoted “Fretwork Teacher.” He also makes fun of the (academic) mania for titles: “Galder Weatherwax, Supreme Grand Conjuror of the Order of the Silver Star, Lord Imperial of the Sacred Staff, Eighth Level Ipsissimus and 304th Chancellor of Unseen University” (*TLF*) and “And my name is Dr A. A. Dinwiddie, D.M.(7th), D.Thau., B.Occ., M.Coll., B.R. That’s Dinwiddie with an o.” (*TT*)

The faculty members have tenure, for life. Their main occupation is to eat huge meals nine times day, and tiff. When a wizard gets a job offer with fixed emolument, the Archchancellor is upset: “Remuneration? Since when did a wizard work for wages? We are pure academics, Mister Stibbons! We do not care for mere money!” (*UA*) It slightly contradicts the fact that professors are supposed to teach and for that they do get compensation: “Many of the faculties also support a sponsored Professorship, which, although carrying a sturdy stipend, also carries with it the stigma of actually being expected to teach the students.” (*TR*, 287)

Everybody is free to pursue their interests and change reality in their rooms, for instance, inserting “half a mile of trout stream in his bathroom” (*UA*), the goal is to keep the wizards out of mischief.

This sinecure is available for all males with a magical potential, females are not accepted (only as staff), the equal opportunity attempt in *Equal Rites* stopped there, although “the all-male world of wizardry could be critiqued by offering a female wizard’s experiences” (Butler, 2011, on gender issues see Williams 2015 and Gender Forum 2015, Issue 52). Officially, a boy or man can enroll in college if he has a sponsor among the wizards, or did a great service to magic. Once enrolled, he will enter one of the eight orders of wizardry (similar to the houses of British public schools). When he obtains his degree, he will have his staff, and may leave (cf. *Mort*), or stay on and likely spend the rest of his life there, separated from civil society.

And now we arrived at the two topmost university activities: teaching and research.

Alma Pater: Teaching, research, library

Universities are traditionally seats of learning, and the reason for their existence is teaching the next generations and doing research, that is, being the cutting edge of knowledge and providing their successors. Neither is fancied by the wizards who to go to any lengths to avoid the former and tend to stay clear of rigorous scholarly investigations in favour of

unthinking experimentation as it is clearly demonstrated in *Science of the Discworld*.

'Students?'

'Er. Yes?' said Ponder, backing away. 'That's all right, isn't it? I mean, this is a university . . .'

Ridcully scratched his ear. The man was right, of course. You had to have some of the buggers around, there was no getting away from it. Personally, he avoided them whenever possible, as did the rest of the faculty, occasionally running the other way or hiding behind doors whenever they saw them. The Lecturer in Recent Runes had been known to lock himself in his wardrobe rather than take a tutorial. (SM, 182)

This attitude of course is not unheard-of in higher education, quite the contrary. I am convinced that all of us know colleagues who think and even say that the university would be a better place without students, and keep their interactions with the student body at a minimum.

Since teaching appears to be unavoidable in certain cases, the university has only one-week long terms, officially eight of them – eight is the magical number on the Discworld –, but the Archchancellor often forgets to open them which of course means no tutorials, a great relief for all involved. When teaching cannot be dodged formally, an unspoken pact helps wizards to sidestep their duties, and students to evade unwanted classes:

One room, amongst the more than 5,000 known rooms in UU, which we may experience trouble visiting is 3B. It is not locatable on any floor plan of UU – but all virtual lectures take place there. That is to say, those lectures that neither the students nor the lecturers wish to attend, but which must have some type of existence since they are down on the timetable, are therefore held in this room which, in fact, does not exist. (TR, 294)

In the whole series, we read about examinations (e.g. the “byzantine examination regulations”), but the only one described in *Moving Pictures* shows an incredibly lucky and totally unfair pass, when the trap set for the student who carefully achieves just a few points less than the pass mark every year in order to retain a scholarship and live a peaceful student life catches another, who thus gets through the exam successfully and is tenured. It is also interesting to compare the exam questions of UU – “What, right, what is the name of the outerdimensional monster whose distinctive cry is “Yerwhatyerwhatyerwhat?”” (MP, 34) – with the competitive examination system of the Agataen Empire described in *Interesting Times* – e.g. the candidates for the post of Assitant Night-Soil Operative have to write “a sixteen-line poem on evening mist over the reed beds” (IT, 106) –, there is

not much difference: both require all participants to know totally irrelevant and pointless things. It certainly goes against the cultivated image of meritocracy in academe, particularly if we take the received way of advancement, that is, killing one's peers and superiors, into consideration; then again, it may also be interpreted as mocking the lack of learning on part of the masses.

Similarly, the only lecture ever presented does not paint a complimentary picture of academic oration, either of delivery, or intelligibility,⁵ while it plays with some concepts of modern physics and philosophy of science – most scenes written by Pratchett have several layers that is what makes them so captivating and challenging to decipher⁶:

When the wizards had settled down, Simon began to talk. He read from notes, and every time he stuttered over a word the wizards, as one man, without being able to stop themselves, chorused it for him. [...]

Even allowing for the stutter, he was not a very good speaker. He dropped notes. He corrected himself. He ummed and ahed. And as far as Esk was concerned he wasn't saying anything very much. Phrases filtered down to her hiding place. "Basic fabric of the universe" was one, and she didn't understand what that was, unless he meant denim, or maybe flannelette. "Mutability of the possibility matrix" she couldn't guess at all.

Sometimes he seemed to be saying that nothing existed unless people thought it did, and the world was really only there at all because people kept on imagining it. But then he seemed to be saying that there was lots of worlds, all nearly the same and all sort of occupying the same place but all separated by the thickness of a shadow, so that everything that ever could happen would have somewhere to happen in.

[...] There was something disturbing about the phrases Simon used. Half the time he seemed to be saying that the world was about as real as a soap bubble, or a dream.

[...] Simon talked on, about the world being made up of tiny things whose presence could only be determined by the fact that they were not there, little spinning balls of nothingness that magic could shunt together to make stars and butterflies and diamonds. Everything was made up of emptiness.

The funny thing was, he seemed to find this fascinating. (ER)

⁵ Although the reader sees the whole scene through a young girl's eyes, and since female and male approaches to magic differ significantly, this point of view may be interpreted as parody of, or deficiency in female understanding as well as the reaction of the (wo)man in the street to lofty scientific parlance.

⁶ I do bury, er, resonances and obscure references in the text, but I hope I do it in such a way that it won't spoil the narrative for readers who don't recognise them. (Pratchett interview 1995, *Turtle Recall*, 328)

Since the author focusses on the faculty members, students are mostly ignored. Just a few are named and only those three figure in at least two novels (Rincewind, Ponder Stibbons, Adrian Turnipseed aka Big Mad Drongo) who later obtain tenure, and may serve as another cliché.

University traditions, for instance, the degree ceremony called Convivium (*J*), a whole-term-long Rag Week (*MM*), or the use of Latatian, the Disworld version of Latin for mottoes and formal occasions, like awarding an honorary degree of *Doctorum Adamus con Flabello Dulci* (*J*), appear quite frequently, and add to the *couleur locale*. A few study books – *Occult Primer* (*S, J*) and *Occult Companion* (*UA*), *Necrotelicomnicon Discussed for Students, with Practical Experiments* (*MP*) – are mentioned in passing. Other trappings of university life — for instance, curricula, essays, theses, job descriptions – are only referred to in passing, or not at all, evincing that only the most apparent aspects of academic life are discussed in the series.

Ideally, academics are expected to do research and contribute to the total of human knowledge. Pratchett himself obviously loved doing research for his books as well as for fun, so it was familiar terrain; that might be the reason why his critique of the wizards' research seems much more cutting. Having a look at what the author implies by the titles of research papers or monographs and their qualities— well, I for one find them apt, but at the same time feel uncomfortable reading “*Dangerous Mammals, Reptiles, Amphibians, Birds, Fish, Jellyfish, Insects, Spiders, Crustaceans, Grasses, Trees, Mosses & Lichen of Terror Incognita* (at least 29 volumes and three parts)” [*TLC*] or “*Wesentlichen Ungewissheiten Zugehörig der Offenkundigen Männlichkeit, Das* (Ofleberger)” [*UA*], or Dr Bentley Purchase, *The Vicar is Coming to Tea and One Hundred and Twenty-seven Other Warnings of Social Embarrassment* (Unseen University Press) (*Snuff*). Each of them typifies and exaggerates certain title conventions.

Wizards tend to commit themselves to arcane research topics: “The Dean had spent seventeen years writing a treatise on The Use of the Syllable 'ENK' in Levitation Spells of the Early Confused Period.” (*SM*) Scholars are often accused of doing research useless from a societal perspective, and these jokes seemingly substantiate the accusation, like the student pursuing an inquiry abroad:

‘That’s Devious Collabone, sir. He’s out studying Oyster Communications in a Low Intensity Magical Field for his B.Thau.’ ‘Good gods, can they communicate?’ said Ridcully. ‘Apparently, Archchancellor, although thus far they’re refusing to talk to him.’ (*GP*)

Another feature of scholarly works, creatively and funnily put into service by the author, is adding footnotes to his text as well as to his footnotes (e.g., 24 footnotes in *UA*, 35 in *Snuff* compared to one and five, resp. in *COM* and *TLF*), thus producing a marked *Verfremdungseffekt*, certainly unusual in immersive fantasy fiction – though Pratchett frequently employs distancing effects as an artistic device to promote critical thinking.

Neither learning, nor research can be done without a library, and the Library of the UU, but even more so, the Librarian – a human turned orangutan who only says ook, is a mean keyboard player and goalkeeper and all-round favourite of fans – features in most Discworld novels, and commemorate Pratchett's love of reading, for books. According to the Library-Space general and specific theories, the Library contains all books, even those that are not written yet. The Archchancellor encourages the students to take advantage of the Library:

You know how to read. There is a library. You're here to learn, not to be taught. [...] We tell our students that there are some things that are sooner or later unavoidable, and these will probably include opening a book. (UUD)

Harsh criticism of student behaviour, indeed, and it certainly anticipated the 21st century problems we have to face these days in higher education.

Conclusions: The transformation of UU

To my knowledge, only Penelope Hill (2000, 2004) examined the University's development in an essay, but after the second edition of that collection six more Discworld novels have added to the portrayal of UU, making it more nuanced, giving it more depth, distancing it from the initial pure burlesque in the first novels.

The final university is indeed very different from the initial light-hearted parody. The last Discworld novels focus on Ankh-Morpork and its industrial revolution which changes the world. Of course, the UU partakes in this progress, although only one plotline in *Unseen Academicals* takes place there. In these novels, as opposed to the previous ones, the wizards are capable of changing at several levels. For instance, the Dean accepts a job offer from another university, and becomes its Archchancellor, an act regarded as treason by his erstwhile colleagues. More importantly, the head wizards display more wisdom and more tact, champion social and economic justice, and play a significantly more active role in the city's life as is demonstrated by their employing an orc: the wizards's college becomes a flagship university in equal opportunity employment for all species – just

like the City Watch of Ankh-Morpork in another subseries –, publicising their belief that nobody should be discriminated against based on the happenstance of their birth, and prejudices should be re-assessed in each and every case.

Obviously, UU, like the whole Discworld, gradually took shape, so inconsistencies do occur, particularly when we contrast the early novels with the late ones. The metamorphosis of UU ran parallel with that of the Discworld and manifests the author's evolving world view and moral stance which found its best expressive form in the fantasy genre.

Fantasy should present the familiar in a new light—I try to do that on Discworld. It's a way of looking at the here and now, not the there and then. Fantasy is the Ur-literature, from which everything else sprang—which is why my knuckles go white when toe-sucking literary critics dismiss it as "genre trash." (Pratchett 2014, 100)

Just like Le Guin (2010), another exceptional fantasist who wrote about schools and universities, Pratchett considered fantasy a fundamental, essential part of world literature whose neglect by literary studies is unforgivable, and his postmodern use of the fantasy traditions which conquers the hearts of millions while nourishes their intellects clearly shows the value inherent in the genre.

This paper only scratched the surface of this fascinating topic, but I hope that a detailed analysis of Unseen University will not be long in coming.

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