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Collecting to the Core--Milton Studies and Surprised by Sin

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Collecting to the Core — Milton Studies and Surprised by Sin

by **Cecile M. Jagodzinski** (British Literature Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <cjagodzi@gmail.com>

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Readers, I hope, will pardon the cliché, but writing on core monographs in British literature, from the Old English period through the twenty-first century, provides one with an embarrassment of riches. Which period best represents the strength and influence of British literature on literature as a whole, or on the literatures of other parts of the globe? Which authors should one regard as preeminent? **Shake-**

spere, of course, but what about **John Donne**, **Edmund Spenser**, **Samuel Johnson**, **Jane Austen**, the **Brontës**, the **Brownings**, **Charles Dickens**, and, of more recent vintage, **James Joyce**, Nobel laureate **Seamus Heaney**, or winners of the **Man Booker** award? In order to escape the burden of such a choice, I am proposing a single core title, along with its associated referents, that has had a profound influence on **Milton** studies: **Stanley Fish's** *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*.¹ Not only did this critical work change the way scholars thought about **John Milton's** epic poem *Paradise Lost*; it illustrates the way in which the critical tradition in literature evolves, and, more broadly, how scholarship operates as a conversation between and among scholars.

In order to set **Fish's** work into its proper context, a brief history of the critical reception to *Paradise Lost* is in order. It was first published in 1667, with later seventeenth-century editions in 1668, 1669,

and 1674.² It was published after the **Restoration** of the monarchy in England, following years of civil war — years in which **Milton** stood on the side of the republicans as a prolific author of pamphlets opposing **Charles I** and the royalists. Especially after the publication of the fourth edition of *Paradise Lost*, **Milton** was "known and celebrated in England as the author of the national Protestant epic."³ The poem was regarded as a work of supreme sublimity, notable for its aesthetics as well as its Christian moralism. Several positive critical appraisals, commentaries, and explanations of the work appeared in the eighteenth century.

The critical winds shifted with the rise of the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century. For **William Blake** and **Percy Bysshe Shelley**, the poem's key figure was not Adam, Eve, or God the Father or the Son, but Satan himself. **Shelley**, in the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound*, invokes **Milton**

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as “the inheritor of a republican tradition in poetry” whose leaders, a new generation of poets, sought to overcome tyranny. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley regards Satan as “the Hero of Paradise Lost” because of the devil’s sheer “energy and magnificence.”⁷⁴ The most influential of the Romantics in the history of Miltonic criticism, however, was William Blake. Not only did he illustrate several of Milton’s works, but he famously remarked in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Milton “wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God and at liberty when of Devils & Hell.”⁷⁵ Blake’s estimation is repeated throughout the criticism surrounding *Paradise Lost*; indeed, the character of Satan becomes the central figure in what came to be known as “the Milton controversy,” and Satan presents Fish with the opportunity to make some of his strongest arguments in *Surprised by Sin*.

By the early twentieth century, the image of Milton as a republican combatting tyranny was replaced by a consideration of Milton the epic poet. The Latinate (and often obscure) style of *Paradise Lost* was criticized by the modernists, including T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Ezra Pound, and F. R. Leavis. To them, Milton’s God was a cruel tyrant who simply gave long and boring speeches. In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that *Paradise Lost* “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied about its business, but rather a solemn game.”⁷⁶ Noted (and formidable) critic F. R. Leavis does not mince words in his commentaries on Milton and the pro-Milton camp. In an essay entitled “Mr Eliot and Milton,” Leavis remarks on “Milton’s failure to realize his undertaking — to conceive it dramatically as a whole ... He remains in the poem too much John Milton, declaiming, insisting, arguing, suffering, and protesting.”⁷⁷ In *Milton’s God*, William Empson centers on the figure of God the Father. Quite radically, he admits that “I think the traditional God of Christianity very wicked, and have done so since I was at school, where nearly all my little playmates thought the same.”⁷⁸ Satan, on the other hand, makes us “feel the agony of his ruined greatness;” in other words, Satan, as in all tragedies, is the hero with a tragic flaw.⁷⁹ Confronting “The Milton Controversy” in *Milton’s Grand Style*, Christopher Ricks summarizes the anti-Miltonists’ views: “The

basic point of the anti-Miltonists, then, is simply that



Milton’s poetry doesn’t mean very much.”¹⁰ Ricks, who goes on to defend Milton and his poem, classifies the charges against Milton as misreadings and faults attributable to the poem’s stylistics.¹¹

C. S. Lewis was one of the few critics who countered the anti-Miltonists in his seminal work *A Preface to Paradise Lost*.¹² His arguments became “dominant in Milton scholarship” and contributed to a critical shift in readings of Milton’s work.¹³ Lewis bases his reading in part on hierarchy and the natural superiority of God, as well as the disobedience which causes the Fall, ideas which surely would have been repugnant to the Romantics to whom Lewis alludes.¹⁴ Anticipating Fish, he contrasts the “unfallen sexual activity” of the early parts of the poem with the fallen sexuality of the later sections and argues that a “heroic” Satan is attractive because an evil character is incomparably easier to draw than a good one.¹⁵ It is easy to draw on the “bad passions” within ourselves; it is more difficult to imagine the best in ourselves “prolonged and more consistently embodied in action.”¹⁶

In *Surprised by Sin*, Fish responds to Milton’s critics with an ingenious argument: that we find Satan and his rhetoric so attractive and God so forbidding because we, as readers, are fallen. Like Adam and Eve, we fall into the trap of Satan’s magnificent speeches and (anti)heroic gestures precisely because we have inherited the faults of our first parents. In the preface to the book, Fish summarizes his purpose:

My subject is Milton’s reader, and my thesis, simply, that the uniqueness of the poem’s theme — man’s first disobedience and the fruit thereof — results in the reader’s being simultaneously a participant in the action and a critic of his own performance.¹⁷

Fish intends to explore two patterns: the reader’s humiliation and his education. This intentional focus on the reader is what differentiates Fish’s approach from that of Milton’s other defenders, especially Lewis. It also makes use of the modern literary theory of reader-response criticism, a method to which Fish would remain committed, later producing the influential work *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.¹⁸

Fish makes three points in the book: that the central figure of the poem is the reader; that Milton’s purpose is to educate the reader on his position as fallen; and that Milton’s method is an inventive one: he wishes to re-create the drama of the Fall. Fish emphasizes that the reader admires Satan even though his rhetoric (that which tempted the Romantics) is false, despite its virtuosity; the reader is “surprised by sin,” just as Adam and Eve were. This interest in the language of the poem underpins Fish’s argument; the reader is fooled by language because he knows only fallen language. In an extended explication of a passage describing Eve before the Fall, Fish

notes that Eve’s “wanton” hair is not to be taken as an indication of a predilection toward sin; we only read it that way because our fallen natures cannot rightfully interpret “prelapsarian vocabulary.” Fish also answers those who regard Satan as the hero of the poem; in one chapter, he distinguishes between Satan’s “epic heroism” and true Christian heroism.

Immediate responses to Fish’s work were mixed. Rosalie Colie, in a review of the book, says that Fish’s “stylistic, rhetorical, and formal analyses of *Paradise Lost* go a long way to dissuade us that Milton was “affected by anti-Christian feelings,” as Empson et al. had claimed. Both the seventeenth-century and the twentieth-century “guilty reader” is drawn into the poem to identify with Adam and Eve, who are taken unawares by temptation and Satan. Colie recognizes that Milton’s rhetorical strategies are meant to convey proper Christian doctrine.¹⁹ Barbara Lewalski, meanwhile, criticizes the reader-response approach to the text: “Fish’s theologically grounded insistence upon the defects of the ‘fallen’ readers deprives them of any basis for criticizing the poem: everything in the poem must be assumed to succeed entirely ... for whatever difficulties fallen readers encounter must result from their own defects rather than their author’s.”²⁰ Lewalski’s general opinion of the book, however, is positive: she appreciates Fish’s engagement with the epic similes and style of the poem. John Peter Rumrich was one of Fish’s detractors, insisting that his work relies primarily on rhetoric, just as Satan does in the poem.²¹ But even Rumrich, in a later article (within a footnote), admits to the legacy of *Surprised by Sin* and “the extent to which even now our Milton is Fish’s Milton.”²²

A second, thirtieth-anniversary edition of *Surprised by Sin* was published in 1997.²³ In a *Times Literary Supplement* review of the second edition, Cedric C. Brown pronounces “Those of us who have taught Milton have always known that Fish radically overstated the case when he claimed that Milton actually coerced the reader in *Paradise Lost* to fall with Adam and Eve.” In fact, he calls Fish’s argument “bullying,” and praises other critics who challenge Fish, including Rumrich’s *Milton Unbound*.²⁴⁻²⁵ Fish, however, makes no apologies for his early work and makes no changes to the original text. Instead, in a lengthy preface to the anniversary edition, he responds to his critics: “You will probably have noticed that in the course of defending *Surprised by Sin*, I have repeated the gesture that most infuriated some of its readers. I have turned objectors into devils and replied to their points by hitting them over the head with mine.”²⁶ Neither should academic librarians offer any apologies for retaining Fish’s seminal book in their collections, since it represents a pivotal argument in the centuries-long discussion of Milton the poet, as well as an important exemplar of reader-response criticism and the evolving critical approaches to literary works. 🌿

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