

To the Editor:

I think we should quickly concede Stanley Fish's main point in his guest column. Any argument for intrinsic, self-demonstrating merit is mistaken, since merit can only be produced and recognized within an institutional context. As Fish says, an argument for blind submission on such grounds is simply a disguised attempt to move "from one political agenda to another" (746).

But that new agenda is better than his. Fish sees the profession of academic literary criticism as a hierarchy of merit that rewards canny critical entrepreneurs: "in this profession you earn the right to say something because it has not been said by anyone else, or because it is a reversal of what is usually said, or because while it has been said, its implications have not yet been spelled out" (739). But why, then, does this year's well-placed Stanley Fish essay resemble nothing so much as last year's well-placed Stanley Fish essay? Fish's account here works pretty well with the early phases of his career, when *Surprised by Sin* and *Self-Consuming Artifacts* broke new ground and earned him a considerable reputation. However, during the last decade or so, when neither Fish's critical nor his theoretical writings have been notable for their bold variety, he has nonetheless become the recipient of "the profession's highest rewards," in the sly phrase of his *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980, 371). In the academic marketplace Fish champions, as in the capitalist marketplace it emulates, today's "earnings" are more frequently the result of last year's accumulated capital than of yesterday's new production, and any institutional attempt (like *PMLA*'s blind-submissions policy) to limit the brute momentum of such professional capital is fine by me.

More important, though, is the disagreeable and (I think) false model of human nature implicit in Fish's discussion of professionalism. For Fish, critical professionals are an academic subspecies of *homo oeconomicus*. Incapable of any sort of collective solidarity, they set out to maximize their status and their salaries within a more or less fixed and immutable professional system. In a display of vulgar economism that would make a Bolshevik blush, Fish argues that antiprofessional professionals simply fool themselves into thinking they are "motivated by something larger than marketplace conditions—by, for instance, a regard for justice or for the sanctity of human life or for the best that has been thought and said—even as that larger something is itself given shape and being by the very market conditions it supposedly transcends" (746). But only someone convinced that professions are hermetically sealed and all-determining systems (rather than assemblies of potentially conflicting practices) will find it absurd to think that some action within a profession might arise from an internal contradiction or an external force or value.

For years, Fish has been denying himself access to the preinterpreted "work itself" as the ground for all proper theorizing. But "the profession itself" seems to have taken over that comforting authoritarian role for him. Consequently, he is able to transform all critics of a profession into idealistic opponents of professionalism itself: opposition to Fish's model of the profession always eventually becomes a deluded quest for transcendence. However, progressive academics trying to turn literary criticism and theory into a socialist, feminist, and anti-imperialist practice are trying to transform and humanize the profession, not leap outside it altogether.

Since "the profession" from Fish's perspective has always resembled a cross between a futures market and a masquing hall, the playful echo of James I in his title is absolutely appropriate. Both see the more egalitarian order advocated by a group of radical professors as an attack from below on the metaphysical principle of order itself. In a Scots presbytery, James says, "Jack and Tom and Will and Dick shall meet, and at their pleasures censure me and my council and all our proceedings. Then Will shall stand up and say, 'It must be thus'; then Dick shall reply and say 'Nay, marry, but we will have it thus.' . . . My lords the Bishops, . . . if once you were out, and they in place, I know what would become of my supremacy. No bishop, no king. . . . I shall make them conform themselves, or I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse" (*The Good Old Cause*, Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, 2nd ed., New York: Kelley, 1969, 177–78). But of course, when the radical Independent offspring of these Presbyterians brought James's son and his archbishop to the scaffold, they were attacking not order itself but only a particular monarchical and prelatical articulation of it. Similarly, when progressive academics alter *PMLA*'s submissions policy, or oppose the reactionary Bennett-Cheney regime at the NEH, or encourage their students to compare Robinson Crusoe's racist imperialism to Ronald Reagan's, or worry about (rather than gloat at) the inadequacy of all these measures, they are attacking not professionalism itself but only that reified marketplace model of it in which Stanley Fish thrives. Jack and Tom (and Joan and Jane) will not be harried out.

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To the Editor:

In the framework of the humanities, Fish's argument is the equivalent of the capitalist's stance in economics. A major problem with both is the assumption that if only you "labor in the vineyards" you will reap the fruits. Women, minorities, and in general those who do not cultivate the "right" connections know otherwise. A major