

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.

JAMES HOLSTUN
University of Vermont

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

journal, for example, will not publish their nine-year-old articles with afterwords attached. It will ask for a rewritten version.

A reversal of the anonymous-submission policy would cause a drastic decline in submissions by excellent but unknown writers; in competition with a Fish, the cards are stacked against them, or—as the German phrase goes—“sie können gegen den Fish nicht anstinken.”

SIEGLINDE LUG
University of Denver

To the Editor:

PMLA's practice of anonymous submission and evaluation of manuscripts suggests, as Stanley Fish notes in his guest column, a belief that ignorance of authorship “ensure[s] that in making their evaluations readers are not influenced by factors other than the intrinsic merits of the article” (739). Well, we subscribers want to appreciate intrinsic merit, too. Are we being prevented from doing so by *PMLA*'s practice of providing us with the names of its contributors, as well as introductory “Notes on Contributors” that generate professional profiles?

The fact that *PMLA* withholds from its readership the “privilege” of blind evaluation enjoyed by its sequestered Editorial Board bespeaks, I think, an unconscious agreement with one of Fish's arguments against anonymity. I imagine that *PMLA* hopes its readers would recognize that (for example) Richard Levin's March 1988 article attacking feminist thematics was something different from an anonymous article attacking feminist thematics, largely because Levin, in previously published work, had helped to shape the debate on the subject. As Fish writes, “there are words that matter more than other words spoken by those who address a field that they themselves have in large part constituted” (741). To conceal authorship is to withhold valuable information about an article's context, from editors no less than from subscribers.

GRACE TIFFANY
University of Notre Dame

To the Editor:

I would like to take up a point made in passing by Stanley Fish in his guest column. He says that he is grateful to the Spenser Society and other professional organizations because “were it not for the opportunities made available by these organizations there would be nothing for us to do” (743). I disagree. One of the greatest weaknesses in departments of English is that most of us are only superficially aware of languages and literatures other than our own. What we should do is reward people who

learn a language and its literature. Doing so would substitute greater learning for the increasingly sterile shifts we are put to. It would also reduce the provinciality of our work and ground our theorizing more firmly. It would say to the community that we are not bound by an outmoded nationalism or linguistic chauvinism, and we would be able to place our own literature in the context of other literary traditions (an activity that is not meant to be taken as theory-neutral) rather than of new interpretive modes. One can think of numerous additional benefits that might flow from my proposal—for example, more and better talk between members of the various language departments—and at least for now I can think of no drawbacks.

I do not mean to imply that there is no serious scholarly work to be done or that no innovation is possible, but I do think we have reached a point of diminishing returns when, as in my university, there are eighty or ninety “researchers” for literature in English and perhaps fifteen for all of European history. We should accept the fact that we exist in the numbers we do primarily to pass on a tradition, not to add to a body of knowledge, and we can deepen and broaden that effort in a single stroke. I propose that the MLA establish a committee (!) to look into the advantages and disadvantages of my proposal. The point of all this is to make it possible for people to be promoted for learning a language and literature. We need to expand our notion of what we should be rewarded for.

ROGER SEAMON
University of British Columbia

To the Editor:

It is so obvious that the merit of an essay is independent of our feelings toward the person who wrote it that Stanley Fish has to use a sleight of hand to “prove” his argument that “the identity of the men and women who propose to speak about [whatever the subject of the essay may be] cannot be irrelevant to a judgment of the merit of what they have to say” (741). He does so by first pointing out that the merit of an essay is based on criteria or standards such as “a set of authorized . . . methodologies, . . . a list of the tasks that particularly need doing, . . . arguments that are properly literary . . .” (740), which are, of course, “a product” of “professional and institutional conditions” (740), which are, in turn, created by human beings. Fish then jumps to his conclusion that since human beings create the standards by which we judge an essay, their “identity . . . cannot be irrelevant” to our judgment of the essay's merit.

The sleight of hand has two parts: First, the authors of the essays are not necessarily (or usually) the authors of the standards. Second, and more important, even if they were, the value of the standards or criteria is based