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

Cecile M. Jagodzinski
*Resources for College Libraries, cjagodzi@gmail.com*

Anne Doherty
*CHOICE/ACRL, adoherty@ala-choice.org*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg](https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg)

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg)

Recommended Citation

Jagodzinski, Cecile M. and Doherty, Anne (2013) "Collecting to the Core--Milton Studies and Surprised by Sin," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 25: Iss. 6, Article 41.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7436](https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7436)

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.
Collecting to the Core — Milton Studies and Surprised by Sin

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

Column Editor: Anne Doherty (Resources for College Libraries Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL)  <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

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? Shakespeare, 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...
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 position 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, “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 In a 1936 essay, Eliot opines that Paradise Lost “is not serious poetry, not poetry fully occupied in its own performance. 17”18 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