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De Gustibus

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Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility
by Corey McEleney. New York:
Fordham University Press, 2018.
Pp. 256. \$28.00 paper.

Corey McEleney's *Futile Pleasures* seeks to demonstrate that Renaissance writers who worried about the frivolity of literature— theater, poetry, and romance— were right. Despite their appeals to educational or moral profit to justify literary pleasure, these Renaissance literary texts fail to deliver on their utilitarian promises. Linking contemporary historicist criticism to Renaissance authors' similar wish to redeem literature as useful, McEleney seeks instead to revive a deconstructive textuality that emphasizes "play, digression, deferral, contradiction, surprise, coincidence, and a general resistance to ends" (8). He ties the eclipse of this high deconstructive mode to its association with "non-heterosexual eroticism and style" (40), as reflected in charges of "impotency and passivity . . . obliquely figured by the narcissism of women and queers, gay men in particular" (41). Critics who insist instead on the "importance of effecting historical or political understanding, difference, or change" (41) replicate Renaissance scapegoating of queer or other marginalized figures who represent un(re)productive literary and sexual pleasures (8, 44).

Playing on the utility of Horace's *dulce et utile*, McEleney calls his approach "futilitarian." Granting, however, that it is difficult to eschew all forms of usefulness, and perhaps undesirable to do so (6–7), McEleney hopes the pleasurable critical journey of *Futile Pleasures* will excuse its

inevitable capitulation to the ends of critical argument (14). This journey involves—with intentional digression to other texts and authors, early modern and otherwise—close readings of five major Renaissance texts: *Richard II*, *The Schoolmaster*, *The Unfortunate Traveler*, Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost*. Surprisingly absent from the book is Marlowe, who merits only three brief mentions. For sheer Renaissance literary fun, is there anything that beats “Hero and Leander”?

The chapter on *Richard II* establishes the connection between futilitarian literary pleasures and a scapegoated queer character whom McEleney—borrowing from Lee Edelman riffing on Lacan—refers to as the sinthomosexual (47–48). Here the sinthomosexual is Richard II, a non-reproductive king who engages in wasteful and “narcissistic” (48) pleasures (from the view of the normative political world) along with his “sodomitical flatterers” Bushy, Bagot, and Green (58–59). These pleasures are also literary, a connection made through the aesthetic dimension of the myth of Narcissus and through the epithet “caterpillars of the commonwealth,” used both to describe Richard’s followers and, in Stephen Gosson’s *The Schoole of Abuse*, poets and players, among others (pipers, as usual in these discussions, get short shrift). McEleney argues that Richard becomes the

scapegoat for the pleasures of the text: “the play projects vanity onto its eponymous character so as to avoid the futilitarian void in which he falls” (51). By finally providing a counter figure of redemption in Hal, Shakespeare further submits the narrative arc of the second tetralogy to “the ideology of socially useful ends” (63).

The following chapter shifts from theater to another suspect Renaissance literary form, the romance. A nice deconstructive reading of Roger Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster* traces how his condemnation of the idle and indecent pleasures of Arthurian tales replicates, in its search for the enemies of morality, a romance quest, with the “protean foe always just beyond his grasp” (79). McEleney in this chapter joins Ascham with Nashe, an unlikely pair except that Nashe too, however ironically, at times rails against pleasures of romance or Italianate literature and culture. There is a sharp reading here of the phrase “babble bookemungers” in the *Anatomie of Absurditie* (82–85). McEleney’s attempt to discover Nashe’s inability in *The Unfortunate Traveler* to reconcile pleasure and profit (“a radically incompatible doubling between the pleasurable means and apparently virtuous ends of the text” [97]) seems to me to take Nashe’s occasional expressions of seriousness too seriously in the first place.

In the second half of the book, McEleney turns to two writers, Spenser and Milton, who did take seriously the idea that literary pleasure could provide a useful moral education. In the chapter on Book 6 of the *Faerie Queene*, McEleney emphasizes, as other critics before him, the ways in which the particularly interrupted and unfinished plots of Book 6 give the lie to any notion of ends-oriented literary value. Like Calidore, Spenser abandons the quest. Or rather, such is the nature of literary writing, and pleasure, that Spenser finds himself unable to straighten out its twists and turns (especially 109, 115). Speaking tropologically, writing, romance in particular, is perverse.

If the perverse power of the trope is the subject of McEleney's chapter on *The Faerie Queene*, the failed effort to sublimate literary materials into spiritual goods is the subject of the chapter on *Paradise Lost*. In what I find the most ambitious chapter of the book, McEleney argues that Milton seeks to purge the literary of all that is base, including remnants of Elizabethan romance and ornamental language. Or rather, he seeks to sublimate them, like an alchemist transmutes base metal into gold. This process of sublimation is also a desire for sublimity, for an airy, mountain view from which one can stand above the dross of history. Yet, McEleney observes, Milton is as constantly aware of

the vain pride in soaring too high as he is of the inevitable residue of creation, the "black tartareous cold infernal dregs" (*Paradise Lost* 7.238) that cannot be sublimed away. The sinthomosexual figure for this fall from heights to dregs is Satan, in whose Hell the hill is (as described by McEleney by way of some imagery from Bataille) an anus/volcano, unpredictably belching unsublimated ore (159–60). McEleney concludes: "The real task, then, is to theorize a critical space wherein that or(e) is taken differently into account, viewed not simply as abjected refuse but as a source of queer pleasure and as the undesired end, in every sense of the word 'end,' of the salvational, redemptive, and generative desires we foist onto poetry" (160).

The book's coda reflects in turn on the ends of "futilitarian" criticism. Can such a criticism have an end, without betraying its commitment to nonpurposive activity? McEleney tentatively answers that that criticism can seek to be more like the literary, in order to "reconceive scholarly and critical writing to make *more* room for the idle, pointless and playful pleasures that early modern writers, not unlike their postmodern heirs, half-heartedly embrace" (164).

"Half-hearted" captures my reservations about this project. Given McEleney's desire to embrace a "pleasure unreconciled to virtue," I would have liked even more

pleasure in this book. The book's insistent critical framing feels disciplinary, especially when it criticizes other critics for being insufficiently attuned to uselessness (e.g., 98–99). In addition, the book sometimes fixes rather than plays with binaries—for example, in the coda's bright-line distinction between “conclusive criticism,” which is all about facts, information, and judgment, and a more open-ended or speculative “implicative criticism,” which resists these in order to engage readers (167). More central to the aim of the book (and I use that phrase with its full teleological meaning), the attempt to purify pleasure from use risks limiting a play between profit and pleasure—as McEleneý sometimes recognizes.

In addition, the book restricts what counts as pleasure to that of the text. Even sexual pleasure is displaced by the textuality that figures it. But if we wish to escape the Protestant work ethic (11) in order to give ourselves to pleasure, why look to Renaissance literature? Its pleasures are fairly difficult, unlike, for example, the pleasure of ice cream. That's okay—I like some of my pleasures that way. Renaissance literature and, even

more, Renaissance literary scholarship, is an acquired taste, one that simply by virtue of that literature's historical remove, to say nothing of its rhetorical or literary historical ambition, requires work to enjoy. (And let's not get started on writing about it.) To people who are not readers or critics of Renaissance literature, its pleasure is futile not because there's too much but too little. It's too much work! I expect these readers would have the same experience of *Futile Pleasures*, which is hardly less workaday in style or argument than most literary scholarship. If there's a way to make Renaissance literary scholarship more like sex or ice cream, I do not think *Futile Pleasures* has found it. The book is at its best rather when it provides (I hope the author won't mind me saying so) smart readings of Renaissance texts that, to those of us who like this sort of thing, are both useful and a pleasure to read.

Robert Matz is professor of English at George Mason University. His most recent book is an edition, Two Early Modern Marriage Sermons: Henry Smith's "A Preparative to Marriage" (1591) and William Whately's "A Bride-Bush" (1623).