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Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility / Corey McEleney

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Corey McEleney. *Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility.* Fordham University Press, 2017. 256pp.

Reviewed by SAMANTHA DRESSEL

Corey McEleney asks us to redefine poetry as "a mode of writing that lacks a guarantee of its own utility" in his book, *Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility* (22). This phrase highlights not only one of the central themes of his work, but also its stylistic goals. In this elegantly-written work, McEleney challenges his readers to imagine a world in which poetry may be written not even for its own sake, but for no sake at all. He opens up a world of "futilitarian" possibility, rife with the queer pleasure of un-productive work. His book is particularly graceful in its attention to the types of words I have used to paraphrase him, words such as "may" and "possibility." McEleney is not trying to assert that early modern poetic endeavors are necessarily fruitless, but rather the far more nuanced point, that they are not necessarily fruitful. This space of doubt is the space McEleney expands on, raising the possibility of futilitarian work and highlighting how attention to that potential futility can enhance our understanding of the work of humanistic endeavors, both in the early modern period and in our own anti-intellectual moment.

McEleney presents a complex framework in his introduction and Chapter 1, justifying its Renaissance applications. He positions the book as a response to many recent defenses of the humanities, particularly those written by early modernists. His primary approach is a marriage of queer theory and deconstruction, which he sees as complementary because of their shared emphases on the importance of hedonic and playful approaches to both text and their own critical styles, and through their equivocations, relating to the early modern as "symptomatic reconfigurations of the ambivalences that early modern writers themselves struggled with" (8). He both advocates and practices a style of "slow reading," through which he may return to close analyses of the texts in terms of form, word choice, and the pauses between those words. He applies this style throughout the rest of the work, deftly homing in on the details of not only his primary texts, but on the word choice of his critical interlocutors as well. Chapter 1 further helps McEleney establish the context of his early modern argument, as he discusses in brief the Renaissance tensions surrounding poetic goals of utility and the opposing impulse towards futilitarian stylistics.

In Chapter 2, we first experience McEleney's proposed style of slow reading as he delves into the *Henriad*, focusing on *Richard II*. He draws connections between the culture wars of the 1980s in which deconstruction was condemned as masturbatory in its playfulness and criticisms of Richard II's vanity and self-directed pleasure impulses. He insightfully delineates Shakespeare's impossible task: to not only justify, but legitimate the deposition of a monarch, which he attempts by creating a self-destructive futilitarian impulse in Richard. McEleney proposes Richard as a version of Ovid's Narcissus, a *sinthom*osexual who seeks

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pleasure at the expense of society. This figure is echoed in young Hal, with his social threat ultimately calmed by his maturing into Henry V. This chapter draws together many disparate threads of criticism across at least three time periods (the Classical, Renaissance, and modern critical movements), but it surprisingly lacked attention to less-canonical intertexts of the period. In my mind, a discussion of the futilitarian impulses in *Richard II* immediately invoked the question of Marlowe's treatment of the same in *Edward II*. While McEleney does offer a broad justification for omissions in his text (174-5, n10), the decision in a book that self-consciously enjoys its own errancy to *not* digress even briefly into a discussion of a text so closely related in both theme and critical tradition was surprising. This silence aside, the chapter ends broadly, with the provocative proposal that the impossibility of a complete negation of utilitarian value makes the questioning of such a circumstance even more crucial.

Chapters 3-5 highlight the ways a text's internal errancy can escape its author's utilitarian intentions or claims. In Chapter 3, McEleney cleverly pits Roger Ascham's polemical *The Scholemaster* against Thomas Nashe's bizarre and playful *The Unfortunate Traveller*. He highlights the anti-futilitarian stance both authors claim and then shows that the errancy of the authorial endeavor itself constantly overleaps that moral stance. He particularly challenges the frequent critical assumption that Nashe's work must have a moral overlay, noting Nashe's own futilitarian tendencies to write himself into poverty. Once again, he is careful to note that he does not refute the possibility that *The Unfortunate Traveller* can be moral, but instead opens up the possibility that it does not have to be. In this chapter, he begins to explore one of the most interesting themes of the rest of the book: the way the form of a text influences its content, and vice-versa. McEleney argues that in Ascham's case, his goal of explaining a virtuous education is undermined by his approach of explaining it in the negative: such an approach proves elusive, and implicitly promotes the very errancy that he speaks against. Similarly, Nashe's work calls attention to its attempts not to wander, contrarily highlighting those very moments when it does.

Chapter 4 expands on this idea of the errant text in Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*. The poem's own form undermines its stated goal of an action-based response to romance, as its own errant path leads to many dead ends and seems to present a world determined far more by fortune than personal responsibility. He reframes the whole as a struggle with the Horatian ethics of poetry, as Spenser wrestles with his text which, as a living thing, constantly escapes his grasp and wanders astray. In Chapter 5, examining *Paradise Lost*, McEleney again brings attention to the author's impossible task: this time the paradox of presenting a vision of Divine inspiration while not himself rising above his station. McEleney cleverly ties this paradoxical goal to the self-deconstructions within the text, particularly the way the mountainous imagery of Hell and Chaos reflect and thereby undermine the metaphors of the Divine perspective from the mountaintops. This chapter might have benefitted from a brief temporal accounting: little attention is paid to the gap between Milton's writing and McEleney's other focal texts, leaving the open question of whether he sees an evolution in the futilitarian writing of the Renaissance or a stasis. While he

intentionally avoids a sociohistorical approach, the large temporal gap between the first four texts explored and the last one seems to merit some attention.

A couple of small threads never quite tied together in this ambitious book. The prevailing theme of the text's resistance to the stated goals of its author is absent from the first case study of *Richard II*. Perhaps most disappointing, McEleney notes that a majority of authors putting early modern humanism in conversation with the humanities do so as "a framing gesture," implying his departure from such an approach (176-77 n15). However, a discussion of these resonances disappears in the second half of the text, making it seem as though largely, his discussion of the modern humanistic endeavor is indeed "relegat[ed]… to prefaces and afterwords" (176-77 n15). The errancies away from these major themes are disappointing mainly because they are so deftly handled elsewhere in the work.

The book wraps up with an elegant discussion of its own purpose, and the necessary paradox of closing a text which itself discusses the importance of futile pleasure in such a way. This endpoint creates a climax of McEleney's stylistic goals. In the introduction, he emphasizes the degree to which he hopes that the book's form will mirror its goals and themes, and this is its most profound strength in many ways. Superficially, the book is a delight to read in its wordplay – the attentive reader is rewarded with frequent puns and alliteration. That joy itself seems futilitarian; while those moments reflect back on the themes, they are not required for understanding, and indeed, McEleney notes pushback from early readers for these 'unnecessary' flourishes (197 n49). More deeply, form and content coincide thematically in two major ways. One is McEleney's endpoint: a call for criticism to be more futilitarian, to play more, and a subsequent collapse of the boundaries between literature and criticism, all of which are borne out in his own writing. Finally, perhaps the strongest aspect of the book is its attention to ambivalences. McEleney is careful to note the deep ambivalence the early modern writers have to the balance of style and utility, and he never forgets this ambivalence in his work. Early in the book, he claims that, "My objective here is thus to recapture, explore, and play with the ambivalence, contingency, and irony that mark both early modern and modern debates about literary value" (7). This goal is admirably fulfilled, and unlike Satan (and not-impossibly Milton), McEleney never overleaps his own goals, never emerging from the space of exploration of play into any proposition of certainty. Perhaps the only certainty the reader can be left with is the value of this book to our way of thinking about early modern poetic utility and the utility pursued by our own scholarship and pedagogy.

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