

COREY MCELENEY. *Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. Pp. 243. \$100.00 (cloth).
doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.10

Why do we impose narratives of teleology and functionality onto early modern literature? What if early modern writers themselves were more frustrated and enchanted by the possibility of futility and the pleasures of errancy than by the moral lesson or argument at the end? These are the core questions posed and explored with great aplomb in Corey McEleney's brilliant and relevant new book, *Futile Pleasures: Early Modern Literature and the Limits of Utility*. McEleney sets out to address not only early modern literature's preoccupation with the struggle between pleasure and profit, but also our own critical and political desire to impose profitable, useful, and ultimately worthwhile meaning onto works of literature during the crisis in the humanities. McEleney's two-pronged analysis of, on the one hand, early modern literature that confronts, embraces, and worries deeply about pleasure for its own end, and on the other, critics of that very literature who impose more bounded readings on the texts, is delightful and enlightening.

McEleney opens the book by setting up his theoretical paradigm in the midst of a timely discussion of the need to valorize the study of literature today. Keeping both early modern literature and current scholarship in view as (almost) equal objects of study, McEleney reveals that "early modern writers were no less anxious and ambivalent about the value of literature than their contemporary counterparts" (3). He chooses deconstruction and queer theory as analytical tools, for both forms of analysis approach the text from the margins and resist the urge to generate meaning that necessarily points to some sort of utility. In so doing, McEleney champions close or "slow" reading (8), although he resists connecting his own work directly to New Formalism or New Materialism.

With the first chapter he introduces the book's theme: the dialectic between pleasure and profit. McEleney's sharp skills of close reading and historical analysis are visible from the outset, as he extracts and identifies the classical commonplace of literature providing both pleasure and profit as the root of such arguments. McEleney reveals how early modern writers transformed it into an equation in which instruction appears as the *telos* of the pleasure and then upended this equation themselves in their discussions of poetry, "a mode of writing that lacks a guarantee of its own utility" (22). In the second chapter he examines the notion of pleasure run aground in the figure of Shakespeare's *Richard II* with attention to the bonfire of the vanities and to *vanitas*. I was particularly intrigued by McEleney's reading of Richard as *sinthomosexual* through the figure of Ovid's Narcissus, which includes an excellent analysis of Ovid's poem's awareness of its own potential for futility and vanity. Further connections might be drawn between Ovid's role as counter-classical purveyor of literary pleasure and foreignness in the 1590s and between Ovid's Narcissus and Richard, whose capacity for emptiness is repeatedly figured through language of water (the empty bucket analogy in 4.1) and profuse tears in Shakespeare's play. But this is the beauty of McEleney's work: in opening up the space between pleasure and its ends, he inspires us to read further according to our own interests and pleasures.

In the subsequent chapters McEleney explores the limits of utility and various investments in pleasure and wandering in Thomas Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveler* (1594) (chapter 3), Book 6 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590) (chapter 4) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) (chapter 5). Throughout, McEleney reads critical scholarship on each of these texts with the same acuity and playfulness with which he attends to the texts themselves, frequently injecting his readings with some elegantly and clearly described theoretical approaches drawn from deconstruction, queer theory and psychoanalysis. Thus, the lengthy attention to current critical approaches accomplishes much more than the space clearing typical of many first books: instead, it

creates a transhistorical dialogue in which both scholars and writers grapple with the same problem of pleasure literary narrative.

Of these three chapters, the Spenser and Milton readings are the strongest and most revealing. McEleney's conclusion that the Legend of Courtesy's repeated plot open-endedness sets up "the entire poem's subject as *always already having been* the ambivalence of romance" (121) is entirely convincing, and his deconstructive, metacritical readings of Milton—focusing on what he calls *relèveation* (attempts at sublation, elevation and revelation that belie their own futility)—both playfully and seriously reveal the dark and putrid flipside to teleological and redemptive interpretations of the poem. The irony here is that McEleney's own uncovering of Miltonic ambiguity is a rich revelation itself, even as he attempts to keep pleasure and profit oscillating in contingent, unresolved dialogue.

Much as I loved the analysis of Nashe, I wished it had been more historically grounded in the early modern cultural practices of invention and absurdity that McEleney alludes to in his (nonetheless) excellent reading of the text as an open-ended questioning of utility coming the end of pleasure. Nashe's mechanical banqueting house could be linked to the destructive practices of early modern banquets and void feasts that Patricia Fumerton has examined, as well as to Hero's hydraulic boots in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1598), which Wendy Hyman has discussed. A queer reading of foreignness in Nashe could go further by attending to the ways early modern literary culture embraced foreign pleasures as alternatives to (classical, Puritan) didacticism.

In the book's elegant coda McEleney ponders the limitations of drawing any sort of "profitable" conclusion from a study that aims to open up the space between pleasure and profit. The point is to pry open this space so that others can then explore it in more depth. But McEleney has one more delightful revelation: one way that we can approach the possibility of "pleasure unreconciled to virtue" (168) as a source of delight rather than horror in our own work is to blur the boundaries between literature and criticism itself. McEleney's book is refreshing, delightful, and earnestly concerned with the values we assign to literature and to scholarship. Just as his book cleverly and successfully upends and interrogates the binary opposition between pleasure and profit, so too, his hopeful conclusion dissects the binary between literature and criticism itself. If only we *could* all write and interpret with as much pleasure, art, and insight as McEleney does.

Miriam Jacobson
The University of Georgia
jacobson@uga.edu

BENJAMIN MOUNTFORD. *Britain, China, and Colonial Australia*. Oxford Historical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. 297. \$100.00 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.11

The British government established its New South Wales colony in 1788, five years after recognizing the independence of the United States of America. As James Belich writes in *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo World, 1783–1939* (2009), at that time, "two Anglo metropolises," the British Isles and the United States, lay on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. In the century between the Napoleonic wars and World War I, the effects of lower trade barriers and reduced transport costs combined to transform the world economy. As the volume of world trade increased, and new regions were opened up to white settlement to supply food and raw materials, Britain and the eastern United States became emigrant societies. New technologies that improved communications and military firepower gave Europeans increasing power to enter markets in Asia and Africa where