

Will Stockton. *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. xxvi + 176 pp. \$22.50. ISBN: 978-0-8166-6607-2.

It is very easy to say nice things about Will Stockton's *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy*. So let me throw out a few for openers: Brilliant (see the title). Engaging (see title). Witty (title). Well-written (yes, title). Surprising (a book on comedy begins with a discussion of Shakespeare's most famous tragedy, *Hamlet*). Wide-ranging (early modern drama and prose; Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) and theoretically sophisticated. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis; and queer theory. Thoughtful (rather than choose between historicism and

psychoanalysis, Stockton opts for “(a)historicism”). Inquisitive. Intellectually “promiscuous” (a word Stockton uses several times to describe his book’s aims; xx–xxi). Daring (Stockton deliberately does not organize his book around a single idea that each chapter would have advanced). Open-ended. Always rhetorically adept, Stockton takes into account the ways in which academics often read books as random access machines, reading around rather than reading from first page to last, reading a part of the book (a chapter, or even less) rather than the whole book. Some readers may find this “lack” frustrating, Stockton acknowledges, closing his introduction by stating that his “final wager” — namely, that “in the theory and history of anal eroticism, breaks and origins or foundations are at once points of departure and very relative things” — will depend “on the reader’s willingness to play along.” Stockton refuses to heed Jean Baudrillard’s advice to “forget Foucault” (xxvi). Although Stockton aligns his book with Michel Foucault’s books on the history of sexuality, the Foucault he recalls is a stand-up comic: Stockton resurfaces Foucault by quoting an exchange between Foucault and Jacques-Alain Miller, Jacques Lacan’s son-in-law and editor, on the way Foucault’s genealogical method depends on a positing of an origin where things began. Foucault insists he was joking. And the more he plays, the more frustrated Miller becomes (understandably so).

I take Stockton’s invitation/request/demand that I play along by writing a review Foucault might have classified as one of the “monstrosities of criticism,” or book reviews that do not review the book under review, in a hilarious, biting exchange with George Steiner back in 1971. Consider my review a para-book-review, then, written in rapper Chamillionaire mode and titled: “Tryin’ to catch me writin’ dirty.” Bound by this journal’s word-count limit, this review will not get much beyond the book’s title, which bears close reading. Is Stockton’s hope that the reader play along also permission for the reader to play dirty, I mean with Stockton’s book? Is the title of the book, *Playing Dirty*, tautological in that playing is necessarily dirty? Does “play” necessarily introduce a kind of contamination of “clean” discourse — impurities that pose a biohazard to the reader? What is the relation between wit and dirt? Is there a paradoxical economy, announced in Stockton’s subtitle, of “waste” in which the dirtiness of play is its redemption, the joke defusing a potentially indecorous “outblurt” or *faux pas*? Or does the economy present a deferral, a slow fusing of a narrative that never explodes?

It is to Stockton’s credit that these questions (don’t explicitly) arise in his book but nevertheless remain readable on its surface. Stockton effectively straps himself onto the critical toilet, as it were, exchanging the sexual closet for the water closet rather than for a sexually liberated, vagrant space either of legibility and visibility or of obscurity. Stockton aligns himself with “waste studies,” but he comes closer to practicing something like waste mismanagement studies by refusing to align waste with a single referent. Perhaps heralding what may someday be called “Tword Studies,” Stockton keeps the semantic indeterminacy of waste in play, relating it to the waist, to anal eroticism, to the anus, to the but(t), to the (cl)ass, to the bottom, to word play, to the fundament-al.

Stockton does not (want to) hit pay dirt. Although attentive to the salvage, purifying critical operations performed by other readers, Stockton often hitches a ride to critics who still practice an arguably exhausted or anachronistic (past its academic sell-by-date) kind of queering the Renaissance. Getting bogged down at times in encrusted summaries of critical positions he apparently was required to write up and at other times in summaries of his own chapters or previews for his next chapter, Stockton neither flushes out nor flushes down his own extremely brilliant close readings. Stockton's critical manner of letting go by holding on makes his book into something like Plato's "pharmakon" so brilliantly analyzed by Jacques Derrida long ago in *Dissemination*. Derrida's ash-hit accounts of writing and of the ash of the archive could be reread in Stockton's terms as a biohazard of reading, an ah / s/ hit account of writing, the danger of writing being, even in non-phenomenal deconstructive arche-writing, the multiplicity and irreducible heterogeneity of the remainder, signaled by the nontautological tautological liturgical phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Derriere da.

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