

REVIEW

The Matter We Read

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Allison K. Deutermann and András Kiséry, editors

Formal Matters: Reading the Materials of English Renaissance Literature

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☞ THE COLLECTION OF ESSAYS under review here proposes to set forth a programmatic agenda for Renaissance literary criticism. The “formal” half of the main title is clear enough, referring to the techniques of close reading from New Criticism, yet what the editors mean by “matter” and “materials” is rather murky. Citations to works by Jerome McGann and D. F. McKenzie suggest that a history-of-the-book methodology lies behind the editors’ proposed “material” approach to texts. The sociological aspects of McGann’s and McKenzie’s textual analyses swerve from the author-centered tradition, as does Roger Chartier’s concentration on authorless bibliographical modes, such as the commonplace book. Similarly, the contributions to this volume fit into recognizable book-history themes, including the essays by Heather James on printed commonplace books, by Matthew Zarnowiecki on a poetic miscellany, by Adam Smyth on jestbooks, and by Jeffrey Todd Knight on continuations. These explore examples of sociable authorship that disperse the idea of the author as an originary figure and replace it with a textual focus on materiality, sociability, and transmission. They seem to realize the McKenzian goal of attempting to recover the human motives and interactions that texts involve at various stages of their production, transmission, and consumption. Tanya Pollard’s essay about Renaissance editions of Greek drama speculates on the role of translators as textual and genre critics, seeming to reflect a McGannian interest in the aesthetic and ideological role of the textual critic in transmitting and producing textuality. Henry S. Turner likewise emphasizes Richard Hakluyt’s textual role in *The Principal Navigations* as fundamentally different from the author functions assumed in traditional literary texts. Alan Stewart and Amanda Bailey reconsider canonical literary texts—plays by

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William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton—as part of a contemporaneous cultural system of textuality. Intertextuality is here approached synchronically rather than diachronically, horizontally rather than vertically (as autonomous literary texts influencing one another in a sequential process). The properties of quotidian but highly consequential textual forms—newsbooks and penal debt bonds—suffuse and provoke drama. Peter Lake’s essay examines a case in which bibliographic classification has led to the distortion and misrepresentation of an author’s works. Lake problematizes an overreliance on form in drawing conclusions about the content of John Andrewes’s theology, warning against circular modes of argument from publication format to content: texts are signifying systems as well as material artifacts. Shankar Raman investigates analogies between challenges of representation in geometry texts and challenges of expression in poetry.

“Matter” in these essays thus seems to encompass the primary, hard, bibliographical details of actual books as well as the secondary, soft, cultural analysis of books enmeshed in a matrix of mentalities. Analytical bibliography is supplemented with economic, social, and religious history; books are regarded as both objects and systems. The implications of the citations to McGann and McKenzie should be expressed more explicitly in the introduction, but the methodological synthesis proposed in the volume becomes clearer in the case studies that follow. This review will focus on the essays that best illustrate that synthesis, despite the introduction’s insufficient theoretical framework.

Heather James, examining the Renaissance printed commonplace book, finds the genre capable of engaging in moral and philosophical discourses about politics. James focuses on the series of vernacular printed commonplace books produced by John Bodenham, Nicholas Ling, Anthony Munday, and Robert Allot between 1597 and 1600. Compiled of selections from contemporary poetry and drama, these collections commend not only the flowers of English literature but also a version of English nationhood, according to James. Aesthetic choices about including specific extracts are also polemical choices. Because the topics or keywords around which passages cluster include such moral and political terms as *truth*, *justice*, *liberty*, *law*, *treason*, and *tyranny*, opportunities for expressing sociopolitical values arise despite, or perhaps on account of, the impersonality of the contents and the anonymity of authorship.

Like commonplace books, jestbooks were compiled rather than composed; their entries or jokes were not invented or owned by a single author. Adam Smyth thoroughly reviews the scholarship on jestbooks and surveys a range of early modern jests and jest collections. Smyth explains that the early modern English “jest” was based in physical action but evolved into a form in which humor turned on verbal wit or ambiguity. Jest was connected to popular culture but also had a learned, classical humanist pedigree. Sometimes they followed an inversion paradigm indicating a socially subversive potential. While early modern jests could function to resist a dominant, patriarchal culture, they could just as easily function to uphold that same culture, for a conservative ideology might be implied in the moralizing tendency of many jokes to punish or ridicule social ambition, individualism, and pride. The form itself was open

to political inflection. Early modern jokes could serve to help people break out of social structures as well as keep them in their place. The culture of circulation surrounding these jests made them susceptible to appropriation and reworking by individual tellers. Illustrating the diverse ways in which jests were circulated and collected, Smyth describes the joke-telling community of the Le Strange household at Hunstanton, Norfolk, and Archbishop Sancroft's manuscript copies of jokes from a printed collection.

Tanya Pollard argues that "the textual forms that came to frame Greek plays in the sixteenth century . . . provide templates for, and commentaries on, the dramatic genres that would come to shape the theatre" (101). In her analysis, Pollard suggests that the conventions used by sixteenth-century Continental printers of ancient Greek drama shaped notions about the nature of those genres in Renaissance theater. Editions of Greek plays, for example, introduce and comment on plays through a paratextual apparatus that becomes standard in Renaissance English drama: *dramatis personae*, prologues, and epilogues. Prefatory letters by translators offer a space for theorizing about genre; in turn, scholarly reflections on genre by translators and editors of classical Greek comedy and tragedy had an impact on conceptions about those genres as practiced by vernacular Renaissance playwrights. Pollard shows that, in the case of tragedy, book history and genre history are interlinked, because editorial introductions to the translations of Greek drama routinely include theoretical discussion about genre. Somewhat predictably, classicized notions of drama apply to certain theoretically self-conscious dramatists like Ben Jonson more convincingly than to other playwrights. The omission of choruses and choral odes and the dominance of the multiplot form in early modern English drama perhaps point to the limits of Pollard's thesis about ancient Greek drama's impact on Renaissance drama.

Henry S. Turner focuses on the translations and editorial activities performed by Richard Hakluyt, particularly as they relate to his compilation of *The Principal Navigations*. Hakluyt published his own translations of books from Latin, French, and Portuguese, he sponsored the publication of others' translations, and he was a global polyglot in terms of his book ownership. In the *Principal Navigations* he printed lists of indigenous words, language specimens collected by commercial agents or factors in the field. Hakluyt's extreme literalist approach to translation, Turner argues, served the ends of international trade and travel, helping to identify words for things that would be transformed by trade into commodities. The literal translation of words assisted in the act of commodification, which itself involved a process of translating substances into commodities. Turner defers here to Bruno Latour's notion of the agency of things. He encourages us to see Hakluyt's role as translator and editor in contrast to classical author functions: "The *Principal Navigations* consists of innumerable reports generated by the enormous trading corporations of his day, reports that trace the long, rhizome-like networks that extended from outpost to ship, from factor to agent to merchant and finally to Hakluyt back in London" (139). As such, Hakluyt's text must be seen as the product of a global network, and Hakluyt's role as translator and editor as lending an agency to things, in particular to potential commodities that may exert a sort of agency in generating international trade.

Alan Stewart and Amanda Bailey look at plays by Shakespeare and Middleton that explore the distinctive properties and effects of two early modern textual forms—the newsbook and the penal debt bond. Stewart considers Shakespeare’s deployment of news in the *Henry VI* plays to create dramatic suspense by controlling the flow of information to the audience and to reflect the fragmentary and conflicting nature of breaking news. These history plays recount events from the 1420s, but because war in France features centrally in the plays, they resonated for Londoners in the 1590s, whose hunger for news about the religious wars in France and England’s involvement in them fueled demand for newsbooks. When there was not yet such a thing as a weekly news publication, the newsletters printed about the wars in France acclimated readers to their conventions (in 1590 alone, forty newsletters were published or entered in the Stationers’ Register for publication). Shakespeare draws on the audience’s experience of the partial, open-ended, uncertain nature of information as reported in the generically heterogeneous medium of ephemeral news from abroad. Stewart shows that Shakespeare deploys a three-messenger motif to thematize conflicting interpretation and spin in early modern news reporting. For the fortunes of the plays’ would-be power brokers, the delays of cross-Channel communication between France and England, the strength of intelligence networks, and one’s aptitude for interpreting news play crucial roles. To sum up, Shakespeare “hits on a brilliant device for undoing the relentless chronological ‘truth’ of chronicle history, reducing historical events back to the fragmented, contested, contradictory ways in which they were originally reported. And in the terrain that fascinated the news-crammed Londoners of the early 1590s, France, just twenty miles distant from England in space, but sometimes weeks away in time, he found the perfect test-case for how news works, and does not work, in early modern England” (166).

Amanda Bailey examines some of the legal ambiguities surrounding written contracts, with special attention to the penal debt bond, with a view to analyzing its function in Middleton’s *Michaelmas Term*. Legal questions about the penal debt bond centered on what constituted contractual consent, and the 1602 decision on Slade’s Case made the act of signing a bond the legal standard. Bailey persuasively argues that *Michaelmas Term* (first performed in 1604) dramatizes the legal ambiguities surrounding the debt bond, replacing city comedy’s usual focus on marriage contracts with the contracts made via penal debt bond between Richard Easy, a landed heir, and Ephestian Quomodo, a wealthy cloth merchant. If the relationship formed through the contract of a debt bond is like a marriage, the plot of *Michaelmas Term* suggests, then it is a relationship in which the debtor is rendered a passive, effeminate victim. The decision in Slade’s Case, Bailey indicates, has given an advantage to predatory lenders such as Quomodo and his accomplice Shortyard, enabling them to con naïve young gentlemen who come to the city. According to Bailey, the penal debt bond, especially as defined by the important 1602 law case, generates the central metaphors for human relationship explored in Middleton’s play. Scenes of courtship typical in city comedy are replaced with a staging of the ceremonies around signing debt bond documents. By implicitly contrasting marriage contracts and contracts formed through debt bonds, Bailey argues, Middleton exposes the “confused notion of economic agency” to which

debt bonds could give rise (184). The efficacy endowed in a special form of written contract by legal decision has dramatic consequences for human relationships, economic agency, and procreative possibilities within the play.

Peter Lake's essay cautions that the cumulative empiricism of traditional historical bibliography, built on a large set of data, can misrepresent individual items. He reexamines the "penny godlies" of John Andrewes, which, because they were classified as cheap print, have been assumed to purvey a popular brand of religion that did not conform to orthodox English Protestantism. Andrewes's penny godlies have figured importantly in studies of the culture of cheap print because Andrewes virtually invented the format of religious chapbooks and became very involved in financing, publishing, and selling them. Cheap packaging, however, does not imply primitive theology. When Lake examines the theological ideas in Andrewes's pamphlets closely, he finds that they center on the concepts of sin, divine judgment, damnation, and repentance—key terms in Calvinist orthodoxy. A comparison of Andrewes's notions about repentance to those of such orthodox authorities as William Perkins shows Andrewes to be in line with English reformed orthodoxy. Lake provides a salutary corrective to oversimplified bibliographical classifications such as cheap print. In short, false oppositions between elite and popular, commercial and edificatory have obscured the mixed form and function of Andrewes's penny godlies.

David Scott Kastan's afterword attempts to unpack and explicate the multivalent pun in the concept of "matter" invoked in the volume's title. Kastan points out that the term overlaps vocabularies of the material and conceptual realms. "Matter" can refer to the physical object of the book, including such details as typefaces, page layout, paper, and binding—as well as the subject matter of the book, as in ideas, themes, and plot. While Kastan's observations about the ambiguity and almost metaphorical force of the terms *form*, *matter*, *book*, and *character* are valid, this reviewer would have appreciated an unambiguous, expository vocabulary. Since the collection foregrounds a novel methodological synthesis, one would have liked the editors to have been more explicit and transparent about methodology and in their use of terminology. Nevertheless, the volume's essays demonstrate how approaches from book history can expand the critical repertory of Renaissance literary genres; accentuate the culture's common practices of social authorship, multiple authorship, and cooperative writing; and redefine or reorient such literary concepts as intertextuality toward textual forms that may have seemed irrelevant or extraliterary.

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