

Formal Matters: Reading the Materials of English Renaissance Literature.

Allison K. Deutermann and András Kiséry, eds.

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This illuminating collection of essays entitled *Formal Matters* is a methodological fusion of the study of material texts (influenced as it is by the work of scholars such as D. F. McKenzie, Roger Chartier, and Jerome J. McGann, among others) with recent trends toward the renewed study of literary form. In many ways, it takes the insights of book history and critical bibliography and applies them to literary interpretation; its interest is in the interaction and intersection of what one might describe as the bibliographic rhetoric of early modern texts with textual and literary rhetoric. In other words, it is after the literary payoff of hard-hat bibliographic analysis. The editors, however, do not claim to offer a manifesto; rather, the volume serves as a diverse and eclectic anthology of materially inflected modes of analysis of literary form, and represented by these essays are some of the leading new and not-so-new lights in the field.

The book falls into three main sections, after a rather slim but very serviceable introduction that usefully surveys the field, situates the book, and rather nicely encapsulates its material substance. The first section, "Forming Literature," focuses on literary forms as a way of examining authorship, reading, and circulation. Cumulatively these essays argue not only for composition as a collective enterprise, but also that authorship was conditioned by "the materiality of the text and its formal apparatus" (6). Essays here treat printed commonplace books (Heather James), jests and jestbooks (Adam Smyth), the poetic miscellany *Love's Martyr* (Matthew Zarnowiecki), and Middleton and what Jeffrey Knight terms the genre of "continuation" (78). Exemplary of the kind of approach taken in many of the essays in the volume is what Zarnowiecki describes as "medium close reading," by which he means attention to the interplay of the material, rhetorical, and formal aspects of texts.

The second section, comprised of two essays on translation (by Tanya Pollard and Henry S. Turner) fits slightly less comfortably within the remit of the volume, although the editors offer a very plausible justification for their inclusion. It doesn't to my mind, however, have the weightiness of the two sections with which it is bookended. Nevertheless, taken as a pair, these essays prompt an investigation into the relationship between form and matter from the perspective of translation, which is examined both as a material and linguistic process, as well as theoretically. The last section of the volume, "The Matters of Writing," looks at forms of writing — legal, news, geometry, and theology — and examines the ways in which different kinds of literary and nonliterary discourse were embedded in and shaped by textual forms. In the first of four essays, Alan Stewart, in one of the standout pieces of the collection, demonstrates the ways in which a detailed material study of newsbooks offers rich pickings for interpretations of Shakespeare's *3 Henry VI*. This is followed by Amanda Bailey's study of Middleton's use of the debt bond in *Michaelmas Term* in the context of *Slade's Case*. The final two essays, by Peter Lake and Shankar Raman, subject more strictly nonliterary texts — cheap godly pamphlets and geometry manuals — to a sustained analysis of content and form. The book ends with a delightfully playful afterword by David Scott Kastan, which in many ways complicates the main analytical themes of the volume (without necessarily undermining the whole enterprise) by drawing our attention to the slipperiness of the terms *matter* and even *book*.

Above all what emerges from this fascinating collection of essays is the importance of material approaches to literary and nonliterary texts in dialogue with other modes of reading. As such, meaning is collaborative, constructed by diverse agents, including but not limited to authors, compilers, scribes, printers, stationers, and readers, and generated by physical and visual as well as textual forms such as script, typeface, page layout, paper, and size — in other words, all the various material extratextual features that communicated significant meaning to early modern writers and readers.

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