“This collection makes form its focus,” declare the editors in their first introductory statement (1). The ten chapters that follow discuss in a variety of ways what has become generally understood as the sociology of texts: “how the formal, literary qualities of writing relate to the cultural, social, and political world in which it exists” (8). The editors divide their contributors’ ten essays somewhat arbitrarily into three parts: “Forming literature”; “Translations”; and “The matters of writing.” Each writer embraces the theme in a different but discrete and not always complementary way. This ambitious book aims to offer a view of the literary world in its social context, but this theme is not easy to reconcile with ten very disparate essays.

Heather James offers the first essay in this collection on “The first English printed commonplace books,” which helps to establish the theme of reading texts in their historical situation and also in terms of their particular material and formal expression. Robert Allot, the compiler of England’s Parnassus (1600), brings together a compendium of passages that implicitly define moral, aesthetic, and political goals. In Matthew Zarnowiecki’s subsequent essay, we consider the miscellany that forms Loves Martyr (1601) by Robert Chester, a work that includes Shakespeare’s Phoenix and Turtle—and lines also by John Marston and Ben Jonson. Perhaps Shakespeare wrote his poem “miscellaneously, as a contribution to a set of poems all on a single theme” (39); however, we are wise to avoid any particular or too specific readings of this miscellany. While of its time and place, Loves Martyr freely emerges into further and broader meaning.

Like miscellanies and commonplace books, jestbooks were a notable and familiar form of publication in the late Renaissance. Adam Smyth writes well of jests and jokes in this period, reflecting on the difficulty their authors faced in conveying wittiness in print. It is also difficult for modern readers to appreciate the significance and the context of Renaissance jokes, but one should nevertheless cultivate an openness to their “productive and compelling strangeness” (72).
How very different from these books are those composed in “the
genre of continuation.” We move abruptly into another topic in this
already broad study: formal text against social significance and external
demands. The next chapter on Thomas Middleton fits tendentiously
into the company of jestbooks and miscellanies, but Jeffrey Todd
Knight writes convincingly of this prolific and tireless author. Middle-
ton was certainly “deeply enmeshed in the variety and dynamics of
early publishing” (77) with “different points of contact between the
material forms of texts and the formal matters of writing” (78). He
is an artist of continuation: thus The Ghost of Lucrece is a response to
Shakespeare, and The Blacke Booke a kind of commentary or para-
text to Nashe’s Pierce Penniless. Middleton appears again, rather less
satisfactorily, in a later chapter of Formal Matters—the dramatist of
Michaelmas Term. Amanda Bailey reveals in a subtly, tenuously argued
essay, how the character of Easy is used to define the penal debt bond
and contemporary legal culture.

With an agile leap, we reach “Greek playbooks and dramatic forms
in early modern England,” a closely and thoughtfully argued essay by
Tanya Pollard. Contrary to the common view that Greek drama had
little (or even no) influence on English drama of this period, Pollard
argues that Greek dramatic practice was widely understood through
various humanist treatises and editions of classical plays. The routes of
transmission in the sixteenth century were numerous and important
in shaping English drama, especially in the development of genres.
Another kind of “translation” forms the subject of the very informa-
tive study by Henry S. Turner of Richard Hakluyt, well known for his
Principal Navigations. Of course, Hakluyt himself translated a variety
of works, from French, Latin, Portuguese, and more. But he received
many messages and documents from explorers and travellers, and to
these reports he gave new form and substance—performing a special
kind of transformational translation.

Shakespeare’s 3 Henry VI is central to Alan Stewart’s contribution
to Formal Matters. He describes the fashion in which news is carried
from France in Shakespeare’s play, often by three different reporters
in rapid succession of each other. Even with several reports, one is
unsure of the truth, for it comes in different versions. The essay is an
excellent and provocative reading of this play; but its contribution to
the putative theme of the volume is somewhat unclear. Peter Lake’s essay is similarly adrift, for his study of John Andrewes and “popular puritanism” seems, even more than Stewart’s, to be in the wrong volume. Andrewes wrote many small books, which we would now call tracts or devotional booklets. He was a formidable evangelical of great and widely favored fecundity, but of little literary interest, important chiefly for enabling modern historians to define “the religion of the people” in early modern England. Lake’s essay unfortunately lacks the generally careful editing of other contributions to this volume, for it is filled with problems both grammatical and typographical. Examples abound: near the conclusion he writes: “In the light of [Eamon] Duffy’s account of ‘the devotions of the [printed] primers’ of late medieval England, might we not imagine puritan divinity enjoying something of the same sort of close (albeit also tense, distanced, and potentially adversarial) relationship to ‘popular religion’ in post-Reformation England that Duffy shows that the sophisticated religious sensibilities encapsulated in, say, the ‘fifteen oes’ enjoyed with the religion of the laity before the Reformation?” (213). Lake’s concluding point, as so much of his essay, is interesting but clumsily expressed.

The final essay (and chapter) of Formal Matters is the most original and informative of the volume. Shankar Raman’s “How to construct a poem” explores the connection between geometry and poetry, an alliance in which Sir Philip Sidney and René Descartes are central figures. Raman demonstrates how Sydney’s poesis affects “the kind of knowledge that comes to characterize mathematics, whereby knowing its ‘truths’ becomes not simply a matter of discovering or imitating what is already there but increasingly that of producing those truths” (221)—attitudes central to Cartesian geometry. The essay is difficult to summarize; for it is densely argued with essential illustrations, such as Descartes’s famous compass (from Géométrie) which is used to demonstrate the process of Sidney’s first sonnet in Astrophel and Stella. In a central statement, Raman describes the inevitability of the Sidney-Descartes connection: “If, for Descartes, geometrical construction converts the formal logic of algebraic analysis into an intuitive grasp of truth akin to divination, the turn inward to the heart in this sonnet [by Sidney] likewise achieves a re-vision; it changes the very mode of seeing: from the observation of a series of mechanical move-
ments between causes and effects into an almost vatic insight into the totality of their deeper, underlying connectedness” (236).

The editors of *Formal Matters* have brought together ten essays that in their several ways address cultural and “material” interests while engaged also in the formal analysis of texts. Some of the essays in this book are of outstanding importance, but others are of modest interest. Many of these essays might easily have appeared as journal articles, and should have done so. This book is an anthology that wants to display the best kind of current Renaissance literary criticism, which views the importance of close reading while making use of historical, cultural, and bibliographic analysis. This promise is a worthy endeavor, but somewhat illusory. Bringing together a group of essays that have little in common except a factitious obedience to a common critical direction (albeit confined to a literary era) is a brave enterprise. That *Formal Matters* is nevertheless so worthy a collection must be due in large measure to Allison K. Deutermann and András Kiséry, its conscientious editors.


When Bosola and Ferdinand speculate about who the father of the Duchess’s three children is, Bosola tells him that “we may go read [it] i’th’ stars.” In response, Ferdinand states: Why, some hold/ Opinion all things are written there,” to which Bosola replies, “Yes, if we could find spectacles to read them” (5.1.59-62). On one level, Webster’s characters may be more prophetic than even he imagined. Recently, scientists have provided us with “spectacles,” the New Horizon space probe, for example, by means of which we have discovered significant data about Pluto, the farthest planet, or dwarf planet, in our solar system. Indeed, we have constructed spectacles that have enabled astronomers to read the stars beyond our galaxy. They have discovered several “exoplanets,” worlds similar to earth that orbit a sun and are capable of sustaining life. These “spectacles” have provided scientists with data by means of which they can rethink the spaces that we oc-