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IMMATERIALITY AND EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert

JAMES A. KNAPP

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Eli and Riley, understood the project and humoured me when I found resonances of the immaterial in every Shakespeare production we attended. I could not have written the book without the support of my wife Kate. This book is dedicated to her, without whom it would have come to nothing.
Picture Macbeth alone on stage, staring intently into empty space. ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me?’ he asks, grasping decisively at the air. On one hand, this is a quintessentially theatrical question. At once an object and a vector, the dagger describes the possibility of knowledge (‘Is this a dagger’) in specifically visual and spatial terms (‘which I see before me’). At the same time, Macbeth is posing a quintessentially philosophical question, one that assumes knowledge to be both conditional and experiential, and that probes the relationship between certainty and perception as well as intention and action. It is from this shared ground of art and enquiry, of theatre and theory, that this series advances its basic premise: Shakespeare is philosophical.

It seems like a simple enough claim. But what does it mean exactly, beyond the parameters of this specific moment in Macbeth? Does it mean that Shakespeare had something we could think of as his own philosophy? Does it mean that he was influenced by particular philosophical schools, texts and thinkers? Does it mean, conversely, that modern philosophers have been influenced by him, that Shakespeare’s plays and poems have been, and continue to be, resources for philosophical thought and speculation?

The answer is ‘yes’ all around. These are all useful ways of conceiving a philosophical Shakespeare and all point to
lines of enquiry that this series welcomes. But Shakespeare is philosophical in a much more fundamental way as well. Shakespeare is philosophical because the plays and poems actively create new worlds of knowledge and new scenes of ethical encounter. They ask big questions, make bold arguments and develop new vocabularies in order to think what might otherwise be unthinkable. Through both their scenarios and their imagery, the plays and poems engage the qualities of consciousness, the consequences of human action, the phenomenology of motive and attention, the conditions of personhood and the relationship among different orders of reality and experience. This is writing and dramaturgy, moreover, that consistently experiments with a broad range of conceptual crossings, between love and subjectivity, nature and politics, and temporality and form.

Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy takes seriously these speculative and world-making dimensions of Shakespeare’s work. The series proceeds from a core conviction that art’s capacity to think – to formulate, not just reflect, ideas – is what makes it urgent and valuable. Art matters because unlike other human activities it establishes its own frame of reference, reminding us that all acts of creation – biological, political, intellectual and amorous – are grounded in imagination. This is a far cry from business-as-usual in Shakespeare studies. Because historicism remains the methodological gold standard of the field, far more energy has been invested in exploring what Shakespeare once meant than in thinking rigorously about what Shakespeare continues to make possible. In response, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy pushes back against the critical orthodoxies of historicism and cultural studies to clear a space for scholarship that confronts aspects of literature that can neither be reduced to nor adequately explained by particular historical contexts.
Shakespeare’s creations are not just inheritances of a past culture, frozen artefacts whose original settings must be expertly reconstructed in order to be understood. The plays and poems are also living art, vital thought-worlds that struggle, across time, with foundational questions of metaphysics, ethics, politics and aesthetics. With this orientation in mind, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy offers a series of scholarly monographs that will reinvigorate Shakespeare studies by opening new interdisciplinary conversations among scholars, artists and students.

Kevin Curran
For Kate
INTRODUCTION: SHAKESPEARE’S NAUGHT

To be or not to be, I there’s the point.

*The Tragical History of Hamlet* [Q1]¹

But no object of what nature or force so euer it bee can make the least alteration or impression into the will of GOD, whose nature is immutable, yea impassible. For hee is not materiall as are the creatures, yea euen the Angels themselves who must needs be granted to consist of, and in some matter, which may suffer and bee altered, whereof it commeth that not onely men, but euen the spirituall Angels, are subiect to affection, passion and perturbation: but God is a pure and mere forme, and therefore altogether immateriall, and therefore impassible.

Thomas Morton of Berwick, *A Treatise of the Nature of God*²

Mannes minde . . . standeth . . . in contemplation of immortall, and perdurable things: therto, in suche as fade, and fall, it teacheth, ordayneth, appointeth, commaundeth . . . Yet is the selfsame minde by the felouship, and companie of the senses, and desires, many a time called away from that principall office, to consider these unstable, and mutable things: and sometime to cast in conceite fourmes disseuered from the mater, mathematically: and sometime to view things sensible, that can in no wise bee sondered from the materiall substance:
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as Elementes, Beastes, Herbes, Trees, Metalls, Stones, and such like: all that which must needes be sensed . . .
Nicholas Grimald, ‘To the Reader’, Marcus Tullius Cicero, *his three books of duties*¹

Being, believing, thinking. In early modern England, discourse concerning the ‘big questions’ turned on the distinction between the material and immaterial. While much recent scholarship has focused on material culture, the present study is concerned with its immaterial complement. In particular, the following pages explore the metaphysical status of immateriality and its figurative power in England from the last decades of the sixteenth century through the first half of the seventeenth. What occurred during these turbulent and eventful years amounts to a sea change in the way immateriality and materiality were conceived and represented, providing writers with an opportunity to capitalise on shifts in the shared understanding of the nature of things and thus produce some of the most celebrated literature in English.

Throughout the Christian Middle Ages, theologians and philosophers relied on a conception of reality necessarily comprised of both material and immaterial things. Though the distinction between the two realms was counted among the mysteries of God’s creation, philosophers and theologians developed a range of theories to explain the nature of material and immaterial entities and the manner in which the two did and did not interact. Over the course of the long Middle Ages, St Augustine’s Neoplatonist metaphysics eventually gave way to Aristotelian scholasticism as the accepted metaphysical authority, even as fierce debates over the compatibility of Aristotelian and Platonic metaphysics with Christian doctrine and dogma raged. The nature of the triune God and the relationship of body and soul animated scholastic debate on ancient philosophical problems in the high Middle Ages.
Schoolmen devoted a great deal of attention to the metaphysical status of abstraction (ideas) – seeking to explain how immaterial universals (apparently not available to sensuous perception) were related to the world of perceptible material things. Unlike those ancient philosophers willing to rule out the existence of immaterial entities – often in an attempt to avoid the logical contradiction of positing the existence of nothing – medieval philosophers could not afford to doubt the existence of immaterial things without risking the loss of basic tenets of Christianity (most importantly, the immortality of the soul and the incorporeal nature of God the Father). Mystical and scholastic theologians alike viewed sensuous experience with the natural world as a conduit to the spiritual and incorruptible realm beyond mortal comprehension. God was in all things and all things led to God.

After the works of Islamic philosophers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Averroës (Ibn Rushd) enabled the reintroduction of central aspects of Aristotelian thought to the European universities in the thirteenth century, Aristotle’s hylomorphic metaphysics increasingly grounded the basic understanding of the nature of things material and immaterial. Combining the Greek terms for matter, ‘hyle’, (ὕλη) and form, ‘morphe’, (µορφή), hylomorphism refers to Aristotle’s theory of reality in which all things exist as compounds of matter and form, expressing essence. Unlike Platonic particulars that imperfectly express a separable, immaterial and perfect form – the proper object of philosophical attention – in Aristotle’s system reality, and thus the truth of things, is to be found in the analysis of enformed matter. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, the Aristotelian concept of matter, as well as that developed by his intellectual heirs, is complex and unfamiliar.

The first significant early modern challenge to the Aristotelian ascendency would come in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when Italian humanists began to contemplate the
impact of newly available ancient texts. Humanist translations of Plato’s works into Latin led to new efforts to reconcile Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics with Christian theology, reviving Augustinian Neoplatonism as an alternative to scholastic Aristotelianism. Marsilio Ficino announces this aim explicitly in the proem to his *Platonic Theology*: ‘Augustine chose Plato out of the ranks of the philosophers to be his model, as being closest of all to the Christian truth. With just a few changes, he maintained, the Platonists would be Christians.’

This move opened the door for natural philosophers to disentangle the material and immaterial realms, undoing the Aristotelian hylomorphic synthesis by reintroducing a realm of ideal Forms, distinct from the material things in which they were available to sensuous experience. This was nothing new for Christian metaphysics, as Augustinian Neoplatonism had never disappeared, coexisting in the thought of medieval mystics like St Bonaventure and evident in even the more overtly Aristotelian thought of schoolmen like St Thomas Aquinas. Nevertheless, the Aristotelian position had dominated accounts of human cognition and the soul – two areas in which the interaction between materiality and immateriality is crucial – and the introduction of Latin translations of and commentaries on ancient texts by Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and others reignited metaphysical debates about the constitution of the natural and spiritual worlds that would have profound implications for the conception of immateriality in early modern England. Consonant with a Christian metaphysics of transcendence, the Neoplatonic re-emphasis of immaterial Forms prompted renewed speculation and reflection on the nature of the material/immaterial relation itself.

By the end of the sixteenth century, seismic changes in the European intellectual landscape had complicated conventional accounts of the relationship between immaterial and material things. In addition to the humanist revival of
Platonic metaphysics, challenges came from two additional, seemingly opposite directions, as the Protestant Reformation fostered suspicion of outward appearance at the same time that the emergence of the new science encouraged close observation of the natural world. The apparent conflict between a reformed view of the material world and the growing interest of natural philosophers in divining that world’s secrets is more accurately viewed as a shifting of perspective. Doctrinal controversies over everything from idolatry and vestments to the nature of the soul and the Eucharist focused attention on accounts of the relationship between the material and immaterial that had been tentatively settled by traditional authorities. Where the presence of the immaterial God in all things was assumed in the conversations of the schoolmen, reformers now questioned whether an inanimate material statue could lead to spiritual edification. In the 1571 ‘Homily against Peril of Idolatry’, the theological objection to Roman Catholic practice is articulated in explicitly metaphysical terms:

For how can God, a most pure spirit, whom man never saw, be expressed by a gross, bodily, and visible similitude? How can the infinite majesty and greatness of God, incomprehensible to man’s mind, much more not able to be compassed with the sense, be expressed in a small and little image? How can a dead and dumb image express the living God?

In other words, the homilist asks: How can two distinct substances subsist in one thing? This was, in fact, a question asked and answered by the scholastics, but the disruption of the Reformation placed new pressure on the contorted logic provided by the schoolmen to resolve apparent conflicts between Christian doctrine and philosophical argument. The impact of revisiting such questions was widely felt in works ranging from literature to natural philosophy and theology.
Just as the fragile medieval reconciliation of ancient philosophy and Christian theology was shaken with the onset of the Reformation, the emergence of an empiricism grounded in experimentation and observation in natural philosophy contributed to a re-evaluation of accepted propositions concerning both physics and metaphysics. In the mid-sixteenth century, Copernicus, Vesalius and Fracastoro challenged the established accounts of important authorities in natural philosophy, including Ptolemy, Galen and Aristotle, setting the stage for the rapid expansion of experimental science in the seventeenth century. Spearheaded by Francis Bacon and later William Harvey, Robert Boyle and others in England, and culminating in the establishment of the Royal Society in 1660, the new methods would soon be extended to all areas of enquiry into the natural world. One important result of seventeenth-century developments in natural philosophy was an increase in efforts to remove immaterial things from conversations about the natural world. Invisible forces, long considered supernatural, were brought under the power of empirical science, aided by new methodologies and innovative apparatuses: microscopes and air-pumps would make visible that which had been previously invisible, and the analysis of the data they provided would be ordered and re-examined to derive more accurate theoretical knowledge from nature. For most this meant relegating immaterial things to theology, though others denied their existence altogether, both moves which appear to us now as evidence of the onset of modernity. Yet throughout the period all such enquiry was carried out under the rubric of natural philosophy, and it is important to remember that the philosophical aspect of this work remained central to its methods and rhetoric. Some important figures in the scientific revolution are still identified primarily as philosophers – Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes – despite making significant contributions to both natural science and metaphysics, and bemoaning the
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continued reliance on suspect authority. Most important for the present study is that, like all historical change, changes in the understanding of material and immaterial interaction were slow to take hold. While the relegation of immaterial things to theology or superstition would eventually define the Enlightenment, they remained an important part of the conversation even as experimental science gained ground in the first half of the seventeenth century. Even if one accepts that modern science was essentially born in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to describe its emergence as a revolution is problematic. As John L. Heilbron writes of even the best accounts of the scientific revolution, ‘The wine is new, the bottle old, the label misleading.’

As Heilbron’s description indicates, old ideas and methods mixed with new ones throughout the period, even as experimental science gained ground in the second half of the seventeenth century. By the Restoration in Britain, debates over the existence of ‘immater"
originating with Descartes and his materialist interlocutors (especially Pierre Gassendi in France and Hobbes and Cavendish in England). The backdrop to the rise of science and reason was thus a significant metaphysical debate about the nature of things, the reality of the natural and supernatural world. Fielding’s confidence in the distinction between essence and substance was not shared by those writing at the turn of the seventeenth century, at a moment when medieval Latin translations of Aristotle still informed early modern natural philosophy and theology, and in which the crucial concept of *ousia* was variously translated as essence and substance.\(^{10}\)

*Immateriality and Early Modern English Literature* focuses on the messy period of transition between these two poles – from an era in which the intertwining of the natural and spiritual worlds was taken for granted to one in which the two worlds represented distinct objects for reflection. In this in-between period, and especially the years that are the subject of this book, roughly the 1590s to the 1630s, the focus was as much on the interaction between the material and immaterial as it was on establishing their existence or distinct nature. For the philosophers, theologians, natural philosophers, physicians and poets discussed below, the material and immaterial realms interpenetrated one another in productive and surprising ways. While early modernists, seeking to correct a long tradition of scholarship focused on the history of ideas, have shifted critical attention to materiality and material culture, such studies tell only part of the story. The ‘material turn’ in early modern studies has rightly redirected scholarly attention to the intersection between material (often termed ‘embodied’) experience and cultural production in the period. But at times an over-investment in materiality has led to the dismissal of the role that immateriality and immaterial things played in that same culture.\(^{11}\) Francis Bacon, the putative founder of modern science in England, includes divinity in his ‘small
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Globe of the Intellectual World’ as essentially settled truth: ‘I can report no deficiencie concerning them: for I can find no space or ground that lieth vacant and unsown in the matter of divinity.’ Thomas Hobbes, perhaps the most trenchant English advocate for a materialist metaphysics in the seventeenth century, similarly reserved a space for the spiritual outside of the realm of his materialist philosophy, a view he repeatedly voiced despite charges of atheism. Though this may have been a feint aimed at avoiding serious charges of heresy, his willingness to affirm a real but incomprehensible theological realm suggests how difficult it was to be a thoroughgoing materialist in the seventeenth century.

This is not to say that early modern accounts of the natural and supernatural worlds do not reflect profound changes in the intellectual landscape, including an increased interest in Lucretian atomism, humanist Neoplatonism and the emerging emphasis on experimental observation. My argument is that competing metaphysical systems vied for authority as the ground for understanding the natural world and its relationship to theological truth. Aristotelianism was especially slow to disappear; the rejection of scholastic Aristotelianism by humanist scholars failed to blunt its continued popularity in a range of discourses from psychology to theology. The authority of Thomist Aristotelianism actually grew in the sixteenth century. Paul Oskar Kristeller makes the point that,

beginning with the sixteenth century it often happened – as it never did during the Middle Ages – that the ordinary reader who was not a theologian, and even the reader who was not a Catholic nor a philosopher, considered St. Thomas to be the sole representative of medieval philosophy and theology who deserved to be excluded from the general contempt for that tradition.

The metaphysical debate broadly associated with Aristotelian and Platonist positions still dominated the intellectual
landscape, even as confessional identity altered the stakes involved in taking one side or the other.\textsuperscript{16}

The humanist translation and dissemination of important works of classical philosophy that had been lost to medieval Europe fostered renewed interest in metaphysical speculation. The most well known and important is the Neoplatonism ushered in by Ficino and other Italian humanists, but Lucretian atomism and the hermetic tradition were equally disruptive to authoritative accounts of material and immaterial interaction. It was arguably the Reformation, however, that created the most turbulence in early modern natural philosophy and metaphysics, the two areas in which ideas about the nature of materiality and immateriality had to be directly reconciled with religious belief and doctrine. As acrimonious as medieval debates on these subjects had been, the tenor of Reformation polemic reached a whole new level. Theological debates over the Eucharist, to take an obvious example, had long drawn on what we would consider today to be contradictory philosophical systems. When medieval scholastics wrestled with an ancient metaphysical inheritance that was in many ways incompatible with their theological convictions, they did so in the shadow of a unified Church. Reformers and counter-reformers appealed to different theological authorities. An important result of all of this philosophical and theological uncertainty was that conventional accounts of the human relationship to both the natural and supernatural worlds were increasingly revealed to be contradictory, and sometimes simply incoherent. This created, I argue, a unique opportunity for literary innovation, but not because it ushered in the dawn of the modern era, and with it modern subjectivity. Rather, on this particular set of issues, the early modern was decidedly pre-modern, looking back as much as forward in the hope of stabilising uncertainties about both the earthly world and the eternal realm beyond its limits.
An important premise of this book is that it is necessary to understand the important role ideas about immaterial things played in the lives of the writers under consideration here, accepting that a dynamic interplay between immateriality and materiality saturated the period’s language and thought. This is not as easy to do as it sounds, for today, outside of overtly religious, theological discourse, immateriality is viewed with suspicion. Important recent scholarship on early modern astrology, alchemy and the occult has begun to make strides in understanding a past that was saturated with anxiety and belief about the nature of immaterial things ranging from spirits and demons to thoughts and invisible forces.  Yet even in such excellent recent work, belief in the immateriality of souls and spirits, among other things, is often characterised as naive, such theories about the world deemed absurd or silly. When signs of proto-modern scientific sensibility are found alongside clearly pre-modern fallacies about the functioning of the natural world, the tendency has been to trace a route from nascent scientific intuition to the present assumptions of modern science. The fact that early modern atomists could conceive of a world made up of tiny particles – however unlike the actual atomic structure recognised by modern physics – is evidence of proto-modern, forward thinking.  What we lose when we search for clues to the development of the modern sensibility is a clear picture of the way unfamiliar early modern ways of experiencing and thinking about the world informed its religion, politics and culture. While not advocating for a re-evaluation of debunked theories long since abandoned by science, I suggest that a focus on early modern belief in things immaterial can illuminate the literature of the period by offering a corrective to some of the more familiar accounts of the period’s cultural development, including the so-called secularisation thesis. In this sense, my project is basically historicist, though, as I will explain
below, my approach is indebted to philosophical phenomenology and thus more akin to the historical phenomenology proposed by Bruce Smith and other early modernists working in the phenomenological tradition, including Julia Lupton, James Kearney and Jennifer Waldron.

In this book, I ask a question similar to the one Gail Kern Paster asks in her influential study, *Humoring the Body*: that we imagine a way of thinking about the world that seems utterly different from our own. Paster asks readers to consider that emotion was, for the early moderns, an entirely material phenomenon, a position that enables an ‘ecology’ of early modern emotion focused on an understanding of the physical features of the internal body. Early modern passions, in Paster’s account, ‘have an elemental character more literal than metaphoric in force’. This view goes against the modern (still largely Cartesian) distinction between extended body and non-extended thought. This distinction, which defined the ‘mind–body problem’ in philosophy from Descartes through much of the twentieth century, has recently broken down in the wake of research into cognitive neuroscience linking specific physical activity in the brain and related somatic responses to particular emotions long considered immaterial. Antonio Damasio sums up the recent rejection of Cartesian dualism in his book *Descartes’ Error*, describing the ‘error’ of his title as follows:

... the abyssal separation between body and mind, between the sizable, dimensioned, mechanically operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizable, undimensioned, un-pushpullable, nondivisible mind stuff; the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgement, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body. Specifically: the separation of the most refined operations of the mind from the structure and operation of a biological organism.
In early modern studies, Paster, Mary Crane and others who have drawn on this research use the current model of neuroscience to reconsider the way emotion was experienced in the early modern period; humoral theory and cognitive neuroscience use different terms but describe embodied emotion in strikingly similar ways. This helps bring a seemingly alien understanding of human emotion (humoral theory) into focus, but it does so at the risk of imposing a contemporary perspective on our description of early modern experience. We might ask how much of this revisionist sense of early modern cognitive experience is a reflection of our own moment and its re-evaluation of the connection between the material body, thought and emotion. In other words, is a materialist theory like Galenic humoralism starting to make sense to us because our own understanding of emotion is increasingly materialist?

The consequences of the so-called material turn in early modern studies – bolstered, perhaps, by a reverence for experimental science as the engine of an increasingly complex technological culture – has had the unfortunate side effect of demoting the immaterial as a category for serious enquiry. The recent explosion of interest in the ‘Lucretian Renaissance’, to borrow a phrase from Gerard Passannante, rests, in part, on the belief that modern physics is more like Lucretian atomism than either of the Aristotelian or Neoplatonic alternatives available in the early modern period. Such studies suggest that a re-evaluation of the impact of Lucretius in the Renaissance will help clarify the ‘modern’ in ‘early modern’. Yet, as Ada Palmer has noted, most of those reading Lucretius in the Renaissance were not atomists, and in fact, many dismissed or even condemned his overall metaphysics. This is in part due to the fact that the very idea that everything that exists is material was anathema to most, though certainly not all, early modern writers who weighed in on the topic. For most people in early
modern England, the objects of contemplation that were thought to be immaterial were every bit as, if not more, important than material ones, even if the process of revealing them involved embodied experience. *Immateriality and Early Modern English Literature* asks what we might learn by taking seriously this early modern belief in things immaterial. To do so, we would have to entertain a way of thinking about the world as unfamiliar as the one described by Paster on the question of emotion. Where Paster’s work helped us see materiality where we had assumed immateriality, my aim is to foreground belief in the immaterial as an active component in early modern material life. And, just as current shifts in thinking about cognition and emotion have guided some of the important work on materiality in early modern studies, the increased influence of religion in contemporary politics and culture has refocused scholarly attention on early modern belief, potentially pushing immateriality back to the fore. But rather than urge a pendulum swing back to the history of ideas and away from the emphasis on materiality that has dominated the last two decades of early modern scholarship, I propose a way forward that more rigorously examines the dynamic interplay between material and immaterial metaphysics in the early modern period.

To this end the current study builds on the work of scholars focused on early modern materiality by offering a complementary analysis of the role immateriality played in early modern thought. Sarah Wall-Randell has recently undertaken a similar project in the area of Renaissance book history. In *The Immaterial Book*, she urges ‘practitioners [of Renaissance literary studies] to attend to materiality’s inverse, its shadow, the immaterial, to investigate what immateriality might mean in the period and investigate its effects’. Her work focuses on the books represented in literary texts from the period and their role in the early modern imagination,
complementing my own examination of the philosophical, theological and medical discourses informing the representation of materiality and immateriality in early modern poetics. In *Dark Matter*, Andrew Sofer explores the importance of the unseen in the theatre, ‘the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance’. The role of the immaterial is often the implied other to the material conditions and objects under consideration.

Katherine Eggert has recently argued eloquently that the early modern confusion over evolving science – sparked by the shift from humanism to modern empiricism – led writers to deploy knowledge they knew to be false. It is a compelling argument, and Eggert’s position is beautifully articulated in readings of some of the same authors under consideration in the present study. Eggert is clearly right that, for some, the collapse of faith in medieval physics led to a lack of confidence in the traditional theories of matter that had underwritten much of late medieval natural philosophy and theology. Even more important is her related point that no coherent theory of matter filled the void left by the collapse of tradition at the turn of the seventeenth century. But I’m not convinced that the seeming incoherence of the theories circulating at the turn of the seventeenth century means that the people who deployed these theories knew them to be false; instead, it seems more accurate to say that they believed some things that appear to be simply incoherent to us in the twenty-first century. That incoherent belief was belief nonetheless.

The destabilisation of long-held, if often inconsistent, accounts of the material and immaterial in early modern natural philosophy is the rich reserve from which the poets and dramatists of the age drew some of their most memorable figures. Eggert’s focus on alchemy adds weight to her conclusion, as many early modern writers expressed their scepticism of this particular form of what we now consider junk
science, and certainly some drew on outmoded theories in order to get at elusive problems figuratively. John Donne’s reference to the intertwining of ‘eye beams’ in *The Ecstasy* is a likely example of a poet deploying a theory known to be false. But a wide range of equally alien beliefs about the world were clearly held in earnest – aspects of humoral theory, for example, but also many of the ideas underlying alchemy itself. My own argument is that early modern English habits of mind were shaped by an intellectual culture in which the immaterial was a category as vibrant and necessary as the material. Only in retrospect can we locate the beginning of the scientific revolution in England at the turn of the seventeenth century. From our vantage, we may be able to identify the ‘new science’ as an already nascent form of our own modern science. And of course, in very important ways, it was. But the aspects of these emerging modes of enquiry that we identify as modern were often tangential to those older and less familiar views that guided enquiry into nature and faith during the period.

Focus on the development of the modern sometimes makes it difficult to accept that early modern intellectual giants – thinkers like Shakespeare, Bacon and Donne – were not always able to tell where Galen and Aristotle went wrong. When we consider Shakespeare ‘our contemporary’, we make a choice to highlight the familiar at the expense of the outmoded. Advocates of ‘presentism’ offer a compelling defence of the relevance of Shakespeare and early modern literature for our current moment, but they do so at the risk of overstating the continuity between a distant past and our own moment. Of course, the opposite is a danger if we accept the position that historical alterity is so absolute as to be impossible to recover even provisionally; this idea is often proposed in relation to early modern dramatic performance, as both the historical conditions of spectatorship and the details of dramatic practice are lost to time. This
component of historicist approaches, maintaining the inaccessibility of the past except that which can be recovered provisionally through a survey of the now silent voices available in extant texts and material artefacts, effectively places any enquiry into past experience off limits. In response to this critical problem, I turn to historical phenomenology. As a critical practice, phenomenology may offer a middle ground between the poles of presentism and historicism, especially when its own methods are made historical.

The way early modern writers engaged with the variety of theoretical explanations concerning the nature of material and immaterial things suggests a complex and deeply felt anxiety about human knowledge and experience of the natural and supernatural world. We might hear this anxiety in Othello’s frustration at the height of the temptation scene when his experience fails to yield a coherent understanding of his predicament: ‘I think my wife be honest and think she’s not . . . I’ll have some proof!’ Othello’s problem is that the proof he seeks is not forthcoming – or even possible – at least not in material form. The idea that Desdemona’s fidelity can be proven or disproven on the grounds of ‘ocular proof’ drives the tragedy, as does a similar lack of empirical proof of Old Hamlet’s murder in Hamlet – ‘there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy’ (1.5.168–9), decries a flummoxed Hamlet to a pragmatic Horatio. In both cases, the protagonists are forced to grapple with alternatives to both tradition and empirical, material evidence – they are forced to engage with the immaterial. Similarly, when John Donne implores God to ‘batter [his] heart’, or George Herbert questions how man, ‘a crazy, brittle glass’, can convey God’s word, they express a larger cultural anxiety that is played out along the fault line separating the material and immaterial.

This anxiety has sometimes been taken as a primarily epistemological problem. Advocates of Shakespeare’s scepticism,
most notably Stanley Cavell, point to the distrust of proof in Shakespeare as evidence of the playwright’s espousal of a properly philosophical scepticism. Such a position centres the debate on epistemological questions rather than ontological ones. The theatre invites epistemological speculation because it offers its truths through deceptive appearances. In the cases of poets like Donne and Herbert, however, to focus on epistemological questions would be to suggest that their affliction is a result of their inability to know rather than feel, evacuating an aspect of the religious content from their devotional verse. And while textual evidence for a sceptical Shakespeare can be compelling, true philosophical scepticism is a position unlikely to have actually been held in early modern England. For most, early modern epistemology was predicated on an ontological belief: that eternal, immaterial things (God, but also, in certain modes, souls and angels) both exist and are beyond the comprehension of materially embodied humans. Epistemological doubt was almost always accompanied by an investment in this ontological certainty. There was a truth, even if it was in some aspects inaccessible. The nature of existence was more important than the human capacity to have knowledge of that nature. Put slightly differently, doubt about the truth value of almost anything in the sublunary world was subordinated to a belief in the ontological fact of God’s existence: immaterial, imperceptible things were thus as real and in fact more important than the things found in the material sensorium. Accepting this as a basic aspect of early modern thought helps explain Descartes’ surprising leap to the existence of God in his third meditation, after proposing what appears to be a convincing, modern philosophical scepticism. In fact, of course, Descartes’ proof of God was always primary, his scepticism a rhetorically powerful method to get to the more important argument. For most early modern Christians the fallibility of sense perception served to accentuate the transitory and insignificant
nature of earthly, mortal existence. In its ability to produce epistemological doubt, sensation provided evidence of the theological truth of postlapsarian human corruption. The material world nevertheless provided the only access to the incomprehensible truths of the immaterial realm, and thus the material/immaterial dyad can be found at the heart of early modern philosophical and theological accounts of both the nature of the world and the place of humans in it.

One of the aims of the present study is to try to provide a description of how it felt to live at a time when this complex and now quite unfamiliar understanding of material and immaterial interactivity pervaded the intellectual scene. Rather than try to identify the philosophical school into which the literary writers under consideration may be classified (Shakespeare the Neoplatonist, for example), my goal is to explore how the conflicts over metaphysics and theology were felt by those living through the change. Poetry and drama is precisely where we should look for this kind of representation of experience, for poets and dramatists primarily seek to convey experience, even when that experience is informed by ideas or theories. This is the difference between literature and history or philosophy in Sir Philip Sidney’s account – the requirement of literature to move or ‘delight’ is about replicating experience. It is for this reason that overtly didactic literature almost always fails in comparison to literature that presents rather than dictates (hence the advice to creative writers to show rather than tell). This is, however, not to say that the poets and dramatists of the period were not concerned with the ideas themselves, or with a kind of aesthetic didacticism that was explicitly intended to persuade. My point is, rather, that the demands of aesthetic production open a window onto the way serious philosophical, ethical and theological debates were experienced in the social and cultural world of the time.
In both philosophy and literary theory, the method focused most squarely on experience as a category has been phenomenology. As a philosophical movement, phenomenology turned to the category of experience as a way of interrogating consciousness of the world in contrast to naturalism’s emphasis on material reality, and it has remained consistent in its focus even as shifting ideas about the nature of experience have changed the course of phenomenological enquiry since it first appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. Though literary critics have drawn on the work of phenomenologists since at least the 1960s, only in the last two decades or so have we seen a considerable revival of interest in phenomenological approaches to early modern studies. The most prominent advocate for such an approach has been Bruce R. Smith. In *Phenomenal Shakespeare* Smith offers a manifesto-style defence of what he calls ‘historical phenomenology’, arguing that phenomenology is an attractive alternative to literary criticism that approaches literary and cultural materials with an agenda underwritten by the assumptions (axioms) of a particular theoretical system (Marxist, psychoanalytic, eco-critical etc.). Such axiom-driven studies, Smith argues, produce analyses that force the texts under consideration to conform to the presupposed axioms of the method. Smith compares such readings to the demonstration (Q.E.D.) in mathematical problem solving. The demonstration proves the theory rather than the theory offering proof of its conclusions. Smith advocates phenomenology because it abandons the kind of critical axioms that interpretive schools favour, reducing method to a single axiomatic position: ‘you cannot know anything apart from the way that you come to know it’. This characterisation has special relevance for the present examination of materiality and immateriality in early modern culture. Smith explicitly compares the phenomenological method to that proposed by Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and *The New Organon* (1620). As Smith points out,
phenomenology’s insistence on analysing the experience of the phenomenal world shares with Bacon a desire to begin at the bottom and work up towards axioms rather than proceeding from the other direction. As we will see, this concern with directionality – from sense experience to thought rather than thought to sense experience – is at the heart of debates over the material and immaterial in the English Renaissance.

Smith has been joined by other early modernists who have recognised phenomenology’s potential to open up early modern experience to analysis. Smith is clear that to get at such experience requires some historical reconstruction, and he admits that this process will always fail to reach its subject entirely. But the advantage of reorienting critical attention towards the history of lived experience is to recover an important component of the early modern literary lifeworld that is obscured by programmatic criticism guided by theoretical agendas. As his previous phenomenologically oriented studies have shown, the approach offers insight into aspects of early modern culture that scholars and historians have otherwise deemed inaccessible. In The Acoustic World of Early Modern England, for example, Smith asks if early modern people experienced sound differently than we do today. He then sets out to answer the question by analysing both the ways writers discussed sound in surviving texts and the ways in which the cultural meanings of their works were shaped by the acoustic conditions in which they were experienced. His project in The Key of Green provides a similar journey through the visual experience of a single colour in the period, reading the language of green against its appearance in texts, objects and designs from the period as a starting point for reconstructing a history of sensuous response. Smith’s approach is especially well suited to the ‘material turn’ in early modern studies, due to its attention to material things beyond the linguistic, textual record, as well as its emphasis on embodied experience.
But phenomenology’s relationship to materialism is a complicated one. Julia Reinhard Lupton, another practitioner of the phenomenological approach in Shakespeare studies, follows Michael Lewis and Tanja Staehler in describing phenomenology as ‘the science of appearances’. Lupton’s association of phenomenology with both ‘science’ and ‘appearance’, like Smith’s emphasis on sensuous experience, may suggest to some that phenomenology’s focus is on materiality, or perhaps the affordances any material environment may offer. At the same time, however, it is helpful to consider what is meant by ‘appearance’, for the term can indicate the sensuous coming to visibility of a natural (material) object, or the presentation of an immaterial object in the mind. A key conclusion in the early development of phenomenology was Edmund Husserl’s claim that ‘there is no duality between being and appearance’. This claim was directly aimed at breaking down the Kantian distinction between noumena and phenomena (things-in-themselves and appearances, respectively), but also the psychological account of mental activity as distinct from physical sensation as described by Descartes. Husserl developed two of the most important concepts of phenomenological analysis – intention and intuition – in order to clarify his position on the unity of appearance and being. And though Husserl was ostensibly working to overcome Kantian and Cartesian dualities that had created an unbridgeable gap between appearance and existence, it is important for the present study that part of the solution was to return philosophy to a state prior to their influential contributions.

Contemporary phenomenology has its origins in Franz Brentano’s nineteenth-century attempt to develop a rigorous science of psychic activity. Brentano drew on both Aristotle and Thomist scholasticism in developing his theory of mental activity, hoping to provide a solution to the problem of distinguishing between objects in the world and mental objects. His conclusion that ‘psychical phenomena’ are ‘intentional’
provided the jumping-off point for Husserl's development of the theory of intentionality. Brentano makes his debt to the scholastics clear:

Every psychical phenomenon is characterized by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or sometimes the mental) inexistence of an object, and what we should like to call, although not quite unambiguously, the reference (Beziehung) to a content, the directedness (Richtung) towards an object (which in this context is not to be understood as something real) or the immanent-object-quality (immanente Gegenstandlichkeit). Each contains something as its object, though not each in the same manner. In the representation (Vorstellung) something is represented, in the judgment something is acknowledged or rejected, in the desiring it is desired, etc. This intentional inexistence is peculiar alone to psychical phenomena. No physical phenomenon shows anything like it. And thus we can define psychical phenomena by saying that they are such phenomena as contain objects in themselves by way of intention (intentional).

Brentano was explicitly interested in the distinction between material objects in the natural world and mental objects, which appear to have no material existence. These two kinds of objects, he thought, are clearly related, but also clearly different in kind. The concept of intention would subsequently become central to phenomenology, as a way to avoid speculation about metaphysical questions that were not grounded in experience, for, as Husserl would demonstrate, all objects about which something could be truthfully predicated (both natural and mental) are intentional objects. In Husserl’s hands, the concept of intentionality would be refined to indicate that all experience of phenomena involves being conscious of an object of intention, that all consciousness is consciousness of something.
While all phenomenal experience involves intention towards an object, according to Husserl, not all intentional objects are of the same kind. Perceptual appearance (that which appears to sight, for example) is never complete, despite our experience of the object being given to consciousness as a whole. As Steven Crowell explains,

If, for instance, I reflect on my perception of this apple, I note that the apple is given as a whole but that only one side of it appears while the others are occluded. Further, the apple is given as the same even as other sides of it come into view. But reflection also shows that the order and connection that defines the object of such experience necessarily makes reference to the subject whose experience it is. This side of the apple is currently appearing because I am seeing it from here; these other sides come to appear because I am now seeing it from another angle, and so on.49

In recognising that the apple is given as whole, one also recognises that something beyond empirical observation of the world ‘as it is’ must be caught up in the act of perception. This recognition is the product of philosophical reflection. In what Husserl calls the ‘natural attitude’, we assume the existence of the world and the manner of its constitution based on preconceptions and prior experience. We have seen a lot of apples, for example, and we do not pause to consider how it is that we experience three-dimensional objects with facets that we cannot see. This naive view is crucial to living in the world (we would never open doors without the implicit awareness that the room on the other side was indeed going to be there to welcome us). Similarly, we don’t launch into reflections on consciousness every time we see an apple. Yet, as Smith notes regarding Bacon’s method, preconceptions complicate the effort to seek knowledge on a pure rather than practical level. The knowledge sought in reflection on and description of phenomenal experience is the revelation
of both the essential structure of our experiences as well as what appears. For the phenomenologist, in order to reach these scientific truths about the world one must inhibit oneself from the natural attitude.

This deliberate resistance to the natural attitude is called the ‘phenomenological reduction’. Associated with Husserl’s term *epoché* or ‘bracketing’, the reduction is not a scepticism of knowledge (as in Descartes’ *Meditations*), but a setting aside of all knowledge, withholding it while undertaking the act of philosophical reflection. The result is an intuitive opening onto another mode of being. If intentionality identifies the condition of perceptual experience as oriented towards an object (either material or mental), philosophical intuition focuses on the immediate givenness of that object to consciousness. Philosophical reflection reveals the structure of this relation between object and consciousness. The role of phenomenological intuition and description when perceiving with the senses – what Husserl called ‘external intention’ – is to highlight the inadequacy of sense perception to the object, to recognise that what appears to the senses is not all that appears in the phenomenal experience of the object. On the other hand, ‘internal intuition’ reveals the object under consideration to be an object ‘of consciousness’, apprehended as a whole. Moreover, the appearance of a non-material object before consciousness is, for Husserl, real in the same way as the appearance of an extra-mental object: the proper focus for the science of phenomenology is phenomenal appearance in consciousness.

Thus, despite one strand of phenomenology that emphasises the material things of experience (the ‘appearance of objects’ in the first sense), another important strand is explicitly focused on the fact that the experience of phenomena involves both visible and invisible objects of analysis. This is where the second key phenomenological term becomes important: intuition. If intention (directedness towards an object) is the condition of phenomenal perception, intuition allows for
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its facilitation. Here again, phenomenology’s inheritance from scholastic thought provides an important historical parallel. In developing the concept of intuition, Husserl invoked the long history of the term *intuito*, which was central to medieval scholastic thought – used variously by Aquinas, Duns Scotus and Ockham. For the scholastics, *intuito* was a broad term for something like immediate knowledge. The term was a matter of much scholastic refinement and debate, often associated with Augustinian divine illumination to distinguish it from the more limited faculty of human reason. In developing a modern phenomenological theory of intuition, Husserl hoped to create a more scientific account of intuition’s functioning by tying it to the same methods of phenomenological analysis outlined for the world of sense experience, that is, in Herbert Spiegelberg’s description, to move from the ‘careful consideration of representative examples, which are to serve as stepping stones, as it were, for any generalizing “ideation”’. While this shares with induction a movement from the particular to the general, it exceeds the inductive method by intertwining the facts gleaned from concrete examples of experience with the descriptive analysis of the essential structure of those experiences, a product of the phenomenological method known as eidetic reduction.

In the context of medieval scholasticism, ‘intuition’ was a broad term referring to something like ‘direct perception’ of reality; it identified the ways in which things were known to be true or real, despite the limits of human reason, the obvious case being the knowledge of God. It was not, Jaakko Hintikka points out, concerned with ‘an internal or introspective source of knowledge’, the way the term is generally used today. Hintikka’s account of the shift from the medieval to the modern sense of intuition reveals much about the way this development has been historicised:

It seems to me that the main historical reasons why the broad scholastic concept of intuition was not long-lived are obvious. The geometrical and mechanical vision of the
world of early modern science showed that what looks like a direct perception is in reality a complex process involving all sorts of inferences, albeit often unspoken and even unconscious ones. Such ideas as the Copernican explanation of the apparent movements of the sun in terms of the earth’s unperceived motion or Berkeley’s analysis of depth vision through stereoscopic seeing showed how many potential slips there are between the cup and the lip – or, rather, between the cup and the eye. A perceiver’s relation to the objects of perception could no longer be thought of as an immediate, i.e. intuitive, one. The only area left where we seem to have truly direct knowledge is our inner world the world of our ideas and mental acts.\(^5\)

Hintikka’s two examples, Copernicus and Berkeley, writing in the early decades of the sixteenth century and the first half of the eighteenth respectively, suggest that scientists and philosophers alike recognised the inadequacy of the scholastic concept of direct perception. What is interesting for the present study is that scholastic intuition was specifically formulated as an answer to the problem of experience with the immaterial as real. Hintikka’s early modern mechanists, with their geometry and mechanical vision, shifted the immaterial to the realm of ideation exclusively, thus creating a chasm between the material and immaterial (as in Cartesian substance dualism). It is a familiar story, but one that is belied by the actual habits of thought that pervaded the early modern period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Though attitudes to the capacity for sensuous perception to yield truths about the natural world evolved dramatically over the course of these centuries, the persistence of belief in the other side of perception – the access to intuitive knowledge of the invisible – is evidence of how incomplete the scientific revolution was throughout the early modern period.

Phenomenology’s twofold emphasis on the science of appearance thus provides a compelling methodology for examining the early modern experience of a world comprised
of both heaven and earth. By focusing on phenomena, that which appears to consciousness, phenomenology, especially in the hands of the French practitioners I draw on in this book, is open to the full field of experience that captivated the early modern poets and dramatists under consideration here. Another way to describe phenomenological ‘appearing’ is ‘givenness’. Today the primary practitioner of this formula for phenomenological analysis is the Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. While appearance suggests or demands that there is a material phenomenon available to experience, givenness expands the realm of experience to the invisible and immaterial. If, as some have argued, Brentano’s penchant for science was driven in part by his rejection of Catholicism, the return to the immaterial in French phenomenology could be seen as a radical break with the original phenomenological project. But Marion’s phenomenology is not simply an attempt to co-opt phenomenology for religious ends, though he is upfront about his religious convictions. Rather, it takes up an important strand in phenomenology that had been there from the start. Part of the impetus for bringing human experience under the power of science (arguably the goal of the first practitioners) was to explain what seem to be non-material aspects of human experience in material terms. As the French version of phenomenology developed, especially in the hands of two very different philosophers responding to Heidegger’s existential phenomenology – Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas – the emphasis on what does not appear became more pronounced.

For Levinas, the focus of philosophy must be the ethical demand of the other person, both as embodied individual and impossible idea. This position calls into question any attempt at a science of phenomenal experience that begins with sensuous, material perception, even if that perception is ultimately submitted to the eidetic reduction, for the essence of the other person is in Levinas’s view irreducibly other.
One could say that Levinas’s entire effort to reorient metaphysics or ‘first philosophy’ from ontology to ethics resulted in a call to turn from what appears to what is withheld in the process of appearing. Heidegger’s concern with what he called the ‘unhiddenness’ of truths also reflects the early phenomenological interest in the other side of the appearing phenomenal thing. But while Heidegger acknowledges the hidden or invisible in defining ontological truth as a matter of the ‘unhiddenness of beings’, he fails to submit the hidden to ethical analysis in Levinasian terms. In his repudiation of Heideggerian ontology, Levinas prioritises precisely what always remains hidden in human intersubjective experience: the otherness of the other person. He thus draws on phenomenological methods in order to place ethics and intersubjectivity before ontology and the egocentric as the proper goals of philosophy.

In Merleau-Ponty’s work we find a different but comparable trajectory, beginning with his scientific exploration of experience in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, which evolved into a speculative and searching analysis of the relationship between the visible and the invisible in experience. For Merleau-Ponty, philosophy’s problem, and thus the main challenge for phenomenology, was its reliance on foundational philosophical language that posited the conscious (mental) subject – a product of the Cartesian *cogito* – prior to embodied experience in the phenomenal world. For the present study, the most important development of these later turns in phenomenological thought is the increasing emphasis by the French phenomenologists on the other side of ‘appearing’, that which doesn’t appear, perhaps even in consciousness: the invisible. Merleau-Ponty’s last, unfinished work is a striking attempt to go back to foundational philosophical questions to address the intertwining of the visible and invisible, the sensuous and ideational. Merleau-Ponty, like Bacon, was concerned that conventional philosophical language had
contaminated the search for truth, and that looking anew was the only way to salvage the endeavour.\textsuperscript{57}

This attempt to return to questions about the invisible in phenomenology receives its fullest development in the work of Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion. Henry, whose work has had less impact outside of France than either Levinas or Merleau-Ponty, worked to develop a ‘material phenomenology’ that returned philosophical analysis to the examination of ‘life’ as experienced – a focus that Henry felt Husserl departed from in his late turn to idealism. Though focused on the concrete, and highlighting the material, Henry’s phenomenology is concerned with the ‘life that gives birth and growth to consciousness’.\textsuperscript{58} In the characterisation of Henry’s English translator, Henry sought to reveal a ‘radical immanence’ through phenomenological analysis that would include those aspects of lived experience that exceed conventional descriptions of the perceptible.\textsuperscript{59}

The influence of Henry’s material phenomenology can be felt in Marion’s work on givenness, and specifically his interest in what he calls ‘saturated phenomena’, experiences that exceed and overwhelm but simultaneously constitute comprehension and consciousness. Merold Westphal describes Marion’s saturated phenomena as follows:

\begin{quote}

a saturated phenomenon is one in which what is given to intuition exceeds the intentionality that becomes aware of it. My transcendental ego cannot anticipate it, nor can my concept contain or comprehend it. My horizons are overwhelmed and submerged by it. I am more the subject constituted by its givenness than it is the object constituted by my subjectivity.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

Not surprisingly, significant challenges to both Levinas and Marion have come in the form of accusations that they confuse philosophy and theology. Levinas has been accused of substituting the philosophical concept of the absolute Other...
for God, a case supported by the fact that he was also an accomplished Talmudic scholar. Marion’s overt Catholicism and willingness to consider religious subject matter in his philosophical works have opened him to charges of theological obfuscation — that phenomenology is simply a cover for a project of Catholic apology. The earlier close association of phenomenology with religion, from its origins with Brentano and his vexed relationship to Catholicism and the close connection between Heidegger and theology in the mid-twentieth century, also led to suspicion of phenomenology’s project, especially from politically oriented critics.

In the secular climate of late twentieth-century criticism such suspicion was understandable, and even after the ‘turn to religion’ in early modern studies one can see how theology masquerading as philosophy might trouble those who have accepted the idea that modernity was ultimately a secular development. Yet recent political events have placed God in the same company as Mark Twain: pace Nietzsche, rumours of the death of God appear to be greatly exaggerated. And while this has led to renewed interest in religion on the part of scholars, including at times a full-throated rejection of the secularisation thesis, such interest still threatens to reduce religious belief to political ideology, draining religious experience of its peculiar form of feeling, along with any meaning or access to truth. Any attempt to understand early modern religious feeling must resist the temptation to reduce religion to political control. While those aspects of religion-as-political-coercion relied on an investment in religious experience as a means of the ideological consolidation of power, other forms of religious belief less clearly support the hegemonic structure and deserve to be examined on their own terms. It is for this reason that phenomenology, even with, or perhaps because of, its theological baggage, is precisely the approach to take. An attention to the lived, concrete experience of the early modern world ought to include experience of the
invisible, immaterial, in addition to the material conditions of the day.

In order to explain further the ways in which a complex interaction of material and immaterial things pervaded early modern thought, my first chapter provides an overview of the role immateriality plays in three key discursive fields – metaphysics, theology and psychology. The chapter reviews how the period’s language reflects an intense interest in defining the categories of the material and immaterial as well as a fascination with their interaction. This discussion lays out the larger organisation of the book into three parts, corresponding to the three primary areas where questions surrounding the relation of materiality and immateriality are most acutely felt in the period: being, believing and thinking. In addition to the literary works that are the primary subject of this study, texts ranging from religious polemic to natural philosophy and medicine grapple with the immaterial and thus provide a sense of how pervasive interest in the realm was in the early modern period.

Having laid the groundwork for the project in an overview of the range of discourses surrounding early modern immateriality, I turn in Part I to the role of immateriality in addressing ontological and metaphysical questions in the period. Chapter 2 considers the fact that immateriality posed a set of ontological problems. The discussion revolves around a range of writers’ reflections on the existence of ‘things’, as well as the period’s playful interest in ‘nothing’ and the possibility of such an entity as ‘nothingness’. The paradox arising from the concept of nothing – nothing as an object of thought that has, by definition, no being – provides an introduction to the themes explored in the following chapter on Shakespeare’s Richard II. In this chapter I examine the concept of nothingness in Richard II by looking at the ways in which Shakespeare gradually empties Richard of his sense of self,
revealing it to have been a fiction, and culminating in his final (and only) soliloquy, in which he comes to the conclusion that ‘whate’er I be, / Nor I, nor any man that but man is, / With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing’. While Richard’s conclusion has been described as anticipating a Nietzschean nihilism or Cartesian scepticism, I read this moment as an affirmation of the inescapability of the immaterial as an object of thought. My argument draws on Jean-Luc Marion’s concept of saturated phenomena, and the medieval Islamic philosopher Avicenna’s (Ibn Sīnā) theory of internal sensation. The following chapter examines ontology from another angle, focusing on the relationship between immaterial judgements and material action in 1 Henry IV, and arguing that Shakespeare exploits the lack of consensus over the ontological basis for personal character in generating a central tension in the play: Hal’s conflicted identity as either honourable hero or Machiavellian shape-shifter. Falstaff articulates his scepticism of the concept of honour by privileging the concrete evidence of embodied materiality over the immateriality of the concept. Hal, on the other hand, defends his honour as immanent within himself, its manifestation only available through the language of materiality and enacted on the battlefield. Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenology of time and narrative, derived from Aristotle’s Poetics and Augustine’s Confessions, offers a theoretical framework for the discussion.

In the second part of the book, on believing, I turn to the theological context for understanding the immaterial in the period. An attempt to offer granular detail of the theological debates on this subject would be well beyond the scope of this project. My aim here is to argue that debates over the nature of matter and spirit that lay at the heart of theological divisions wrought by the Reformation necessarily led to renewed interest in established doctrine concerning the nature and interaction of material and immaterial entities. These issues receive further treatment in the two case
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studies that follow. Chapter 6 focuses on Donne’s *Anniversary* poems published at the moment he transitioned from a private secular poet circulating verse among friends at the early modern Inns of Court (law schools) to the public Protestant preacher who would become Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral and the author of devotional poems and sermons. In the *First Anniversary*, published as *An Anatomy of the World*, Donne’s interest in novel scientific thought rests uncomfortably alongside his consideration of the nature of the soul’s substance. The scholastic and phenomenological concepts of intention and intuition help make sense of Donne’s approach in this otherwise difficult poem. In Chapter 7 I turn to George Herbert’s collection of devotional poetry, *The Temple*, examining his approach to inaccessible devotional truths through the language of material experience. Herbert consistently resists prioritising either material presence or spiritual immateriality in his poetic choices, despite always staying focused on the immaterial objects of his devotion. The material conditions of his own life – marked by a combination of affliction through bodily illness and a sensuous joy in nature, music and art – inform Herbert’s reflections on his spiritual fate, always withheld, but always guiding him in his poetic devotions.

The third and final part of the book is addressed to thinking, an action implicated in both metaphysical reflection and belief, and one in which the interaction between the material and immaterial is perhaps most complex. I begin, in Chapter 8, by briefly surveying theories of cognition available in an early modern period that was still primarily shaped by the scholastic synthesis of ancient Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and Galenic philosophy and physiology. The chapter focuses on how early modern cognitive theories attempted to account for the interaction of immaterial ideas and material sensuous experience. Returning to Shakespeare in Chapter 9, I extend the discussion begun in the previous chapter by addressing
the concept of immateriality in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Reading the play alongside early modern medical literature, especially as it had been shaped by the medieval reception of Galenic and Aristotelian conceptions of mind, soul and bodily ‘spirits’, the chapter traces the relation between cognitive knowledge/error and material perception/misperception. In the final case study, I argue that Shakespeare addresses the problematic distinction between mind and body, immateriality and materiality, in *The Tempest*, ultimately creating a world in which the distinction becomes meaningless. I demonstrate how the play consistently blurs the line between thought and sensation, breaking down the distinction, and offering in its place an account of embodied experience that is more akin to what the modern phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the *chiasm*, or ‘intertwining’ of the visible and the invisible.

Notes

3. Cicero, A3r–A3v. Grimald’s translation was first published in 1556 by Richard Tottel, and went through eight more editions between then and 1605, all including Grimald’s prefatory matter.
5. The popularity of a work like Baldassare Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, with its long Neoplatonic account of the ladder of love in Book 4, is evidence of the popular circulation of Neoplatonic ideas during the second half of the sixteenth century in England. How seriously English poets took the metaphysics is another question.
10. Aristotle does distinguish between essence and substance, but the distinction was obscured by medieval translations that were influential in debates in the Renaissance. I discuss this further in the next two chapters.
11. For a broad overview of this critical shift, see my ‘Beyond Materialism in Shakespeare Studies’. See also Stanley Stewart, ‘Author Esquire: The Writer and “Immaterial Culture” in Caroline and Jacobean England’.
13. Hobbes wrote in 1655: ‘Thus philosophy excludes from itself theology, as I call the doctrine about the nature and attributes of the eternal, ungenerable, and incomprehensible God, and in whom no composition and no division can be established and no generation can be understood’ (Hobbes, *De Corpore*, 1.8).
14. The work of Charles B. Schmitt is indispensable here. See especially his *Aristotle and the Renaissance* and *John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England*.
16. I explore the dual influence of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy in detail in the following chapter. For an excellent discussion of both the friction between and agreement among medieval followers of Aristotelian and Platonic thought, see Kellie Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, esp. Part 1.
18. An obvious example here is Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*. His thesis has received considerable pushback from early modernists, especially those working in the history of science. But even a much more
measured approach to Lucretian thought in the period like Ada Palmer’s *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* makes a similar case.


20. Ibid., p. 19.


23. Passannante’s study, *The Lucretian Renaissance*, is an exception, as his thesis is more about the way Lucretius’ poem informed poetic language prior to the moment when atomism began to receive serious attention from natural philosophers.

24. Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*, pp. 4–5. Palmer cites the influence of Lucretius on Giordano Bruno and Fracastoro, but notes that neither could be called an atomist. It was not until the seventeenth century that the atomist position was seriously felt in science. Palmer nevertheless suggests that it was the influence of Lucretius that ultimately pushed Western thought towards modern science.

25. The ‘material turn’ in early modern studies has occurred alongside what Arthur Marotti and Ken Jackson dubbed ‘the turn to religion in early modern studies’ in their article of that name in the journal *Criticism*. While these have generally developed independently, the two may be more connected than they at first appear. Interest in the immaterial is, of course, more germane to those associated with the religious turn.


27. Sofer, *Dark Matter*, p. 3.

28. Eggert defines her neologism ‘disknowledge’ as ‘the conscious and deliberate setting aside of one compelling mode of understanding the world – one discipline, one theory – in favor of another’ (*Disknowledge*, p. 3).
For an account of the development of theories of vision, see, for example, Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye* and David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*.

The phrase is Jan Kott’s from his celebrated book of the same name.


*Othello*, 3.3.400, 402 in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2015). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Shakespeare will be to this edition and cited in the text.

See Frank Kermode’s introduction to the play in the Riverside edition, in which he follows J. C. Maxwell in suggesting that the ocular proof Othello demands is impossible.

The Folio version of this line, ‘our philosophy’ rather than ‘your philosophy’, makes the point even more clearly.

See, for example, Cavell’s *Disowning Knowledge*.

On this point see Gary Kuchar’s discussion of Herbert’s didacticism in ‘Distraction and Ethics of Poetic Form in *The Temple*’.

Some identify G. W. F. Hegel with phenomenology, though he is more often identified with German Idealism. In early modern studies, see particularly the work of Paul Kottman. My focus is on the form of phenomenology that began with Edmund Husserl, building on the work of Franz Brentano, in an effort to respond to the German Idealism of Hegel and Immanuel Kant. Though Hegel and Kant had a profound effect on phenomenology, the practice and focus of phenomenological enquiry that interests me is associated primarily with the French offshoot identified with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion. All of these philosophers are in one way or another responding to Martin Heidegger’s existential phenomenology through a return to phenomenality. I discuss these developments in more detail below.
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40. Ibid., p. 180.
41. On the variety of phenomenological approaches to Shakespeare, see the special issue on ‘Shakespeare and Phenomenology’, Criticism, 54.3 (2012), ed. Kevin Curran and James Kearney. Paster’s work on humoral theory and early modern emotions is also important here, as are the essays in two important collections on early modern sensation: Elizabeth Harvey’s collection Sensible Flesh and Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd Wilson, Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion.
43. The concept of ‘affordances’ has received considerable attention recently. In Komarine Romdenh-Romluc’s description of the term as defined by James Gibson, ‘an affordance is a possibility for action offered by an environment of a certain sort to a particular kind of creature. The possibilities for action that an environment affords a creature depends on the physical structure of that creature, its motor capacities, the nature of the environment, and how the creature is situated with respect to that environment’; ‘Thought in Action’, p. 199.
44. See OED, ‘appearance’, 14. a. concr. ‘That which appears; an object meeting the view; esp. a natural occurrence presenting itself to observation; a phenomenon’, and 14.b. ‘That which appears without being material; a phantom or apparition.’
46. Heidegger would go even further, to the Presocratics, in order to avoid Platonic dualism.
47. On this development, see Spiegelberg, Phenomenological Movement, vol. 1.
Crowell identifies three stages of the reduction that have been identified, though not without considerable debate. The *epoche* is the first, followed by the transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and the ‘eidetic reduction’ proper, which is where Husserl located knowledge of essences; ‘Transcendental Phenomenology’, p. 28.


Considering these roots of phenomenological analysis in medieval and early modern thought helps to recover something of the early modern cultural experience that has been obscured by an acceptance of two now highly questionable critical assumptions about the period’s historical development: (1) that Renaissance humanism, and its concomitant Neoplatonism, led to an utter rejection of scholastic Aristotelianism, and (2) that around the same time, the rise of empirical science and the revival of atomism undermined Aristotelian natural philosophy, making way for the modern scientific era. Both claims have been used to explain how early modern English intellectual culture shifted from one in which textual authority and reason-based logic guided the pursuit of knowledge to one in which empirical observation and demonstration displaced tradition, placing the human capacity for experimental demonstration at the centre of the knowledge-making process.


*Ibid., p. 170.*


*Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible.*

See *Merleau-Ponty, ‘Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence’.*


See Dan Zahavi, ‘Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible’.

61. See for example, Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Badiou claims that Levinas’s concept of the ‘Altogether-Other’ is ‘quite obviously the ethical name for God’ (p. 22).

62. See Bruce R. Smith, ‘Phenomophobia, or Who’s Afraid of Merleau-Ponty?’, p. 481.

63. This is the point made by Arthur Marotti and Ken Jackson in their article ‘The Turn to Religion in Early Modern Studies’.

64. Louis Althusser’s powerful examination of the church as an example of an ‘ideological state apparatus’ along with Marx’s characterisation of religion as an ideologically mystifying cultural institution have led to the commonplace conflation of religion and ideology. See Althusser’s influential essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation’.