With the humanist values described in the previous chapter in its background, this chapter treats of a number of notions such as form and soul that were dear to Renaissance moral philosophers and that occur formatively in *King John* and *Hamlet*. As such, it tries to recuperate in the two plays the significance that these terms had in active life in a dramatic setting. The chapter’s guiding principle reflects in its way the description of moral philosophy by Thomas Bowes, author of the prefatory letter to the English translation of *The French Academie*, as “the practise of vertue in life and not the bare knowledge and contemplation thereof in braine.” Like Bowes’s description, the chapter’s focus is not on abstract notions as the logical patterns of proven truth but on the vitality of form and soul as both real life and drama. The contrast of Bowes’s view of moral philosophy with our contemporary way of evaluating our relationships with our actions and the significance of words with which we discuss them is evident. This is not to suggest that we are not interested in virtue, but in our era we normally separate philosophy, if we hold to it at all, and everyday life. Under the guise of moral philosophy, which included politics, sociology, and science, Renaissance metaphysics manifested itself in a language that expressed common living and bespoke a sensibility to a vocabulary that we as litterateurs have generally lost because the metaphysics behind our conduct has itself radically changed. In at least a certain measure, we have
to rediscover its vocabulary to recapture the meaning of the drama for its time.

The notions of form and soul were undoubtedly concepts linked to the movements of thought of contemporary thinkers such as Ficino, Bembo, and Sidney, but in the discussions of moral philosophers, such notions also became part of current speech. They were so in much the same way that the words “evolution” and “atom” in our own time—and I will return to this shortly—have come to influence how we use them regularly even if we are not scientists. Like evolution and atom, form and soul were applied to all sorts of phenomena that touched the individual person and everything and every event in the world. In the nature of things, as language in 1600 was the medium of drama much as it has always been, these notions found their way onto the stage through it. As a dramatic text, Shakespeare’s work inevitably reflects the significance that his times accorded to its language, that his contemporaries used to discuss, to believe in, and to question the nature of the universe. Because of this, in addition to the writings of Baldwin, Charron, de La Primaudaye, and de Mornay in this background, there were also what we might call today books of psychology such as Timothy Bright’s *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) and Wright’s *The Passions of the Minde* (1601) that popularized metaphysical language.

In the general current of thought, how much the notion of form, so often associated with soul, was a common philosophical ontological description of all sorts of things is attested to by its ramifications. In *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* in 1550, Richard Sherry described “all formes” as finding their expression in matter, and in the same field of rhetoric in *The Arte of English Poesie* in 1589, George Puttenham described “forme” as one of the notions by which style in poetry could be understood. Nor was the budding world of science exempt from the word’s use. In *[A goodlye gallerye with] A most pleasaut prospect, to behold the naturall causes of meteors of 1563, republished in 1602, Willliam Fulke referred to form as the concept that described “all substances.” In the field of what