“Hylomorphism” is, literally, “matter-form-ism” and an appropriate label for Aristotle’s account of matter-form thinking. But in spite of the widespread use of “hylomorphism” in contemporary scholarship, neither the term nor any of its derivatives were used by Aristotle, his Ancient or Medieval commentators, or Early Modern natural philosophers. The same cannot be said of “matter” and “form,” since both terms appear in Plato and persist even today. These terms have proven extremely malleable, as evidenced in the variety of meanings given to “matter” and “form” not only by the Peripatetics but also by seventeenth-century Chemists, Epicurean revivalists and Cartesians. Matter and form have also endured as foundational principles of change in the natural sciences, a role Aristotle first assigned to them and which subsequent natural philosophers found uncontroversial. To be sure, debates existed over how to understand change and the principles of natural science—for example, the distinction between generation and alteration, the teleological character of change, the status of privation, essentialism, and the possibility of matter existing
without form or form without matter. Yet these differences of opinion were nearly all framed in terms of matter and form, and even the most heated disagreements did not fundamentally change the role assigned to matter and form by Aristotle.

This essay expands on these claims. Section one will explore the origin of “hylomorphism” in the early nineteenth-century, further showing that the term did not come to refer to the Peripatetic doctrines of matter and form before the final two decades of the century. I shall then pose the obvious question: if “hylomorphism” was not at work in the Early Modern period, then what was? The answer is “matter” and “form.” To substantiate this claim, section two will survey a wide range of seventeenth-century authors, all of whom utilized these terms or their cognates toward various purposes, and the plurality of meanings for “matter” and “form” will quickly become apparent. Finally, in section three, I will argue that even as certain aspects of matter and form were discarded, the terms remained central in accounting for change in the natural world. No one denied that natural bodies were complex, that matter had a form and that together the two enabled us to understand change. To clarify this point I shall compare Aristotle’s position in *Physics* I with the seventeenth-century Peripatetic Scipion Dupleix and the Cartesian Jacque Rohault.

I

The origin of the term “hylomorphism” is shrouded in mystery. It does not appear in Early Modern dictionaries such as Rodolphus Goclenius’ *Lexicon Philosophicum* (1613), Charles du Cange’s *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* (1678), Jean Nicot’s *Thresor de la langue française* (1606), Jean-François Féraud’s *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (1787–1788), Émile Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872–1877) or any edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*. Nor is the term found in German dictionaries—such as the Grimms’ *Deutsche Wörterbuch* or pre-1883 editions of Friedrich Kluge’s *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*—or Italian dictionaries, including Ottorino Pianigiani’s

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5 All these dictionaries are searchable through the ARTFL project sponsored by the University of Chicago at http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois (last visited September 2010).