Beatrice Groves’s book contributes to a fresh understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*, *King John*, *1 Henry IV*, *Measure for Measure* and, though the play is briefly post-1604, *The Winter’s Tale*. It is a most interesting modern study of Shakespeare.

The title *Texts and Traditions* refers to the book’s schematic division of a two-fold religious influence upon Shakespeare: the “rich verbal texture of Protestantism with its long, punning sermons, catechizing, Prayer Book, witty Marprelate tracts, and, above all, the Bible to be heard and read in English”; as well as “the intensely visual aspects of his Catholic cultural heritage,” specifically the “Incarnational aesthetic” of the medieval mystery cycles. “The cycle plays acted out the enfleshment of the Godhead. This centrality of the body is something that Shakespearean drama shares.”

Professor Groves believes with Naseeb Shaheen that Shakespeare’s use of “Texts” was based mainly on his own study of the Calvinist-annotated Geneva Bible, and less on the publicly approved Bishops’ Bible and other versions. As for “Traditions,” namely “England’s abandoned cultural heritage—church furniture, paintings, liturgy, and the mystery plays”—she maintains that these were accessible to him and his audience “whether they, or he, were convinced Catholics, lapsed papists, or simply Protestants with retentive memories and developed aesthetic sensibilities.” Shakespeare was thus in some respects “comparable to many other 1590s writers of romantic poetry who used Catholic tropes freely, not with reverence, but with the knowledge that they were relics of a discarded religion,” as proposed by Helen Hackett. Groves’s view approximates that of Eamon Duffy and Stephen Greenblatt in holding that it was nostalgia that constituted Shakespeare’s link with the Catholic past, not “doctrinal affiliation,” as claimed by Peter Milward, S.J.
What is fascinating (and problematic) in this fascinating book is the undisclosed distinction it erects between the “Incarnational” and the “aesthetic.” For if Shakespeare’s plays embodied with human actors’ flesh and blood an “emotionally involving spectacle” that resonated with the Corpus Christi drama’s “fundamental connection with the Incarnation,” and did so to a degree that Protestant anti-theatrical tracts perceived “the taint of the Catholic eucharistic rite,” with its enfleshment entailing idolatry, in them, how was it that they were understood at the time as being pejoratively “Incarnational” rather than allowably “aesthetic” if Shakespeare’s only commitment to Catholicism entailed a lack of reverence for a “discarded religion” in harmony with that of “other 1590s writers of romantic poetry?”

The sixteenth-century Reformers polarized the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism by categorizing them as, respectively, religions of the eye and ear. The didactic sermon and Reformed preacher replaced the visual spectacle of stained-glass windows, the Mass, and priests in colored vestments with ascending incense. “Plain Truth” was a matter of hearing, not of seeing, with its “gaudy frippery of props and costumes.” Regrettably for such a formulaic schema, however, “both Catholic ceremonial and dramatic presentations rely on the assimilation of word and image, and [so] diatribes against plays and the mass became mirror-images of each other” (italics mine). In other words, the historical understanding of “Traditions” incorporates both word and image, whereas that of “Texts” excludes one in favor of the other. Unlike Seneca’s classical drama with its rhetoric and long speeches, the mystery plays and Catholic liturgy used spectacle and action united with words.

In her detailed examination of the plays mentioned above, Groves finds biblical parallels with both word and image/action. An example of the former is the fact that Juliet’s tomb is called a stony “monument” in the first Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* (5.3.141), but in the second Quarto, a stony-entranced “sepulchre,” a term used exclusively in the Geneva Bible (as in *1 Henry IV* and *Richard II* as well) for the tomb of Christ. Stone sepulchres were used in churches before (and somewhat after) the Reformation for the Good Friday reservation of the Eucharist till Easter Day. Parallels with action include the arrival of the younger Romeo and then the older Friar Laurence to Juliet’s tomb, which resembles the hastening of the younger John and the older Peter to the sepulchre of Christ; and the Nurse’s use of wormwood to wean the baby Juliet at the time of an...