One of the most important developments for Shakespeare studies within the past twenty years is the emergence of a new account of the English Reformation, spearheaded by Christopher Haigh, J. J. Scarisbrick and Eamon Duffy. These revisionist historians have argued that the Reformation in England was not enthusiastically welcomed and quickly adopted by a populace disaffected with the old religion, but rather, was imposed from above in the face of widespread resistance. Such a conception, which is supported with an impressive array of detailed evidence, radically changes our perspective on Elizabethan England. With respect to Shakespeare’s background and education, it forces us to shift our attention from the national scene and the Church of England to what was going on in the marginal locale of Stratford, rooted as it was in pre-Reformation Catholic culture. This new perspective is more consistent with what we know about the Shakespeare family. Recent scholarship has established that John Shakespeare was a recusant Catholic, that Shakespeare’s daughter Susanna was charged in 1606 with being “popishly affected” because she did not take communion in the Church of England, and that Shakespeare himself was not on the carefully kept communion rolls in his Southwark parish. This continuity of Catholicism in the Shakespeare family would explain the playwright’s apparent lack of formal education at the universities and the Catholic references that occur throughout his plays. It also
exposes serious deficiencies in past approaches to Shakespeare’s works, perhaps nowhere more evident than in the treatment of Shakespeare and the Bible.

It has been widely believed that Shakespeare dined spiritually at the table of the Church of England with its generous servings of Reformed theology. Historical circumstances seen from the standpoint of “the big picture” have had a large part to play in creating this impression, simply because Shakespeare lived in England and, it is assumed, was subjected to the propaganda of Elizabeth’s regime. The Prayer Book, the Homilies, and the English translations of the Bible were influences he seemingly could not have escaped, and of course the Rheims New Testament (1582) would have been a dangerous book to have around. So it stands to reason that there are echoes of the Bishops’ and Geneva Bibles, the Prayer Book, and the Homilies in his works.

Since the publication of Richmond Noble’s Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge in 1935, the impression has been that Shakespeare read English Protestant versions of the Bible, the Bishops’ Bible early on and the Geneva later in life. Noble established this claim with some evidence and a nuanced qualification, but, as was pointed out long ago, he was neither systematic nor comprehensive. Naseeb Shaheen’s recent Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays, a collection of his three previous volumes on the Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, attempts to extend Noble’s work. His stated aim is “to find not only all of Shakespeare’s biblical references, but also his references to the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Homilies” (10). The volume claims to cast its net very broadly and even takes into account Shakespeare’s “sources” as possible avenues through which biblical references found their way into the plays. The book is structured very simply. An opening chapter on the English Bible in Shakespeare’s day briefly covers the history of the various sixteenth-century translations. A second follows on “Shakespeare and the Anglican Liturgy,” dealing with the Prayer Book, the Homilies, Sermons, and the Primer. Finally, Shaheen takes up the question of the criteria for a valid reference. The plays are then dealt with one by one, and each reference to Scripture is rated according to the criteria of “certain, probable, and possible.” Three appendices provide indices to Shakespeare’s references to the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Homilies. The Bibliography is ample, but significantly does not include the recent work of the revisionist historians.

Several important shortcomings of the project are almost immediately evident. First of all, although Shaheen has increased the number of references beyond Noble, he does not improve on Noble’s method. He