going discourse interrogating “English Catholicism’s cultural centrality” (xix). Each essay makes clear, through investigation of both obvious and subtle dramatic messages, a sustained affinity for and resonance of the Virgin Mary in the wake of Reformation theology.


In this time of “post-theory” (or “post-post-theory,” according to some), one might consider Murray Roston’s *Tradition and Subversion in Renaissance Literature* something of a throwback to earlier attacks on the excesses of literary theory. But such an impression would do an injustice to Roston’s often insightful discussions of Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and Donne. The book undertakes contextual readings of each author in an effort to refute the deconstructionist principle of *aporia*, in which the presence of competing voices within a text is seen to create an interpretive impasse beyond which a critic cannot proceed. Rather than show that multivocality results in indeterminacy, or “undecidability,” as J. Hillis Miller called it, Roston demonstrates that the “co-presence” of text and subtext or tradition and innovation creates a complexity of meaning that can be interpreted by the reader sensitive and knowledgeable enough to recover the contexts great writers often bring into tension with one another (x-xiii). He develops this thesis through five in-depth analyses of works in which a tradition (literary, philosophical, or religious) collides with, or is subverted by an innovation. Thus, he investigates the “merger” of the “contemporary acquisitive impulse” and Christian teachings in *The Merchant of Venice* (29); the collision of the Stoic allowance of suicide and Christian strictures against it in *Hamlet*; the resistance to accommodate fully classical materials to Christian themes in *The Faerie Queene*; the “inconsistency between the amusing licentiousness of the opening section” of *Volpone* and its “somber moral conclusion” (169); and the tensions between Anglican theology and Catholic “process of thought” in Donne’s poetic and prose meditations (180). The result is an engaging exploration of specific literary and cultural contexts that also elucidates the processes through which writers
transform received materials.

The chapters on *Hamlet*, Spenser, and Donne are particularly noteworthy, each for a slightly different reason. Roston sees in Hamlet's obsession with mortality a profound conflict between the logic of the Stoics' allowance of suicide in cases of unremitting suffering and the fear that "self slaughter" would result in damnation. To make his case, Roston explores a variety of classical and Renaissance comments on suicide, thereby underscoring Hamlet's precision of reference in his speeches. His interpretation works well in clarifying Hamlet's predicament.

The benefit of Roston's Spenser chapter comes in its corrective of scholarly assumptions about syncretism in *The Faerie Queene*: rather than assume classical references are subsumed by the Christian allegory, Roston argues, we should understand that the "epic achieves its major effect by its separation of the two forms, deriving its theme from Christian tradition, but embellishing it with imagery that is pagan in source" (133). The "richness" and "uniqueness of Spenser's poetic achievement" results from his "refusal to remain within the restrictive borders either of the Puritan or of the secular configuration." This argument would provide an excellent point of departure for an upper division class discussion of Spenser's use of source materials.

Roston's discussion of "Donne and the Meditative Tradition"—by now, a well-trodden path in Donne scholarship—advances a distinction between theological content and structure of thought that would be similarly helpful in classroom teaching. Roston objects to scholarly readings that posit theological principles alone as the only keys fit to unlock Donne's religious expression. Instead, he shows that Donne wrestled with Protestant ideas not through a decidedly Protestant poetics, as Barbara Lewalski and others have claimed, but through the received meditative structures of his Catholic heritage. Donne's methods, in other words, are Catholic in inspiration, while he uses them to assess Calvinist ideas. After converting to the Established Church of England, Roston argues, Donne doctrinally "conformed" but also "remained indebted to the spiritual exercises in their original Catholic form" (209). He also "eschewed" all "controversial elements" and thereby furnished an individualized alternative. In these three chapters especially, Roston follows contextual threads as if he possessed reading glasses with a greater magnification than those of other scholars.

Of the five chapters, perhaps the one on *The Merchant of Venice* proves the
most controversial and is at times the least persuasive. While useful in his discussion of then contemporary attitudes toward usury, Roston argues that the tension in current readings of Shylock's character as both conventional villain and wronged man are based on a misreading of Shakespeare's adherence to the traditional vilification of the Jewish stereotype. “Any attempt in a modern staging of the play to avoid the anti-Semitic implications is, however admirable in its intent, not only a violation of the text but also a misunderstanding of the play,” Roston argues (7). He bases this conclusion primarily on the association of Shylock with both the devil and Judas Iscariot, as well as the staging of similar villainous characters in other plays. But the dismissal of the polyphonic nature of Shylock's character runs counter to Roston's more careful discussions of multivocality elsewhere. It also detracts from the poignancy of Shakespeare's implied critique of the mob mentality on ample display during the trial scene. Still, Roston's discussion of Shakespeare's merger of “Christ with the professional merchant” in the second half of this chapter compensates for what seems a reductive reading in the first half.

Overall, in a book full of common sense readings of both early modern texts and of critical responses to those texts, Roston illuminates and successfully counters the oversimplifying tendencies of the deconstructionist agenda. To slight Roston's book as merely or untimely reactionary, however, would be to ignore its clear-headed treatment of the relationships between tradition and innovation, as well as its insights into the ways in which some of the best English Renaissance writers conceived of their work. As a group, Shakespeare, Spenser, Jonson, and Donne were particularly apt at noting and probing the many contradictions they saw around them, and Tradition and Subversion in Renaissance Literature provides ready access to this habit of engagement in their work. Consequently, it is useful both to scholars and to teachers faced with the task of helping their students learn to see the workings of literary complexity in the English Renaissance.