



# This Rough Magic

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*Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* by Lisa S. Starks-Estes.  
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***Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays:  
Transforming Ovid* by Lisa S. Starks-Estes.  
New York, NY: Palgrave, 2015. Pp. 256.**

**By Dr. Nicola M. Imbrascio, Granite State College**

In 2006 I attended the Ohio Valley Shakespeare conference, “Violently Shakespeare,” where Lisa S. Starks-Estes offered the plenary address, “Transforming Trauma.” As a young graduate student working on research involving body parts and corpses, I was delighted to hear someone speak of the influence of Ovid’s poetry in early modern works—not just in terms of textual or thematic borrowings— but also in terms of the transforming power of violence that such works embody. Starks-Estes argued then that writers such as Marlowe and Shakespeare were inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to use depictions of physical transformation to articulate the unspeakable, namely trauma and pain. Her recent book *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* (Palgrave 2015), further articulates and expands upon those comments I heard years ago—and on her extensive publications on the topic—to consider how the Ovidian echoes in Shakespeare’s Roman works resonate with the transformative effects of trauma, and contribute to the shifting concepts of the “self” in the early modern period. Overall, Starks-Estes book is very

accessible for both undergraduate and graduate-level teaching; her writing style is lively and engaging and her argument on Shakespeare's use of Ovid as a means for representing trauma is nuanced, yet straightforward. The book as a whole would be helpful to someone who is teaching Shakespeare's Roman works, or who might be developing a special-topics class on the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in early modern literature and culture. Additionally, the book would be very helpful for graduate students, as the theoretical introduction offers powerful insights about how contemporary trauma theory can be brought to bear on earlier texts and periods.

Starks-Estes begins her exploration of Shakespeare's Ovidian appropriations by tracing the popularity of Ovid translations in the late 16th century England. First, she situates Ovid's early modern reception in the context of the medieval translators who moralized his works with Christian allegory. Next, Starks-Estes offers a thorough explanation of Golding's "Englished" *Metamorphoses* and to Shakespeare's understanding of Ovid. Unlike his medieval predecessors, Golding excised the moralizing commentary and his translation, as Starks-Estes explains, subsequently illustrates the "potential traumatic effects that violence can have on the soul, or the self" (6). She continues to discuss how Ovid provided early modern readers and writers a model by which they might creatively explore transgressive ideas and forms, plus challenge dominant ideologies.

As part of this introduction, Starks-Estes provides a thorough review of scholarship on the influence of Ovid on Shakespeare and scholarship that addresses that relationship. As such, it is valuable for those students who wish to study how the depiction of the erotic, vulnerable body in Ovid inspired early modern conceptions of the self. The introduction traces the history of “trauma” in psychoanalysis and trauma theory, and offers a unique perspective on the violence and the traumatic aftermath depicted in Shakespeare. In the classroom, comparing Starks-Estes second chapter (“Shakespeare’s Perverse Astraea, Martyr’d Phiomela, and Lamenting Hecuba) with Deborah Willis’ 2002 *Shakespeare Quarterly* article ([“The gnawing vulture”](#)) could be provocative. Such a pairing would invite students to engage in a discussion of the similar—yet vastly different—readings of trauma offered by each.

Starks-Estes applies trauma theory to Shakespeare’s texts in order to examine how representations of trauma and violence become a means to represent shifting notions of selfhood. To that end, she relates the physical wounds represented in Ovid and Shakespeare to the psychological wounds that manifest throughout the texts. However, Starks-Estes is careful to distance herself from those works that seek to apply trauma studies to individual audience experiences, noting that “trauma”—as we understand it—is a modern concept that is not universal. In so doing, she offers an accessible way to introduce students to theories of psychoanalysis and trauma and its application to earlier texts.

The remainder of the book guides readers through Starks-Estes theories of violence, trauma, and *virtus* in those Ovidian moments found in Shakespeare. She divides the book into two parts. Part I, "Love's Wound: Violence, Trauma, and Ovidian Transformations in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays," offers readings of *Venus and Adonis*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, focusing on the moments of trauma found in those texts and connecting them to sadomasochism, psychoanalytic theory, and literary tradition. In Part II, "Transforming Bodies: Trauma, Virtus, and the Limits of Neo-Stoicism in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays," she examines *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Coriolanus* and argues that that cultural trauma represented in these works originates from shifting notions of selfhood, the female body, and masculinity in. In these chapters, Shakespeare's use of Ovid is not the focus. Instead, Stark-Estes uses these plays to articulate how Shakespeare's language emphasizes violence, *virtus*, and the martyred male body.

Starks-Estes broadens her argument in a Coda, "Philomela's Song," which briefly comments upon *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Cymbeline* to demonstrate Shakespeare's Ovidianism beyond his Roman plays. This Coda would be helpful in encouraging student contemplation of how Starks-Estes' innovative analysis could be extended to other early modern works, Shakespearean and otherwise.

*Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* offers the first study of Shakespeare that focuses exclusively on trauma theory and

therefore provides an important contribution to early modern scholarship. Her introduction offers readers not only a thorough and detailed explanation of contemporary trauma theory, but also an excellent model for students on how one might apply modern theoretical apparatuses to early modern texts. What the text lacks is an equally detailed historical and theoretical consideration of *virtus*. For while Part II of the book discusses *virtus* at length, having a clearer connection between the ideal of *virtus* as manifested in both Ovid and then Shakespeare, and its relation to trauma would have made the book feel more cohesive.

In the dedication of her book, Starks-Estes thanks her husband for his support for helping her to complete “the key to all mythologies.” Indeed, *Violence, Trauma, and Virtus in Shakespeare’s Roman Poems and Plays: Transforming Ovid* does read as if it is the essential text to understanding the Ovidian impulse in Shakespeare’s works.