

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Garrison, John S., and Goran Stanivukovic, eds. Ovid and Masculinity in English Renaissance Literature

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Volume 45, Number 1, Winter 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094232ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39127>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McEleney, C. (2022). Review of [Garrison, John S., and Goran Stanivukovic, eds. Ovid and Masculinity in English Renaissance Literature]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(1), 210–212.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39127>



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Ovid and Masculinity in English Renaissance Literature.

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. Pp. viii, 315 + 3 ill. ISBN 978-0-228-00344-1 (hardcover) \$75.

Consider the current moment, in which members of the far right, in an effort to give credence to their celebration of toxic masculinity and white supremacy, routinely appeal to narrow, outdated understandings of classical, as well as medieval and Renaissance, views of white male virtue, valour, and violence. As Lynn Enterline informs us in her “Envoy” to this path-breaking volume, not even Ovid, that most ludic, ironic, and indeed “effeminate” of ancient poets, has been exempt from these neo-fascist misappropriations: “writers in the far right ‘manosphere,’” she notes, “have been asserting a universal, essential, and predatory masculinity by taking the *Ars amatoria* as an ancient ‘how-to’ manual that supports current pick-up artists who want to teach others how to do their work” (296). It is only by “taking Ovid straight,” as she puts it—only by denying, in other words, all that is quintessentially Ovidian about Ovid—that conservative non-readers are able to appropriate him for their ideological causes.

With impressive range and unflinching brilliance, *Ovid and Masculinity in English Renaissance Literature* challenges such “straight,” unitary, and essentialized views of masculinity in the Ovidian corpus and in the wide range of Renaissance texts inspired by him. The various essays harness—or rather, demonstrate how Renaissance writers themselves harness—Ovid’s abiding interest in liminality, metamorphosis, and the vagaries of eroticism with the goal of unsettling, shattering, or otherwise rendering fragile the standard heroic notions of invulnerable masculinity often attributed (by modern writers no less than early modern ones) to the classical past. As John S. Garrison and Goran Stanivukovic explain in their introduction, the contributors to the volume share a “common goal of exploring how pressure on the terms of masculinity can reveal the collapse of gender binaries, queerness in the fictions of manhood, and the protean form of masculinity in literary practice” (10). Each contribution successfully achieves this common goal, making this collection required reading for scholars in both classical and early modern studies—and not just those who work from feminist and queer perspectives, I might add.

The topic of Ovid’s influence on Renaissance literature is, of course, a venerable preoccupation of the field, but the volume’s attention to the question

of masculinity—to masculinity, that is, *as* an open question, rather than a settled and rigid given—yields some fresh insights. Following Garrison and Stanivukovic’s helpful introduction, the volume opens with impressively comprehensive (and characteristically eloquent) essays by two of our foremost scholars of early modern rhetoric and poetics, Jenny C. Mann and Catherine Bates, who examine how Renaissance understandings of poetic style and authorship are often framed in terms of the “soft” or “abject” masculinities found in Ovid’s work. Subsequent essays explore these issues on the terrain of specific early modern texts. While many of the contributors focus—understandably—on some of the most canonical of early modern writers, including Shakespeare (Garrison), Spenser (Kyle Pivetti), Milton (Eric B. Song), Donne (Melissa E. Sanchez), Jonson (Liz Oakley-Brown), and Marlowe (Lisa S. Starks), other essays productively bring lesser-known texts to the critical table, such as Angelo Poliziano’s *La Fabula d’Orfeo* (Ian Frederick Moulton), *Palmerin of England* (Stanivukovic), Thomas Lodge’s *Scyllaes Metamorphosis* (Sarah Carter), and the 1513 *The flores of Ovide* (M. L. Stapleton).

Such variety befits a volume on Ovid. With this sweeping archive, reading the volume often feels, indeed, like the experience of meandering through the *Metamorphoses*, as various figures and concepts get startlingly reframed and transformed in each new chapter. Not that the volume (any more than Ovid’s poem) lacks focus. In fact, a number of Ariadne-esque threads bind together this wide-ranging book. To take one example: Carter’s lucid theoretical discussion of parody in the opening pages of her chapter on early modern epyllia crystallizes the volume’s repeated emphasis on how forms of Ovidian irony and metatextual play deconstruct rigid definitions of masculinity. Along these lines, one is further struck by how theoretically engaged so many of the contributions are, from Bates’s discussions of Kristevan abjection, through Sanchez’s deployment of Barbara Johnson’s “muteness envy” and Jack Halberstam’s “female masculinity,” to Song’s brief but evocative use of Derrida on hospitality in his treatment of the myth of Baucis and Philemon.

In exploring how race, ethnicity, and religion complicate the gender dynamics on which all contributors focus, Sanchez’s nuanced reflections on Ovid’s and Donne’s appropriations of “the racialized figure of the *lesbian* poet Sappho” (154; emphasis in original), along with Starks’s investigation of how Marlowe associates “Ovidian theatricality and gender fluidity” with “the problematic masculinity surrounding images of the male Jew in early modern

culture” (267), also add a crucial corrective to the book’s otherwise exclusive emphasis on gender as the core paradigm of human difference. Given Ovid’s frequent depiction of the dislocations and transformations effected by travel to foreign locales and encounters with racialized others, more work in this vein remains and needs to be done. In opening up such conversations, Garrison and Stanivukovic’s collection will undoubtedly inspire future work on these and other questions, much as Ovid himself influenced so many Renaissance writers.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i1.39127>