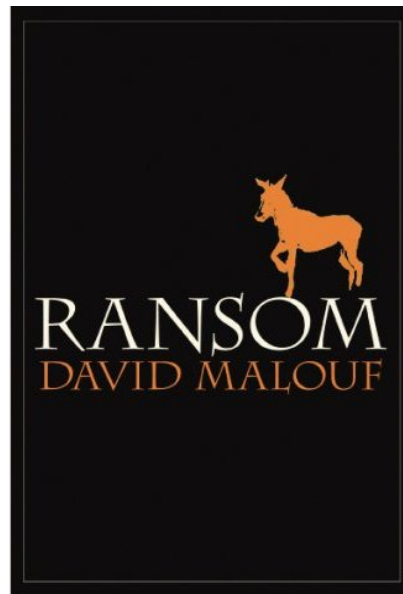


Long Paddock

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Beauty's Clear, Round Eye

David Malouf, *Ransom*
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Despite having her eye-catching face featured on the cover of the Australian edition, her outline on the UK edition and her charms recapitulated in the closing sentences of the novel, the character of the mule Beauty has been, as yet, noted only in passing by most reviewers of David Malouf's new novel. It is as if her presence remains hidden, disguised by what seems a merely supportive role, valued for her reliability just to be there on-the-job, while epic male heroics draw the spotlight.

During a lively book launch at Gleebooks in Sydney in April, Malouf remarked, in answer to a query, that Beauty was indeed an important character in the story but just left it at that – with something of a gleam in his eye, I noticed. It is a hint for the reader to keep in mind when opening this book for the first time and perhaps, in so doing, dismissing the cover as a cute, if distinctive, illustration (“I’ve bought the book with the donkey on the front,” a friend emailed me recently). Continuing the direction of his collection of *Untold Tales* (Paperbark Press, 1999) from myth and legend, Malouf has purposely moved a minor character, and an animal at that, from the margins of Troy’s celebrated story to centre stage in his freshly-imagined telling of the final part of Homer’s great epic *The Iliad*. To what does Beauty draw attention in the novel and why

does she matter so much as to be placed on the cover, her image suggesting the fabulist tradition of the animal story with a moral twist? Is her image offered as an alternative to the legendary wooden horse that was the downfall of Troy?

In *Ransom*, Beauty is a black mule, the hybrid offspring of a female horse and a male donkey, and, with Shock, her fellow mule, pulls the humble cart, driven by the labourer Somax, that carries King Priam's ransom treasure to the camp of Troy's enemy, Achilles, in order to redeem the body of Priam's son, Hector. Malouf has dispensed with Homer's mule-team, given to Priam by the Mysians according to Book 24 of *The Iliad*, choosing instead two mules that are simply waiting for hire in the marketplace on the one day when the King unexpectedly insists that he has need of them. Also missing in *Ransom* is the horse-drawn chariot in which Priam rides behind the wagon in Homer's narrative. The focus is just on the simple cart and on the driver Somax who is asked to take on the role of Priam's usual herald, Idaeus. The city of Troy is shocked when only Somax and his black mules depart with the King on an extraordinary journey. Has Priam lost his reason? What ensues is a kind of pastoral comedy that contrasts sharply with the formal epic world of the Trojan court that Priam is leaving behind, yet balances its belief in traditional ways of thinking and behaving with a fresh view of what may be possible through one character's vision and courage.

It is Priam's waking dream that first suggests to him "the unthinkable" and that vision involves a cart and two "coal-black mules". The mules seem to belong to "chance", an alternative way of acting for Priam that gives life to his intuitions. "Chance", still connected to the gods of mythology through Iris, shows an opening through which Achilles' mad revenge for the death of Patroclus – behavior that breaks all codes of a warrior's honour – might be addressed. Unlike Achilles' divinely-given horses, Balius and Xanthus, who draw his chariot that drags Hector's body each day around the funeral barrow, Beauty and Shock are creatures of the everyday world and its commerce.

They seem to be chosen by "chance", too, from the crowded market by King Priam's attendants. Priam is surprised that the driver and the black mules so much resemble what he first sees in his dream and he feels confirmed in "the rightness of his project". Somax, however, discerns that it is Beauty's attractiveness that has made his wagon stand out from others:

He is here, he knows, not for himself but because of his mules, and especially the smaller of the two, which, the moment they entered the marketplace, caught the eye of one of the princes as she does everyone's – she is such a plain charmer. ... her winning nature has much to do with her intelligence ... and with the fact that she notices people and responds in such a lively way to their interest. Beauty, he calls her ... he is a little in love with the creature (pp. 93–94).

The journey to the camp begins. As Priam comes to appreciate the "incidental and the ordinary" he has previously ignored, he starts to feel restored from his own grief and loss at Hector's death. He becomes interested in the way Somax's daughter-in-law makes pikelets, the way his toes feel dangling in the cool stream. Life, he finds, can be viewed from close-up as well as from afar and in this context he becomes friendly with Beauty. In a world where the unseen and the visible interact constantly, the god Hermes, who attaches himself to Priam's wagon to guide it safely to Achilles' camp, makes the suggestive comment that Beauty is "one of the true servants of the gods". The reader might remember this when, at a crucial point, it is Beauty whose actions prove to be essential in ensuring the wagon's safe arrival in the camp of Achilles.

That arrival leads to the meeting between Priam and Achilles, the climax of the novel and one that places both characters in a situation for which neither of them have a precedent. Underscored by the notes of a lyre (invented, according to legend, by Hermes, also the god of communication and interpretation) the two foes act with

surprising accord. Malouf's handling of the narrative here masterfully blends the visionary and the apparently real, time past, present and future. The modulations of tone and perspective as Achilles realizes the true identity of his most unexpected visitor certainly repay close reading of the kind that Malouf's works have encouraged over the decades. His rhythmic prose is never just a surface but creates a rich narrative texture full of sensory shifts, flashes and glimpses for each reader to discover. The overall effect is a complex evocation of the characters' inner and outer worlds that find significant points of touch even while they remain distinctly themselves.

In *Ransom*, Malouf seeks to remind readers in the twenty-first century that telling a story creates an opening, a space, where things might be different, where seemingly irreconcilable conflicts may move towards resolution or, at least, a new beginning. To achieve this, he detaches his main characters from their societies for a time and structures the novel to give the reader the sense that time is both immediate and endless. The dislocation enables their new perspectives to arise, offering a kind of moral hope. The actual time of the story of *Ransom* is just one day in the life of Achilles, Priam and Somax yet it stretches back and forth into memory and into a prophesied future. As in Malouf's earlier novels *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter*, to which *Ransom* feels closely related, to enter this story is to access the way characters learn greater wisdom by waiting on the moment, by hearing its "voice" and its "music" which seem to grow clearer through an inner wrestling with different ways of knowing. At the beginning of the novel, Achilles' view one morning as he gazes over the sea suggests such tensions:

The man is a fighter but when he is not fighting he is a farmer, earth is his element. One day, he knows, he will go back to it. All the grains that were miraculously called together at his birth to make just these hands, these feet, this corded forearm, will separate and go their own ways again. He is a child of the earth. But for the whole of his life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother's element. To what, in all its many forms, as ocean, pool, stream, is shifting and insubstantial. To what accepts, in a moment of stillness, the reflection of a face, a tree in leaf, but holds nothing, and itself cannot be held (p. 4).

In this regard, *Ransom* has strong connections with the poetic imaginary that underpins Malouf's major work. We are reminded here, for example, of poems such as "Stooping to Drink" (*Neighbours in a Thicket*) and "Ombrone" (*Typewriter Music*) and of the final vision of Jim Saddler as soldier and farmer in *Fly Away Peter*. Malouf's poetic imaginary often depicts animals as having natures that are also still nascent within the human psyche and able to connect with us through feelings that are beyond words. Beauty awakens a sense of companionship and comfort, for example, when Somax sits waiting in the cart on the return journey while Priam looks at the ransomed body of Hector for the first time. At that moment, Somax is reminded of the death of his own son:

He snuffles, rubs his nose with the back of his wrist and pulls a little at the left-hand trace, so that Beauty turns her head, just enough for him to catch sight of her round eye, its clear glistening white (p. 207).

Seeing Beauty's "round eye" brings him back to the present and "he thinks, with a burst of joy, of the little girl", his grand-daughter.

The mules are not fashioned according to the strong "hunter and hunted" tropes that Malouf's non-human representations often evoke (discussed in the print issue of this *Southerly*). Such aggression is already represented by the warriors who kill and are killed relentlessly in the Trojan War, a hunt that is destructive even as it celebrates the hero's valour. Instead, the mules offer a link to the cultivation of the earth, the conveying of wood or hay for daily needs, the task of moving goods from one place to another as people go about their lives. It is the world to which even the warrior will return when war is over and it offers a counter to its destructive force. Somax knows that tomorrow

he will again wait in the marketplace with his cart and two mules to be hired. Priam, too, is glad to have a truce agreed to for the burial of Hector. It will allow ordinary life to resume at least momentarily. He reflects philosophically as the story draws to a close that “one day then the next; no more than that can be counted on. But in his present mood it is enough” (p. 209).

It is to a basic satisfaction in living each day as well as one can, of enduring as Somax says he has done, that Beauty and Shock are witnesses in *Ransom*. Their work as animals and their general existence, idealized as well-looked after and valued by their owner, something many animals would lack, is made part of the earth’s “swarming and singing” (p. 211).

Nor should we forget that Beauty has a strong aesthetic appeal to those who encounter her. Her story, told in *Ransom*, creates and preserves the surprise of aesthetic joy extended to the non-human form, a timely reminder of Earth’s inter-dependent ecology. Why should the love of beauty in an animal not stand “in black ink”, as Shakespeare believes of the human in Sonnet LXV, to redress time’s “wreckful siege of battering days”? The poet asks, “How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?” The reader might keep this thought playfully in mind in discerning Beauty’s role, her strength certainly more than a flower but in many ways as fragile as any animal’s caught in the scheme of human action.

Less noticed than princes, warriors and their horses, the black mule Beauty outlasts them all in Malouf’s telling of the tale. Priam, Hector, Achilles, Neoptolemus, and Patroclus may rightly be the focus of the larger world of the epic, but it is the voice of the ongoing storyteller which ends the novel and Beauty is his focus:

The most remarkable thing about [Somax] was that he was the owner of a little black mule who is still remembered in this part of the country and much talked about. A charming creature, big-eyed and sleek, she bore the name of Beauty – and very appropriately, too, it seems, which is not always the case (p. 219).

It is as if we are about to start a new story, the old one having run its course in the ear of the hearer and the memory of the teller. After *Ransom*, Beauty must always linger in the margins of the legends of Troy as both herself and as a character capable of entering another space that a storyteller might create. Malouf’s finely-crafted novel leads me to conclude that it is no “chance” at all that every time we pick up this book, read it and put it down again, we see, against a background of black ink, Beauty’s clear, round eye.