

ENGLISH: *RANSOM*

“What seems foolish is just as sensible sometimes. Discuss.”

David Malouf's Ransom is an exploration of a series of events that are seemingly unwise; nevertheless, are somewhat justified given the extenuating circumstances. Throughout the novel, Malouf uses the context of the Ancient Greek world and the mythical city of Troy to suggest that what may be perceived as rational in today's society, may very well have been viewed as foolhardy and blasphemous several centuries ago. Whilst the protagonists in Ransom persist that their iconoclastic ideas are justifiable – as opposed to being merely delusional epiphanies – many of the common people of the towns and the royal courts are perplexed by these unconventional concepts and thus, treat them with caution, viewing them as unwise. Nonetheless, exemplified by the unprecedented ransom, the display of rudimentary human emotions by archetypal figures and the celebration of the quotidian, Malouf's novel implies that during a time of adversity, innovative thinking and courage one demonstrates in “taking a chance” is justifiable.

Whilst the iconoclastic and unconventional nature of the ransom initially conveys a perception of foolishness and disorder to the people of Troy, the success of the ransom and the immortalisation of leaders proves the sense of the idea. The ‘nomos’-defying ransom is initially thought of by King Priam, whose extraordinary gift of insight and spiritual connection with the gods enables him to concoct a plan about how he will claim the desecrated body of his son, Hector, from Achilles. Priam is to approach his son's killer in a “plain wooden cart ... drawn by two coal-black mules ... he himself dressed in a plain white robe without ornament” – Malouf employing the symbolism of the mules regarding their low status in the animal kingdom and the sense of purity associated with the colour white to reiterate the simplicity of the ransom. Unsurprisingly, Priam's royal court are not only bewildered as to why their king would act so unlike a tyrannos but are also concerned about Priam's reputation, contending that his epiphany is foolish as it puts his “precious life at risk” and “exposes to insult ... his royal image”. Moreover, the misunderstanding created by Priam's rejection of cherished views and defiance of traditional practices is best exemplified when Priam's grooms bring him his “ceremonial chariot with two thoroughbred horses” instead of the simplistic cart, as well as the shock of the crowd – who “do not know how to react” – when they see Priam leaving the castle “stripped of all finery and show”. Nevertheless, as desperate times call for desperate action, Priam's imaginative courage becomes justified towards the later stages of the novel when Achilles agrees to return Hector's body after being taken aback by the simplicity of the whole occurrence. The sense of the ransom is also to a lesser, albeit, still significant extent realised when Priam understands his exercise of free will can ensure that he is immortalised in the form of story and that his courage will “endure in the minds of men ... long after [he] is gone”.

Moving beyond the material ransom, whilst the display of fundamental human emotions by masculine stereotypes is supposedly scarce and unprecedented, the ability of the characters to act with empathy quickly exemplifies its benefit, as these individuals are able to attain closure over the deaths of loved ones. Although Priam and Somax take a cart of gold and valuable possessions with them to ransom Hector's body, these are largely irrelevant, as Priam hopes his ability to empathise with Achilles “not as a king, but as an ordinary man, a father” will be enough in itself to ensure the success of the ransom. Nonetheless, Priam's faith in Achilles' ability to connect with him on an immensely personal level is greeted with much scepticism and anger from Hecuba, who strongly affirms that Achilles is a “violator of every law of gods and men” and is incapable of “taking the gift you (Priam) holds out to him and acting like a man”. The time and setting of the novel dictate the way in which archetypal warriors and confident kings are supposed to act, that is, not showing emotion or revealing any indication of internal conflict which may be perceived as a sign of weakness. Nevertheless, whilst Priam's desire to “clasp the knees of his killer in a merely human way” is initially perceived as unconventional of his role, the ransom's ability to connect two men from opposing sides on a level that is most human proves its sense and worth. Priam's epiphany is further justified as it proves closure for both the protagonists: firstly with Priam, who is able to finally

come to terms with his son's death and offer him a proper burial, and secondly with Achilles, who is able to move past the grief which he experienced following the death of Patroclus.

The removal of kingly figures from their "royal sphere" allows them to rejoice in the quotidian. And although this is perhaps bizarre and unnatural, the appreciation of simplicity attached to experience in the natural world is justified as it allows such individuals to release their humanity. Malouf challenges the idea of a hero and strips down archetypal figures, placing an emphasis on the universal emotions which they experience. The identification of such deep-rooted emotions contained within powerful individuals is best exemplified by Priam and his redefining of priorities in his journey through the natural world in Book 3. Accompanied by his new Idaeus in the untarnished, fertile plains between the Greek encampment and the city of Troy, the humble carter Somax shares his experiences with the suddenly naive king – Malouf employing the motif of the child to accentuate the reversal of roles and Priam's inexperience outside the "royal sphere". Whilst the image of a king "dabbling his feet in icy streams" and eating "griddlecakes" seems farcical to the common people, Priam's journey is justifiable as it revives from his conflicted self. This is best exemplified by the symbol of the "cool, clean water" which "extends its reviving benefit from his feet to his whole being", contributing to the notion of Priam's reawakening from the "austere stance he is constrained to" as king. Moreover, the value of Priam's journey becomes apparent when he begins to question the "kingly distance" he has kept from his sons and realises his repression of humanity following Somax's nostalgic memories of his home life.

Through his exploration of the cultural perceptions and adherence to tradition associated with the world of Ancient Greek literature, Malouf's Ransom suggests that whilst an individual's actions may be initially perceived as unwise, they are often ultimately justifiable. Despite the material and emotional ransoms in the novel seeming iconoclastic, Malouf implies an appraisal of the imaginative heroism demonstrated by characters who defy tradition in order to achieve an end which is both justifiable and beneficial.