

When Beauty and the Beast Read Latin and Greek:  
Reading the Past Toward the Future in Robin McKinley's *Beauty*, Donna Jo Napoli's *Beast*,  
and Jennifer Donnelly's *Lost in a Book*

Beauty reads. Although the reading of Disney's Belle might be especially iconic these days, the 18th century versions of Beauty and the Beast by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont forged a lasting connection between Beauty and books. In both of their stories, Beauty is heartened when she discovers ample reading material at the Beast's castle, and in Beaumont's version, as in the Disney films, Beauty's reading also serves to mark her as different: Beaumont uses Beauty's habit of reading of "good books"<sup>1</sup> to differentiate her from her frivolous sisters, and the Disney films present Belle's reading as a key manifestation of her difference from the townspeople (Cummins 23-24). While Beauty or Belle's reading separates her from her sisters or neighbors, it connects her to the audience of the tale. In reading "good books" Beaumont's Beauty parallels the readers of Beaumont's story collection, with its aims of educational and ethical improvement (Cummins 23), and in the opening number of the Disney films it is a book of fairy tales that captures Belle's attention. When Belle says that the female protagonist of the story won't know until chapter 3 that the person she has met is actually Prince Charming, the films give viewers a meta-wink. In these ways Belle or Beauty's reading reinforces the genre of her own story and places her and her audience in parallel registers.

But what about instances in which Beauty—or the Beast for that matter—reads something *other* than a story generically affiliated with their own and something with which the

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<sup>1</sup> Beaumont's English version is available at <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/beauty.html>; the corresponding phrase for "good books" in the French text (available at [https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/La\\_Belle\\_et\\_la\\_B%C3%AAtte](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/La_Belle_et_la_B%C3%AAtte)) is *bons livres*.

reading audience itself may be unfamiliar? In what follows I will look at three novels in which Beauty and the Beast read Classical texts: *Beauty* (a 1978 novel by Robin McKinley), *Beast* (by Donna Jo Napoli, published in 2000), and *Lost in a Book* (a novel by Jennifer Donnelly commissioned to coincide with the Disney live-action film release in 2017). In all of these novels Beauty and the Beast engage Classical texts in a non-trivial way: their reading of Greek or Latin literature specifically is made to matter.

In Robin McKinley's novel, we hear of Beauty translating Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Catullus, and Cicero (9, 17, 157, 162). Beauty's Classical studies distinguish her from her sisters, Hope and Grace, but in this rendition—unlike Beaumont's—the differentiation of Beauty through reading does not have a moral dimension. Hope and Grace are not negative characters; they simply do not enjoy reading as much as Beauty does (86). Beauty is different from her sisters in other regards, as well: she loves horses, does not see herself as typically feminine, and is not beautiful. "Beauty" is a nickname at odds with her appearance; her given name is "Honour," and she doesn't feel like it fits her either. If names do not define McKinley's Beauty, self-chosen actions—like tending a motherless horse, reading Latin and Greek late into the night, or even reading Greek *to* a motherless horse (24)—do.<sup>2</sup>

Beauty does not abandon her Classical studies at the Beast's palace: its extensive library allows her to continue translating, and she often uses her Classical training as a touchstone. When she first hears stories about the Beast and his palace, she thinks of the Minotaur and his

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<sup>2</sup> Lynn Moss Sanders somewhat downplays Beauty's reading and her love of horses by seeing them as coping mechanisms for Beauty's "insecurity about her looks," though she does allow that Beauty's reading crucially prepares her to accept the Beast.

Daniel P. Woolsey describes Beauty as an "overly intellectual girl" (132), a description that seems to me to contain an implicit criticism of Beauty's identity-through-reading.

Though Beauty doesn't see herself as typically feminine, Ellen R. Sackelman reminds us that in caring for the motherless horse Beauty "function[s] as a nurturer."

maze (45). At the palace she realizes early on that she is not going to be a sacrifice to a Minotaur-like monster (114), but perhaps—she muses—the Beast is like the three-headed dog Cerberus, guarding the treasures of the house like Cerberus in the underworld (146). Beauty also compares the Beast with Aeolus, the Classical king of the winds (141), and, citing the Greek divinity of retribution, refers to the Beast as the “Nemesis” of her horse (151). Platonic philosophy springs to her mind when she wants to counter the Beast’s declaration that he finds her beautiful (130), and the myth of Hades and Persephone resonates as she tries to process her changing feelings for the Beast (170). Classics becomes a dynamic hermeneutic lens for Beauty, allowing her to process her experiences by seeing how they do—and do not—fit Classical precedents.<sup>3</sup>

During her stay at the palace Beauty expands her perception: she becomes able to see the colors of the sunset more keenly, sense when the Beast is near, hear the voices of the invisible servants, and understand books, contained in the Beast’s library, that will not be published for *centuries* in the real world. Beauty sees her reading of Classics as a step in her development of a sixth sense:

But perhaps there was nothing really mysterious.... I had accepted Cassandra and Medea, and Paris’s choice among the three goddesses as the reason for the Trojan War, and other improbables long before I read about steam-engines and telephones.... The principle was probably the same. (186-187)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In “I Think You Are Not Telling Me All of This Story” Amie A. Doughty sees Beauty’s mythological references as indications that she is “searching for a story of her own;” I think this sets up an opposition rather than a collaboration between Beauty’s reading and her own experience, as if Beauty has to transition from those references to her own tale rather than use them to help her understand her own situation through dynamic comparison and contrast and hence develop heightened insight.

<sup>4</sup> This passage is discussed by Evelyn Perry in her study of the coming-of-age of Beauty in this novel as well as a later retelling of Beauty and the Beast also by McKinley, *Rose Daughter*. Betsy Hearne also treats McKinley’s *Beauty* as a story of maturation, but she sees Beauty’s encounters with the future through reading as “funny” rather than as significant parts of her development (“Beauty and the Beast” 101).

In fact, Beauty experiences a sixth sense growth spurt right after she realizes that—despite her own Persephone-like situation—she has sympathy for Hades and, by extension, for the Beast.<sup>5</sup> Beauty’s Classical reading is an integral part of her development, training her to entertain the unlikely, see beyond given realities, and make connections. In extending her range, reading Latin and Greek texts prepare Beauty to envision a future for herself with the Beast.<sup>6</sup>

While McKinley’s novel is told in Beauty’s voice, Donna Jo Napoli’s *Beast* presents the first-person perspective of the Beast, a Muslim Persian prince named Orasmyn for whom reading is a fundamental component of his identity. He repeatedly references Persian literature that resonates with his circumstances, and he also knows Latin, Greek, Arabic, Turkish, and French (23). This “scholar prince” (59) prefers reading and designing gardens to hunting. When he is transformed into a lion by a female spirit and decides to travel from Persia to France, he carries an illuminated copy of the Persian *Gulistan* with him, a symbol of himself and his humanity. Once he’s taken up residence in an abandoned mansion in a French forest, the books in its library give him more opportunities to exercise his humanity and affirm his identity; for instance, he reads Aristotle for intellectual pleasure (146). He also discovers Vergil’s *Aeneid* on the library’s bookshelves and reads intently of Aeneas’ suffering under a female divinity and extensive travels to find a new home (147-148). The Latin epic echoes and affirms Orasmyn’s own travails. Later, Orasmyn uses both Persian and Greco-Roman frames of reference when Belle arrives at

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<sup>5</sup> On the morning after Beauty’s realization, she describes the morning star “shining like hope from the bottom of Pandora’s box” (170)—so even the hopeful turn in Beauty’s feelings is accompanied by a Classical reference.

<sup>6</sup> For Woolsey, Beauty ultimately moves beyond “the treacherous and ultimately destructive morass of self absorption” presumably signified by her commitment to reading and “into a world of wholeness and connectedness with other living creatures” (133); Woolsey sets Beauty’s reading at odds with her growing relationship to the Beast, but I see the former as reinforcing and aiding the other.

the mansion: the scarf around her head reminds him of a Persian bride, and her tasting of an almond recalls to him Persephone's eating of a pomegranate seed (190). Although neither interpretation of the situation is completely apt, each cultural lens brings into focus different aspects of the truth for Orasmyn as well as for Napoli's readers. Classical texts join Muslim religious practices and Persian cultural and literary traditions to inform Orasmyn's understanding of himself, the world, and the predicament in which he finds himself (cf. Crew 82).

In a gesture of self-disclosure Orasmyn shows his prized copy of the *Gulistan* to Belle, but she returns it with the admission that she does not know the language. However, she does know Latin, and Orasmyn prompts her to read the *Aeneid* aloud. When they reach book 2—in which Aeneas recounts the fall of Troy—Orasmyn thrills to the “nobility, honor, loyalty, glory,” but Belle is disgusted and asks, “Where is the glory in a war that leaves a ruined town, wretched widows, dead babies?” (210) The *Aeneid* is a notoriously ambivalent text, and the reactions of both Orasmyn and Belle can find footing in the poem. Taking a break from the *Aeneid*, Belle and Orasmyn turn to Ovid next,<sup>7</sup> but it is important to Orasmyn that Belle return to the *Aeneid* and read book 3, which focuses on Aeneas' travels across the Mediterranean and which Orasmyn sees as a way to show Belle what he himself has endured. He eventually realizes, however, that

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<sup>7</sup> Napoli does not specify which work of Ovid's the characters read; she refers to it as “a volume of Ovid's poems” that takes four nights to read aloud (211). Hilary S. Crew presumes it is the *Amores* (82), and the poems' subject matter could be somewhat proleptic, but Crew also notes that the transformations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* echo with Orasmyn's situation. I would add that the poems written during Ovid's exile would be thematically resonant. For a reader with some knowledge of Ovid's works, then, this passing reference is intertextually evocative.

A similar dynamic is at play when Napoli entitles one of her chapters “Dido” (221) after the queen who becomes Aeneas' lover during his wandering. It is left to a reader who is acquainted with the *Aeneid* to consider how Belle both is and is not like Dido: for instance, Belle's relationship with the little fox Chou Chou, whom Orasmyn has introduced into the household, might mirror Dido's fondness for Aeneas' son Ascanius; unlike Dido, however, Belle will find a happy ending with Orasmyn.

Belle can't know that what she reads about Aeneas is a key to Orasmyn's own personal history. It might seem, then, that Orasmyn's Classical reading experiment has failed: though he and Belle might be reading the same page, they are not on the same page about what they read. I think that their different understandings of the *Aeneid* nevertheless point to a kind of success because reading the Latin text provides them with a shared experience that also accommodates difference. Orasmyn and Belle build on this by praying alongside one another in their different religious traditions and by eating differently yet together at an outside hearth. Their simultaneous-but-different readings of the *Aeneid* are a first manifestation of the unity-in-difference that becomes the heart and hallmark of their relationship. Their experience of reading the Latin poem plays a part in what Orasmyn ultimately considers the two characters' instantiation of a verse from Rumi: "You / compassionately blend and renew / East and west through and through" (243).

Disney's 2017 *Beauty and the Beast* includes a passing reference to Greek literature: when Belle asks the Beast if he's read every book in the library he says, "Well, not all of them—some of them are in Greek!" Greek literature is thus acknowledged but set aside. However, in Jennifer Donnelly's *Lost in a Book* there's a more sustained look at the Disney characters' engagement with Classical material. This Disney-commissioned "midquel" is set just after the Beast's befitting of the library to Belle, and Donnelly makes sure readers learn that Belle's knowledge of Latin is one of the things that makes her "odd" (18) and that the Beast has been translating the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (46). But there's someone else in the castle who also knows a Classical story—the tea-cup Chip—and let us look at his deployment of Classics first.

Wanting to convey to Belle that the Beast is in pain and needs help, Chip leaves a copy of Aesop's *Fables* unshelved in the library for her to find (120-121). On its cover is an illustration

of Androcles and the lion, a story about a man who takes the thorn out of a lion's foot and is then rewarded for his kindness: when he meets the same lion later in the Roman arena, it recognizes him and refuses to kill him. Although Chip presumably encounters the story in a book written in his contemporary vernacular, it is an ancient tale,<sup>8</sup> and Chip recognizes its utility in communicating his view of the situation to Belle. The Beast, however, rejects the analogy when Belle suggests it (125-126). Not only does it position him as someone in need of "help" (a notion which he resists), but it also cements an ontological gap that limits his hoped-for relationship with Belle. Androcles and the lion don't—can't—fall in love. While Chip's citation of the story conveys to Belle the Beast's state of need, the Classical story can't provide a parallel for the romantic possibilities that are embedded in Belle and the Beast's relationship and that readers know will come to fruition.

In addition to dismissing the story of Androcles, the Beast also eventually moves away from his translation of Epictetus. A Stoic philosopher, Epictetus counsels emotional detachment and an acceptance of one's situation. It makes sense that such a doctrine would appeal to the Beast as a means of coping with his predicament. But when the servants are worried about Belle, who has locked herself into the library and is not responding to their shouts, the Beast abandons his studies to help find her. The sentence he was translating before the interruption is telling: it says, "Difficulties are the things that show people what they are" (257).<sup>9</sup> Donnelly has engineered a situation in which the lesson of Classical philosophy is to let go of Classical philosophy: in order to show "what he is" in his difficulties the Beast must leave behind the work of his mind and take up the demands of his heart.

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<sup>8</sup> The story can be found in Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights* (5.14), a Latin text of the 2nd c. CE.

<sup>9</sup> Epictetus' *Discourses* 1.24.1.

Donnelly's Belle is made to learn a similar lesson herself. Upon receiving the gift of the library, Belle initially thinks of reading Greek epics and tragedies (14), but she is drawn instead to an enchanted book planted in the library by Death and entitled *Nevermore*. Belle physically enters the land of Nevermore through the portal of the book and enjoys its gratifying scenarios. Indeed, it is Death's intention that Belle take up permanent residence there. During her visits to Nevermore Belle is given Classically laden hints about where she actually is: Belle can translate Death's Latin motto—*OMNIA VINCO*—I conquer all things—which is presented near statues of Hades and Persephone, Greek gods of the underworld (63).<sup>10</sup> She is cautioned by insects, sent by Death's sister Love, not to eat anything lest it bind her, Persephone-like, to the place (83). And she even meets Love herself, who shows her that an orchard of pear trees is really an orchard of pomegranates (187-188). Belle *knows* what all this adds up to, but she eats a pomegranate/pear nonetheless. Classical knowledge is presented as inefficacious, unable to forestall or help; what gets Belle out of Nevermore is her emotional connection to the people she has left behind, and she uses a diamond heart necklace given to her by the Beast to cut her way out of Nevermore's pages.

In all three of these novels Classics is not incidental: the reading of Latin or Greek texts is integral to the development of the characters and the story. For all of the characters, reading Classical texts is a personal choice rather than an external imperative—it is part of who they have chosen to be. But in the case of Donnelly's *Lost in a Book*, the choice to read Classics is presented as something of an obstacle that must be gotten over or beyond. Belle's Classical knowledge doesn't help her free herself from Death, and her time in Nevermore underscores

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<sup>10</sup> The book thus becomes a kind of underworld and Belle's residence there would be tantamount to dying; cf. Maria Nikolajeva's assertion that in *Peter Pan*, *The Neverending Story*, and *Far Rockaway* "the transparent metaphor...is that getting immersed in fiction is equal to dying" (11).



Mrs. Potts' chiding that Belle's signature bookishness could be a problematic form of escapism. The Beast's Stoic translation is also presented as a kind of escapism that keeps him from becoming emotionally vulnerable and involved. In order for Belle and the Beast to fall in love—and we know that they will—they will have to close their books, and their coming to this realization themselves is some of the key work of the novel. While McKinley and Napoli do not present Classical texts as having all the answers, the authors show that the reading of Latin and Greek can make positive contributions. Comparisons and contrasts between ancient literature and their present realities help McKinley's *Beauty* and Napoli's *Beast* to understand themselves and to build community with their partners. Their sustained engagement with the past enables them not only to process their present but also to imagine—and achieve—their futures. Betsy Hearne identifies “journeys of maturation” as a key element in the *Beauty and Beast* tradition (*Beauty and the Beast* 140)—and these novels suggest that Classics can play a role in the maturation process, either as a hurdle that must be cleared or a hermeneutic companion along the way.

Jerry Griswold points out that the *Beauty and Beast* tradition constitutes a narrative meditation on difference (24).<sup>11</sup> The characters and the audience encounter otherness of various sorts—differences of personality, class, gender, ethnicity, species. The versions that have *Beauty and the Beast* reading Latin or Greek add a layer of textual difference, as well. Characters interact with texts that are “other” in terms of culture and time, and *how* they do so matters not only for the purposes of plot and character development; it also matters because it

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<sup>11</sup> See also Vandana Saxena (who extends Griswold's focus on otherness and includes a brief mention of Napoli's novel in this regard) and Michelle J. Smith and Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario (who explore themes of otherness in pantomimes and other presentations of *Beauty and the Beast* in Victorian and Edwardian periods).

models for readers what it could mean to read ancient literature themselves. While Donnelly's novel "others" Classics in a way that puts it at arm's length (and even intimates the *necessity* of putting it at arm's length), McKinley and Napoli illustrate a productive, dynamic relationship between young adult readers and Classical texts, one that works through a play of similarity and difference.<sup>12</sup>

The relinquishing of reading in Donnelly's novel participates in the pattern identified by Amie A. Doughty in which characters must transition from reading to "experience" in order to mature ( "*Throw the book away*" 63, 167-168), while the kind of reading we see in McKinley and Napoli's novels seems compatible with the "adolescent" mode of reading discussed by J. A. Appleyard: readers juxtapose the ideas, motivations, and actions they read about with their own (94-120).<sup>13</sup> Appleyard suggests that such a dialogic process between reading and personal experience helps young adults to make meaning by acknowledging and navigating a multiplicity of truths and possibilities. Rather than Donnelly's depiction of reading as a detour from figuring out who you are, what the world is like, and how to move forward in it, this is reading as synthesizing, thinking, and growing. McKinley and Napoli's adolescent characters embody for adolescent readers the proposition that an ongoing conversation with Classical texts is an

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<sup>12</sup> The kind of reading that I see McKinley and Napoli's characters doing complements (though isn't identical to) the productive engagement with books that Joe Sutliff Sanders explores in "The Critical Reader in Children's Metafiction."

<sup>13</sup> Suellen Diaconoff cites Appleyard in her exploration of Villeneuve and Beaumont's versions of the Beauty and Beast story (chapter 6). Diaconoff develops the idea that the versions she examines model a kind of "reading," but Diaconoff's analysis depends on a broader definition of "reading" (including, for instance, viewing objects, dreaming, and watching moving images on a screen) than I use here.

exercise of agency and identity that helps to clarify and coordinate self and others, past, present, and future.<sup>14</sup>

Rebecca Resinski

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<sup>14</sup> Kimberley Reynolds contends that it is not typical for characters to be "committed readers" and also "successful in love" (28), but she explores some books in which that is the case; McKinley and Napoli's novels are two more such instances.

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