

Midas and the Value of Animate Others

We might be most familiar with the myth of Midas as an object lesson about greed: the avaricious ancient king is gifted with a golden touch, but the seeming boon becomes a bane before it is, eventually, expunged—and the chastened monarch has learned his lesson. In this paper, however, I would like to trace a different theme in the reception of this myth: its use as a vehicle to explore and emphasize the importance of living among animate beings with minds and spirits of their own.

So prevalent is the “greed theme” that we might be forgiven for not noticing that it is not an inherent part of Midas’ story. The tale as told in book 11 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the primary Classical narrative, and in it no mention is made of a greedy or miserly Midas. In fact, Midas starts the Ovidian story as a fairly winning fellow: he shows himself to be a hospitable host to Silenus (a doddering follower of the god Bacchus) and is thus rewarded with a wish, which he phrases so: “Let whatever I touch with my body be turned into tawny gold!” (*Met.* 11.102-103) Ovid does not make explicit Midas’ motivation here. I think we are safe to assume that the cultural cachet of gold is an allure, but its appeal might be aesthetic as much as economic. Midas tests his newly bestowed power by transforming a branch, a stone, a clod of earth, stalks of wheat, an apple. Under Midas’ touch, nature becomes art. Upon his return to his palace, Midas aurifies its doorposts, the water he washes with becomes gilded, as does his food, wine, and clothes. Midas is hemmed in by gold. Realizing his corporeal predicament—unable to eat and at the risk of becoming a virtual statue himself—he begs Bacchus to retract the dubious gift. A dunk in the fountainhead of the Pactolus does the trick, and the golden power passes into the river’s sands. Ovid gives us a king whose wish puts him at grave personal risk,

and Midas' misadventure dramatizes the positioning of the human self between the poles of nature and culture. Ovid's Midas learns that one cannot live by gold alone.

While Ovid's presentation of Midas articulates the situation of the animate *self*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's rendition in *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* thematizes the animation of *others*. Hawthorne significantly innovated the myth with his creation of Midas' daughter, Marygold. Midas' fondness for gold is rivaled only by his love for his daughter, and Hawthorne invites us to compare these objects of the kings' affection. Midas keeps his gold in a "dark and dreary apartment, underground, at the basement of his palace." To this "dismal hole" Midas retires daily to examine the treasures he holds under lock and key. In contrast to the stock-piled gold, Marygold is characterized by her activity. She "play[s] merrily around her father's footstool" and runs to greet her father with "buttercups and dandelions." When Midas is gifted with the golden touch by a mysterious stranger, he is discomfited by his own transformation of a handkerchief because it had been embroidered by his daughter. As Hawthorne puts it:

Somehow or other, this...transformation did not quite please King Midas. He would rather that his little daughter's handiwork should have remained just the same as when she climbed his knee and put it into his hand.

Hawthorne consistently portrays Marygold as an active agent in the world, and as a subjective self she has her own opinion about Midas' aurifying efforts. Midas had gilded all the roses in his garden, but Marygold is not pleased with the results—Midas can hear her on the way from the garden to the breakfast-room, walking down the hallway and "crying bitterly." Midas disregards his daughter's objections to the golden roses; however, when he becomes perplexed at his inability to avail himself of breakfast, Marygold does not dismiss *his* concerns. She runs to comfort him, throws her arms around his knees—and becomes "a golden statue." Hawthorne

highlights Marygold's animate activity throughout the story, and he orchestrates an ironic climax in which Marygold's very action—her running to console her father—leads to her dis-animation.

Midas registers the contrast between his once-lively daughter and the gilded simulacrum: “...the more perfect was the resemblance, the greater was the father's agony at beholding the golden image, which was all that was left him of a daughter.” In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the corporeal crisis created by the golden touch concerns Midas' own body; Hawthorne redirects the danger posed by Midas' power to the body and spirit of Midas' daughter. Though Hawthorne does depict Midas' consternation at the difficulty of eating, he minimizes it so that concern for *another person* rather than for the self prompts Midas' request for the retraction of the gift. The mysterious stranger reappears and, assured that Midas has realigned his values, tells him that the river bordering his garden will remove the unwanted power and the river's water will reverse its ill effects. Midas bathes himself, re-animates Marygold, and together they restore the roses to their natural glory. The story concludes with a fast-forward: Marygold is now grown, and the only gold that Midas values is that in his daughter's hair and the hair of his grandchildren. Midas has re-invested in a living legacy of vitality and familial affection. Hawthorne retains yet transforms Ovid's use of Midas' story to highlight the competing claims of nature and culture and adds to it a contest between familial and economic values.

The tradition has largely embraced Hawthorne's augmentation, and versions of Midas' tale post-Hawthorne tend to be as indebted to him as to Ovid. *King Midas and the Golden Touch* by Charlotte and Kinuko Craft is no exception. I won't tease out the Ovidian and Hawthornian threads of Charlotte Craft's narrative here, but I turn to this book next because it illustrates a particular challenge that picturebooks face when treating the story of Midas: they get the chance to depict the spectacular golden touch and yet must also, ultimately, renounce it. Characters in

Kinuko Craft's images model delight in the golden touch when inanimate objects are affected. We are shown Midas' amazement upon the discovery of his power, and we are invited to respond to the transformation of the linen along with Midas' servant at the edge of one page. As Midas descends the stairs of the palace, gilding the architecture as he goes, statues and members of the court direct our gaze and invite our wonder. The excitement of Midas and his entourage continues as he makes his way into the garden, but two statues subtly suggest that all may not be well with the floral metamorphosis. Midas' daughter—named Aurelia (or “Golden One”) in this text—laments the roses' metallic fate, and the downcast dogs visually extend her disappointment. When Aurelia is accidentally transformed, the reactions of the dogs, courtiers, servants, and Midas himself signal that the golden touch has gone too far. While the illustrations initially celebrate the golden touch, they limn the limits of visual pleasure when a person is made into an inanimate object. This message is reinforced at the close of the book: a revived Aurelia stands in the foreground with happy dogs and floral abundance; one golden rose remains, a lingering reminder not just for Midas but also for readers. Craft's images aim to train an audience's reaction, suggesting how *we* should weigh, combine, or otherwise navigate the claims of aesthetics and animation.

In Hawthorne's story familial love prompts Midas to acknowledge that the value of another person supersedes that of gold; in *The Eyes of Kid Midas* by Neal Shusterman friendship does that job instead. The novel is set in the early 1990s and the “kid” of the title is Kevin Midas, a 7th grader who feels that his life is beyond his control. The smallest boy in his class, he's a common butt of bullying, the girl he's interested in doesn't seem to notice him, and his parents unpredictably alternate between paying him too much and not enough attention. His friend Josh is one of the only stable, comfortable givens in his life. In his depiction of Kevin

Midas, Shusterman somewhat turns the myth on its head: Midas is usually presented as a king—at the pinnacle of human power—while Shusterman’s hero is low on the ladder. Kevin receives an unexpected boost when he discovers a pair of sunglasses. It doesn’t take long for Kevin and Josh to figure out that, when worn, the sunglasses will bring about whatever Kevin wants. They quickly procure a surfeit of materialities—foods, furniture, electronics, and even cars that they’re not old enough to drive. Faced with an inconvenient heap of stuff, they learn that the glasses can’t be used to undo what they’ve already done. This becomes an especial problem when Kevin’s wishes involve *people* rather than things: when he tells Bertram, the class bully, to go to hell, the bully disappears into the ground, and when Kevin feels belittled by Nicole, the girl he has a crush on, he shrinks her so that she’s only six inches tall. The rest of the world adjusts to these new realities—people forget about Bertram and they act as if Nicole’s size is completely normal—but Kevin and Josh don’t, and Kevin almost wishes that he’d get punished for what he’s willed into being.

Meanwhile, the glasses become increasingly difficult to manage. They make Kevin crave and ache like an addict, they drain heat and electricity, and they start enacting random things that pop into Kevin’s mind rather than what he’s expressly wished. Josh has been Kevin’s confidante throughout, counseling caution, but as the glasses’ control over the world extends, there’s less and less room in it for Josh’s voice of inter-subjective reason. When the glasses get an extra surge of electricity from the local power-plant they start to remake the universe according to Kevin’s mind, and Josh realizes that he won’t be immune from the cosmic re-creation. Wishing as hard as he can for the glasses to break, Josh jumps into their field and is subsumed in Kevin’s thoughts. The combined loss and absorption of his friend pushes Kevin to shout “stop!”—the glasses fly off his face and break. Kevin returns the glasses to where he found them, and the

world resets. Bertram, Nicole, and Josh are restored; none of it happened. In Shusterman's adaptation of the myth, Kevin Midas' more abstract and mental version of the golden touch threatens grand solipsistic disaster. The loss of his best friend makes Kevin realize that a world wholly of his own mind's making would be intolerable.

The universe is again at stake in *The Midas Flesh*, an 8-installment comic series conceived by Ryan North. The golden touch of North's Midas cannot be retracted by the god who gives it, and its effects spread like a contagion, soon claiming all life on earth. Midas' body retains its metamorphic potential even after death, and *The Midas Flesh* focuses on the efforts of two different factions to weaponize pieces of Midas' body as part of an intergalactic struggle. The main characters—Joey, Cooper (a dinosaur) and Fatima—want to use Midas' flesh against the repressive Federation, but the Federation wants to co-opt Midas' body as the ultimate weapon themselves. Cooper and Fatima realize that the power of Midas' flesh cannot be safely contained, but Fatima's attempt to drop it into a black hole is thwarted. When the Federation obtains some of the flesh, destroys a world, and begins producing weapons with it, Joey decides to unleash her ship's remaining Midas flesh on the Federation's home-world. Meanwhile, a Federation commander-gone-mad launches himself into a sun with the idea of using the sun's power to extend the Midas effect. Things are not good. And they don't get entirely better. The gods Dionysus and Ananke/Necessity reappear, but they are unable to stop what has been set in motion. Joey, Fatima, and Cooper will live out their days trying to slow the spreading destruction and save whomever they can, but they know for sure that ultimately the Midas effect will destroy their universe. The cosmic collapse predicted by Ananke leads to a new Big Bang, and eventually a new Midas is born. This one—when gifted by the god—does not ask for the golden touch.

The Midas Flesh imparts a political dimension to Midas' power. Although we start the series clearly rooting for Joey, Cooper, and Fatima as the good guys, North does not leave us in black-and-white certainty. Joey's decision to touch the Federation home-world with the Midas flesh is presented as both necessary and wrong—and Joey's loss of her arm in combatting the golden contagion seems a kind of symbolic castration-and-punishment for her role in the ethical quagmire. Joey and her friends must come to terms with the fact that their desire to harness an unharnessable power has destructive ramifications on both individual and cosmic scales. While the Midas figures in our other texts learn about the value of other people through the endangerment of someone near-and-dear, North's characters are ethically educated through the fates of unknown victims. The Federation may be more wrong than Joey and her crew, but that's cold comfort. Also somewhat cold comfort is the fact that the second Midas doesn't request the golden touch: his wish isn't a matter of having learned from a mistake; that the second chance goes better than the first is a matter of luck. *The Midas Flesh* uses myth and science fiction to underscore skepticism about weapons of mass destruction, even when deployed by supposed good guys.

Classical myth in children's literature is often employed toward didactic ends, and the myth of Midas might seem especially suited for the education of its audience because its main character can be presented as "learning a lesson." In all of the texts discussed here Midas is not a scapegoat but a surrogate, and the audience learns in tandem with Midas or the Midas-inspired characters. In our last two texts, however, the audience's ethical education is also meant to *surpass* that of any of the characters. Kevin in *The Eyes of Kid Midas* has an ethical epiphany, but once the world is re-set it's wiped from his memory; the second Midas in *The Midas Flesh* doesn't learn at all, and though Joey, Cooper, and Fatima *do* learn and retain their knowledge,

it's not able to reverse the catastrophic course of things. Shusterman and North divert the didactic trajectory from Midas to readers: *we* are the ones meant to carry forward the lesson that not only the well-being of the self but also the continuation and livability of the world—both materially and metaphysically—depend on the existence of animate others not subject to our control.

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A version of this paper was delivered at the 2016 conference
of the Children's Literature Association.

Posted on pegasus-reception.com 2019

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