Midas in Massachusetts: Hawthorne, Dickinson, and the Aesthetics of the Golden Touch

Midas has become a staple of mythological moralizing. Both children and adults who know few other myths know about a greedy king whose golden touch illustrates the fallibility of human wishing as well as the limits of economic wealth. The myth appears to give its audience the opportunity to learn a lesson vicariously, and from the Medieval period on the story seems to have been consolidated primarily along these lines. Here, however, I am going to look at the tale of Midas somewhat differently by turning to two 19th century American authors who made aesthetic considerations a significant component of their renditions of Midas. While Nathaniel Hawthorne combines aesthetic and ethical issues in his telling of Midas' story, Emily Dickinson resists using Midas as a moral example and instead offers him as an avatar of poetic art.

But first: in using Midas to think about art and beauty Dickinson and Hawthorne have a precedent in Ovid. Although aesthetics are more obviously at play in Ovid's second Midas episode—in which Midas prefers the music of Pan over that of Apollo—we may see aesthetics at work in Ovid's first Midas episode, as well. Ovid does not specify Midas' motivation for requesting the golden touch, and although we're on safe ground to suppose that Midas is generally allured by the cultural cachet of gold, that cultural allure may be aesthetic as well as (or even rather than) economic. For Ovid does not call Midas "greedy" or anything similar; the only appetitive word that Ovid deploys in the golden touch episode is *avidus*, and he uses that to describe Midas' *tooth*, "eager" (but ultimately unable) to lay into the food it gilds (11.123). Remember that Ovid has already given us in the *Metamorphoses* a king of uncontrolled acquisitiveness and appetite: Erysichthon. Erysichthon's divinely implanted Hunger amplifies his pre-existing disposition and leads him to do almost anything to satisfy his desires, including selling his daughter for money and eating himself. After Erysichthon and his graphic end in book 8, Midas in book 11 would be an anticlimactic illustration of the undesirable outcomes of needy greed. We might be better served finding in Midas an inversion of Pygmalion, whose story Ovid had just told via Orpheus in book 10. Through the intervention of Venus, Pygmalion's art is transformed into life; conversely, another wish-granting divinity, Bacchus, allows Midas to convert life into art. Ovid describes Midas' aurification of apples by saying "you would think that the Hesperides had given them" (11.114). The *vis aurea* (or "golden power") allows Midas to physically substantiate desirable objects of poetry and myth. Midas discovers, however, that the unlimited scope of his "art" does not allow for the necessities of life. He cannot eat or drink and even risks making himself into a statue. When Bacchus consents to remove the *vis aurea*, the god says that he does so "lest [Midas] stay painted all over [or coated all over] with gold" (11.136). Midas, the maker of art without borders, had been in danger of becoming an artwork himself.

Midas' experience with the golden touch prompts him to reconsider his relative valuation of nature and culture. He retreats to the country and there favors the rustic music of Pan over that of the rarified artiste Apollo, who is richly clothed, holds a jeweled lyre, and strikes an artistic pose—his very stance is like one taken or fashioned by an artist. Statuesque Apollo is offended by Midas' earthy preference and gives the king the ears of an ass. Our final image of Midas is of the ass-eared king hiding his secret with a purple headdress. Although we may be tempted to see this parting image as one that crystallizes Midas' supposed foolishness, I suggest that if we do so we are taking Apollo's view of the matter, and I'm not sure that the Apollo we get elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses* should inspire confidence in his judgment. We might instead see in the be-turbaned, ass-eared Midas a manifestation of an all-too-human predicament—our entanglement in the competing claims of nature and culture, as well as the possible political consequences of our aesthetic inclinations. Taken together, Ovid's two Midas episodes illustrate that aesthetic considerations are crucially circumscribed by both nature and politics.

When Hawthorne turns to the myth of Midas, he both inherits and perpetuates the post-antique tendency to use the story to moralize; however, he also finds in Midas an opportunity for the articulation of aesthetic concerns. In "The Golden Touch," one of the six mythological stories told for children in the *Wonder Book*, Hawthorne explores the relationship between nature and aesthetics and the spiritual implications of what one finds aesthetically appealing.

The story's ethical lesson is vividly and humanely dramatized. Midas is a rich king who has come to value gold above all else. One day he tells a mysterious stranger that his happiness would be complete if he could turn all he touched to gold; the stranger grants his wish. Although Midas is initially delighted by his golden touch and only temporarily dismayed at the dietary challenge it poses, he regrets his wish when he accidentally aurifies his daughter Marygold with a kiss. The mysterious stranger re-appears, catechizes the repentant Midas, and explains how Midas can reverse the effects of the golden touch. Hawthorne intended the *Wonder Book* to be a book that children read for fun rather than classroom study, but it is nevertheless didactic: its lessons pertain to the ethical realm.

And I would say to the aesthetic realm, as well, for Hawthorne consistently adds an aesthetic dimension to Midas' story. Before his fascination with gold, Midas used to love music, but under gold's sway his aural appreciation extends only to "the chink of one coin against another." He also used to love roses and had a garden full of "the biggest and beautifullest and sweetest roses that any mortal ever saw or smelt"—but his desire for wealth leads him to calculate how valuable the garden would be if every rose were gold-plated. Although economics have occluded Midas' aesthetic sensitivity, his daughter remains a reliable aesthetic compass. She is dismayed by the roses' metallic metamorphosis:

> "All the beautiful roses, that smelled so sweetly and had so many lovely blushes, are blighted and spoilt! They are grown quite yellow, as you see this one, and have no longer any fragrance! What can have been the matter with them?"
>
> "Poh, my dear little girl, —pray don't cry about it!" said Midas, who was ashamed to confess that he himself had wrought the change which so greatly afflicted her. "...You will find it easy enough to exchange a golden rose like that (which will last hundreds of years) for an ordinary one which would wither in a day."
>
> "I don't care for such roses as this!" cried Marygold, tossing it contemptuously away. "It has no smell, and the hard petals prick my nose!"

Marygold considers the roses to be ruined because they are no longer alive—their multi-sensory, variegated, and ephemeral beauty has been flattened out and frozen. Alive, the roses used to provide manifold pleasure; Marygold finds that their metamorphosed, metal petals give pain (they prick her nose). When Marygold herself becomes a static statue, Midas adjusts not only his ethics but also his aesthetics. After Midas reanimates his daughter, the pair restores the roses to their former glory, and in his happy ever-after Midas hates the sight of all gold except the gleam in Marygold's hair and (years later) the hair of her children. As part of the spiritual education offered by Hawthorne, the *Wonder Book*'s young audience learns that the natural and the aesthetically appealing are not opposing categories, that moral and aesthetic senses are mutually calibrated, that the beautiful and the good are one.

At the end of the story, Hawthorne's narrator identifies the sheen in Marygold's hair as a positive result of Midas' golden touch:

> ...little Marygold's hair had now a golden tinge, which he had never observed in it before she had been transmuted by the effect of his kiss. This change of hue was really an improvement, and made Marygold's hair richer than in her babyhood.

In this instance the lingering effects of the golden touch embellish nature rather than replace it or remove its vitality. Perhaps we find something similar with Dickinson's oriole in "One of the ones that Midas touched." The poem[1] reads:

> One of the ones that Midas touched
> Who failed to touch us all
> Was that confiding Prodigal
> The reeling Oriole –
>
> So drunk he disavows it
> With badinage divine –
> So dazzling we mistake him
> For an alighting Mine –
>
> A Pleader – a Dissembler –
> An Epicure – a Thief –
> Betimes an Oratorio –
> An Ecstasy in chief –
>
> The Jesuit of Orchards
> He cheats as he enchants
> Of an entire Attar
> For his decamping wants –
>
> The splendor of a Burmah
> The Meteor of Birds,
> Departing like a Pageant
> Of Ballads and of Bards –
>
> I never thought that Jason sought
> For any Golden Fleece
> But then I am a rural Man
> With thoughts that make for Peace –
> But if there were a Jason,
> Tradition bear with me
> Behold his lost Aggrandizement
> [U]pon the Apple Tree –

---

[1] Fr 1488, dated c. 1879. Presented here as transcribed by R. W. Franklin, except that Franklin, following Dickinson's fair copy, has "Opon" in the final line. Franklin notes that in that fair copy there is no stanza break in the last 8 lines. See Franklin 1302-1305.

Dickinson's speaker identifies the oriole's color as the product of Midas' metamorphic power. As figured by Dickinson, the golden touch does not devitalize nor immobilize; rather, it enhances and elevates. Midas' touch becomes that of an artist who burnishes nature into art. And the likely original context of this poem—its being sent as an offering to fellow writer Helen Hunt Jackson—might buttress a meta-poetic reading: Dickinson may be providing Jackson with an aesthetic manifesto that exalts poetry as she sees it and depicts its multifarious splendor. Dickinson highlights poetry's connections to music, nature, pleasure, the exotic, ecstatic, dazzling, and divine. We can find other poems by Dickinson in which such chords are struck repeatedly. In addition, Dickinson notes the deceptive quality of the oriole. The oriole is a "Dissembler" and a "Thief." He enchants and while doing so contrives to steal an orchard's essential oils, fuel for future songs. The oriole even disavows his own status as a product of the golden touch. This pinnacle of art masquerades as nature. And lest we be uncertain of the meta-poetical character of Dickinson's catalog, she caps it off with an explicit reference to poetry: the oriole—in, through, and as art—becomes a "Pageant of Ballads and of Bards."

Dickinson's Midas is not a negative example: he is not faulted for his golden touch nor for its effects. If Dickinson finds any fault with Midas it's because he "failed to touch us all"—too little of the world bears the mark of artistic augmentation. And Dickinson's Midas does not hoard the products of transformation miser-style. The oriole wings about, sharing itself in a paradox of profligate confidences. We can contrast Dickinson's positive rendition of Midas with her presentation of Jason at the close of the poem. The speaker queries the golden fleece as a suitable object for a quest and proposes that we swap the traditional image of the gilded pelt hanging on a tree for that of the alighting oriole. Dickinson here has orchestrated an aesthetic contest: golden bird vs. golden fleece, living vs. dead, Midas vs. Jason, peace vs. war, innovation vs. tradition. Lyric displaces or even replaces epic as Dickinson revises the Classical tradition, using it to express and embody her aesthetic credo with the image of a Midas-touched oriole upon an apple tree. While the oriole is an explicit substitute for the golden fleece, we might also see in it in implicit recasting of the apples of the Hesperides: this new golden prize, the artistic piece, is not to be possessed or fixed in one place—it propagates and flies.

The broad distribution and continued recognition of the myth of Midas is notable. I believe that much of the persistence of the Midas myth into the present day is attributable to the fact that people can make it do what they have come to expect of myth—that is, teach a moral lesson. The very thing that may have kept this myth alive has also, I believe, flattened it out somewhat. Most often Midas becomes a caricature of a greedy man or fool, easy to keep at an arm's length--and the myth's audience gets trained in taking the easy bait of judgmental finger-pointing. I wanted to spend time here with three versions of Midas which I think are more complicated or multi-faceted in their use of Midas to meditate on aesthetic issues: whether they be the relationship between nature and art, art and politics, aesthetics and ethics, or meta-poetics and generic affiliation. Ovid and two 19th century residents of Massachusetts who lend a transformative and animating touch to their Classical inheritance suggest that the myth of Midas is good to think with, not just to moralize with.

Rebecca Resinski

A version of this paper was delivered at the 2015 conference
of the Classical Association of the Midwest and South.

Posted on pegasus-reception.com 2019

Bibliography

When I gave this paper in 2015, I did not discuss other scholars' work in the paper nor in footnotes. I did, however, provide the audience with a hand-out which listed relevant *bibliography with brief comments in square brackets to suggest how they relate to my argument. I include those items below.*

Anderson, William S. "Ovid's Genial and Ingenious Story of King Midas." *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Ovid and the Ovidian Tradition*. Ed. Barbara Weiden Boyd and Cora Fox. New York: MLA, 2010, 151-160. [Treats the presentation of Midas by both Ovid and Hawthorne.]

Brown, Gillian. "Hawthorne's Endangered Daughters." *The Western Humanities Review* 50/51 (1996/97): 327-331. [Includes Marygold in a discussion of how Hawthorne tends to present daughters as the bearers of the moral inheritance of their fathers.]

Cleary, Vincent. "Emily Dickinson's Classical Education." *English Language Notes* 18 (1980): 119-129. [Collects what we know about Dickinson's access to Classical material via her school curriculum and family library; mentions the use of Midas and Jason in "One of the ones that Midas touched" as a framing device.]

Crumbly, Paul. "Dickinson's Correspondence and the Politics of Gift-Based Circulation." *Reading Emily Dickinson's Letters*. Ed. Jane Donahue Eberwein and Cindy MacKenzie. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009, 28-55. [Includes a discussion of the uneasy dynamics of the Jackson/Dickinson correspondence, which was the likely context for "One of the ones that Midas touched."]

Dovell, Karen. "Classical Thermopylae in Works by Emily Dickinson: War, Death, and Immortality." Emily Dickinson International Society 2013 conference paper. [Analyzes Dickinson's most frequent Classical allusion.]

Feldherr, Andrew, and Paula James. "Making the Most of Marsyas." *Aretheusa* 37 (2004): 75-103. [Feldherr's portion of this scholarly diptych develops the idea that Marsyas' punishment can be read from the perspective of Apollo or of Marsyas; I suggest something similar for Apollo's treatment of Midas.]

Franklin, R. W. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998. [Presents Dickinson's work with commentary in a three-volume work.]

Griffin, A. H. F. *A Commentary on Ovid Metamorphoses Book XI*. *Hermathena* 162/163 (1997): 1-290. [Griffin insists that Ovid does not use Midas to moralize, but Griffin himself consistently criticizes Midas in a way that verges on moralizing; I offer Griffin's commentary as one extended scholarly example of this tendency.]

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*. 1852. *Project Gutenberg.* www.gutenberg.org/files/32242/32242-h/32242-h.htm.

Laffrado, Laura. *Hawthorne's Literature for Children*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992. [Presents Midas in "The Golden Touch" as undergoing a process of adjusting and aligning his inner and outer vision.]

Leach, Eleanor Winsor. "Ekphrasis and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." *Ramus* 3 (1974): 102-142. [Includes a consideration of the tension between nature and art brought to the fore by the golden touch.]

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. *The Latin Library*. www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid.html

Petrino, Elizabeth. "Allusion, Echo, and Literary Influence in Emily Dickinson." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 19 (2010): 80-102. [Discusses various kinds of creative interactions which Dickinson had with other literary works.]

Pollak, Vivian R. "Emily Dickinson's Literary Allusions." *Essays in Literature* 1 (1974): 54-68. [Discusses Dickinson's allusive strategies and the dynamic relationship they imply between Dickinson and her sources as well as between literature and life.]

Sewall, Richard B. *The Life of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974. [Provides an overview of Dickinson's education that especially helps to contextualize her views of nature.]

Simpson, Michael. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. [Collates and connects points made by Brooks, Coleman, Solodow, et al. about Ovid's Midas in relation to art.]

Tissol, Garth. *The Face of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. [Discusses the political dimension of Apollo's treatment of Midas and suggests that a focus on the aesthetic aspects of the story could obscure a recognition of its political implications.]

Winterer, Caroline. *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780-1910*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. [Traces a cultural trend to see antiquity as an antidote to modern materialism.]

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986. [Considers "One of the ones that Midas touched" as a meta-poetic text but finds in it a focus on loneliness and loss.]