

Midas, Mixed Messages, and the “Museum” of Dugald Steer’s *Mythology*

Dugald Steer’s *Mythology*, published in 2007, is the fifth installment in the popular Ology series, following *Dragonology*, *Egyptology*, *Wizardology*, and *Pirateology*. *Mythology* purports to be a facsimile of an early 19th century mythological guidebook for students by Lady Hestia Evans, and much of it reads like a typical reference work; it offers profiles of major characters in Greek and Roman mythology and provides streamlined summaries of key stories. Each spread is presented as a largely self-contained assemblage of smaller parts, grouped under a broader heading. For instance, the spread entitled “Heracles and the Greek Heroes” includes separate write-ups about Jason and the Argonauts, the labors of Heracles, and Theseus and the Minotaur; the spread on “Hades and the Underworld” has distinct sections on Hades and Persephone, Demeter, Orpheus, and the fate of souls after death. The formatting of content into associated but independent subsections encourages a reader to dip in and out of it, sample byte-sized chunks, and choose where and when to linger.

The artwork accompanying the content is various in style. Plenty of the pictures show a kinship to fantasy illustration. We might compare images from *Mythology* to some from Dungeon and Dragons handbooks: *Mythology*’s cover showing Heracles battling the hydra vs. a character fighting one of the lizardfolk in *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* (60), Prometheus in chains vs. a bound character in *Hoard of the Dragon Queen* (13), and a Fury vs. a banshee from the *Monster Manual* (23). The affiliation with Dungeons and Dragons extends beyond visual idiom. Like the various D and D guides, *Mythology* doesn’t give information for information’s sake: it connects the content to an adventure. In Dungeons and Dragons, the guides give players information that they will use in the course of their campaigning. In the case of *Mythology*, the reader’s adventure is tracing the travels of a young Englishman named John Oro.

A note from Lady Hestia in the front matter explains that John Oro brought her book with him as he travelled around Greece collecting materials for a museum to be established in Athens by one of Lady Hestia's friends, Mr. Patakis. Another note—presented in John's handwriting—ends ominously: we learn that John has made a “big mistake,” his “time is short,” and he begs, “Zeus, forgive me!” While the reference-like information of *Mythology* does not provide narrative momentum, John's story, beginning with this note, does. The seemingly hand-written margins of the subsequent pages contain John's record of his journey and downfall, as he decides to keep for himself the antiquities he discovers rather than donate them to the museum's cause. His greed reaches such a pitch that on Mt. Olympus he prays for Zeus to give him the golden touch. When his wish is granted, Oro fulfills the destiny of his name and aurifies himself.

Mythology embeds mementos of Oro's travels: for example, the lots which he used to pick his divine allegiance, prophetic oak leaves, a sample of thread spun from Golden Fleece, an impression of a Mycenaean death mask, an ancient obol. The placement of these objects within the book is often suggestive. For instance, the obol appears on the page about the underworld, and the informational text on that page mentions obols as payment for Charon; the Golden Fleece is tucked into a spread devoted to monsters and mythical beasts. The objects thus encourage a reader to bring the marginal narrative of Oro's personal experience into conversation with the volume's more traditional “book knowledge.” And once readers gain practice in connecting Oro's narrative with mythology, they might notice more subtle relationships: for instance, the disastrous consequences of Oro's wish for the golden touch are mentioned in the margin of the page that discusses the Trojan Horse—it is left to readers to realize that both were gifts only in the seeming.

There are other objects and interactive features built into *Mythology*: Pandora's box (not jar, alas), a labyrinth maze, cards about the gods that can be used in a game called "Tartarus," a pen with paper, and numerous flaps to lift or little booklets to read. Such multimodality is a hallmark of the Ology series and participates in the trend of broadening children's literacy education to include training in interpreting and synthesizing a variety of media. The multimodal nature of *Mythology* also makes it akin to a miniature, portable museum—it is an object that houses other objects. While the title page certainly recalls the Parthenon, it also channels the architecture of the British Museum. By turning past the title page, readers enter a virtual museum. And *Mythology* conforms to many of the current best practices for children's museums. It integrates interactive and informational components, appeals to the senses, provides a personal narrative as a through-line, gives children choice in how to chart their course and what to focus on, encourages repeat visits, and enlists individual involvement in the construction of meaning (see Shaffer). *Mythology* is not only a kind of literacy instruction; it is also an exercise in the cultural praxis of museum-going.

As I've already mentioned, museums are an explicit concern in *Mythology*'s back-story. Mr. Patakis' desire to establish a museum for Greek antiquities in Greece is presented as a cultural declaration of independence equivalent to the Greek war of independence, and the front matter equates John Oro's initial enthusiasm for the project to Byron's aid to the Greeks during the actual war. There are further references to Byron throughout *Mythology*, including a notice at the book's end, which mentions Byron's death and support for the Greek cause. But John Oro becomes an anti-Byron in his acquisitiveness, and although Elgin and other "collectors" are not mentioned by name, they lurk as historical touchstones for Steer's depiction of Oro. Readers of *Mythology* are given a choice: will they ally themselves with Oro or will they stand in spirit

with Byron, Lady Hestia, Mr. Patakis, and his museum project? Oro becomes a negative object lesson in *Mythology*'s tutorial in cultural heritage management.

Steer reinforces this lesson by making Oro into a 19th century Midas figure. Midas' golden touch is mentioned by Oro in the first spread after the book's front matter, and this initial reference puts Midas on a reader's radar. At the end of the book Oro refers to Midas again. He frames his prayer to Zeus for the golden touch as a version of Midas' wish to Dionysus, and we witness the effects of the metamorphosis on part of the now-gilded page. The next page has yet more gold, and Oro reports that he finally—like Midas—understands the folly of his wish. A booklet with the story of Midas is included just above Oro's words, prompting readers to see in Midas' story what Oro does.

In making the golden touch imperil the wisher (rather than a third party), Steer follows Ovid, whose Midas begs for the retraction of the *vis aurea* (or “golden power”) once his corporeal predicament is clear: Ovid's Midas, unable to eat or drink, risks becoming surrounded in gold plating himself. But moralizing via Midas is not an Ovidian feature. Ovid does not call Midas greedy nor use him as a negative example of avarice. This moral message gets grafted onto Ovid's version of the Midas myth—we see it in Fulgentius' explication of the story in late antiquity—and it's taken hold. More often than not, when the myth of Midas gets retold it crucially contains this moralizing strain. Steer's didactic use of Oro also has some precedent in earlier Ology books: *Egyptology* has its journaler, the young archaeologist Emily Sands, come to a presumably bad end when searching for the tomb of Osiris, and *Dragonology* concludes with an environmental plea for conservation. But *Mythology*, boosted by the accumulated didactic baggage of the Midas myth, heightens its teachable moments, incorporates them more into the overall narrative, and makes the moral point pronounced and seemingly central.

And yet, there's a double-bind at play. Readers are prompted to find fault with John Oro's selfishness but are also encouraged to enjoy the material record of his travels, including the objects which are the yield of his problematic acquisitiveness. *Mythology* appeals to a reader's pleasure in things, and it is marketed as a special book to own, a prized private possession. Like the other Ology books, it even has "gems" embedded in the cover! These are quintessential "gift books" rather than "share toys." There is a tension between *Mythology*'s championing of public museums for the safekeeping of cultural heritage and the individualized disposition it taps into and implicitly supports. We can often find an analogous double-bind in picturebook retellings of the Midas myth: for instance, in a 2002 picturebook by Demi, Midas is explicitly and repeatedly criticized for his golden desires, while the book gratifies a reader's visual pleasure with its gilded pages. It can be easy to point a finger at Midas (as Apollo does in Demi's book) without realizing that you could be pointing it at yourself.

Steer's *Pirateology* also puts its audience in an ambivalent position. Readers are invited to enjoy all things pirate, including some plunder, but in the guise of being pirate-*hunters*. There's a temptation to chalk such mixed messages up to carelessness or bad faith and move on. But instead, I'd like to conclude by lingering on *Mythology*'s mixed messaging, regardless of its cause. If *Mythology* is analogous to a museum, the book's ambivalence about objects recapitulates for a young audience—in make-believe and miniature—the experience of visiting and enjoying a museum containing material obtained through questionable means and the ideological intersections in which our museum-going practices implicate a viewer. Even when artifacts don't have a problematic acquisition history, museums are the sites of multivalent messaging, and museum-going becomes a process in which participants articulate a self by charting their own paths amidst a multiplicity of objects, narratives, and possible subject

positions (see Hooper-Greenhill and Macdonald). *Mythology*, with the gap between its implicit and explicit messaging, could be seen as offering an opportunity for a similar exercise of identity. While that might seem like heady work for Dugald Steer's book, both children's literature and museums are socializing institutions; the dynamic constitution of individual subjects within cultural parameters is part of their job (again, see Hooper-Greenhill and Macdonald). In *The Well-Tempered Self* Toby Miller proposes that postmodern society has developed its own technology for the production of cultural citizens in which subjects are constituted by the push-pull of capitalistic acquisitive desires and more democratic or socially oriented ethical commitments. How we situate ourselves amidst these forces, and how they situate us, makes us *us*. Though Miller doesn't treat children's literature or museums specifically in his study, a walk through a museum or time spent between the pages of a book such as *Mythology* replicates the larger landscape in which he sees the postmodern self coming to be. While *Mythology* may seek to inform young readers about Greek mythology and help them to develop an ethical disposition toward ancient material culture, the book also participates in shaping its audience as subjects in and of culture whose identity is partly established and expressed through their complex interaction with objects and an ongoing navigation of mixed messages.

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The following chapters were especially helpful for this paper:

2: "Cultural Theory and Museum Studies," Rhiannon Mason

3: "Sociology and the Social Aspects of Museums," Gordon Fyfe

4: "Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible," Donald Preziosi

6: "Collecting Practices," Sharon Macdonalds

10: "Making and Remaking National Identities," Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan

13: "Heritage," Steven Hoelscher

19: "Living in a Learning Society: Museums and Free-choice Learning," John H. Falk,
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21: "Interactivity: Thinking Beyond," Andrea Witcomb

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