

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

Although Classicists have noted aesthetic overtones in Ovid's account of Midas in the *Metamorphoses*, the general reception of Midas' story in English tends to use the tale to make a moral point. The proposed paper will explore how Nathaniel Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson incorporate aesthetic considerations into their appropriations of the Midas myth. While Hawthorne interweaves moral and aesthetic judgment in his rendition of Midas, Dickinson eschews moralizing and makes Midas an avatar of ideal poetic practice.

Ovid does not specify greed as Midas' motivation for requesting the golden touch. Midas is presumably allured by the cachet of gold, but the allure may be as much aesthetic as economic, and his ability to transform nature connects him to artists. The *vis aurea* makes Midas into a sculptor of sorts; however, he finds that the unlimited scope of his "art" does not allow for the necessities of life. Later, as if trying to transform his negative experience with the golden touch into useful knowledge, Midas prefers the rustic music of Pan to that of the rarified artist Apollo. Apollo is offended by Midas' judgment, and just as Midas' over-valuation of culture put him in a corporeal predicament previously, so does his over-valuation of nature: Apollo gives him ass-ears as a physical manifestation of his taste. If Midas' desire for gold does not take into account what a human needs to live, his expression of enthusiasm for Pan's music does not factor in the status of the slighted musician. Ovid's Midas episodes may illustrate various entanglements attendant on one's aesthetic inclinations and the difficulty of steering a middle course between the poles of nature and culture.

Hawthorne shapes the story of Midas so that it contributes to the *Wonder Book's* program of spiritual education for its young readers. Hawthorne uses Midas to make a point about values: through the accidental transformation of his daughter (an episode invented by Hawthorne) Midas

realizes that he has wrongly estimated the value of gold; its worth pales in comparison to that of his daughter. Part morality play, part fairytale, Hawthorne's story teaches an ethical lesson--but a focus solely on the explicit moral message obscures the extent to which Hawthorne gives it an aesthetic dimension. We learn that Midas used to enjoy music and delight in his wondrous rose garden. The desire for gold eclipses these proper pleasures. It perverts Midas' aesthetic sensibility until he prefers the sight and sound of gold to all else and even wishes that the flowers in his garden were golden. When a mysterious stranger grants Midas the golden touch, Midas transforms much of his palace as well as his roses, but his daughter does not appreciate the flowers' metallic metamorphosis. She considers their beauty blighted because they are no longer alive, and although Midas may initially shrug off his daughter's judgment, he comes to a similar conclusion when she becomes a brilliant but inanimate statue. After the mysterious stranger tells Midas how to eradicate the golden touch and reverse its effects, Midas and his restored daughter return the roses to their natural beauty. At the story's end, an elderly Midas professes that the only gold he loves is that in the hair of his daughter and her children, a living legacy. In "The Golden Touch" Hawthorne suggests that ethical values have aesthetic resonance, and that moral and aesthetic senses are mutually calibrated.

In "One of the ones that Midas touched," Dickinson does not enlist Midas to make a moral point; in fact, Dickinson's Midas is culpable only in that "he failed to touch us all." Dickinson invites us to imagine a world in which everything bears the effects of the golden touch, but since such a world is not this one, Dickinson focuses on a single being that does: the oriole. Multifarious, enchanting, ecstatic, and deceptive, Dickinson's oriole is nature transformed by art. Midas becomes equivalent to a poet, and the oriole becomes a symbol of poetry--a living lyric embodiment of Dickinson's aesthetic commitments. After a catalog of

images celebrating the oriole and the variety of guises it can assume in, through, and as art, Dickinson closes the poem by contrasting the oriole with the golden fleece, and she disparages the golden fleece as a suitable object for a quest. Dickinson proposes that we replace the image of the gilded pelt hanging on a tree with that of the alighting oriole. In a contest of sorts orchestrated by Dickinson, Midas' lyric bird trumps Jason's epic aspiration, and Dickinson lends her transformative touch to the Classical tradition as she uses it to illustrate and express her aesthetic credo.

(The full paper will situate this discussion within the context of relevant scholarship on Ovid, Hawthorne, and Dickinson.)