

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

*Mythology* by Dugald Steer et al. (2007) is a mixed-media production: it is presented as a facsimile of a (fictional) 19th century reference work on Greek mythology taken to Greece by a young Englishman, John Oro, who records his own experiences in the book’s margins and encloses within its covers mementos of his fateful travels. This entry in the popular *Ologies* series delivers standard mythological fare framed by the misadventures of John Oro and augmented by material add-ins such as a gilded impression of a Mycenaean mask, a cardboard obol, prophetic oak leaves, a pop-up Pandora’s box, and a specimen of golden fleece. The book becomes an artifact as well as a virtual house of artifacts. *Mythology* thus offers an experience more akin to visiting a museum than to reading a book. Faced with objects, various kinds of texts, illustrations, and interactive elements of the sort often found in children’s museums, the young audience of *Mythology* can develop museum literacy by moving among these elements, synthesizing them into a multi-faceted picture of ancient Greece and its mythology, and revisiting them to make new connections and forge new meanings.

The story of John Oro, which is presented throughout the book in handwriting, provides a personal touch and narrative pull. John comes to Greece in 1826 to gather antiquities for a new museum in Athens; however, he is gradually overtaken by greed and decides to keep his finds for himself. On Mt. Olympus he prays to Zeus for the golden touch, and—after his wish is granted—he aurifies himself. The myth of Midas is prominently placed in the regular text of *Mythology* so that readers are prompted to make the connection between the mythological figure and John Oro. Yet this is a retelling with a twist: unlike Midas’ wish, John’s is not reversed, and his annotated book becomes a cautionary object. To this extent *Mythology* follows in the moralizing footsteps

of most renditions of the Midas myth for children, and to the usual “lesson” about greed it adds one about cultural heritage management.

But *Mythology*, I contend, ultimately offers something more complicated than a straightforward “lesson,” for the acquisitiveness decried by the book is also encouraged by the material objects it contains and the tactile satisfaction they offer. Although John Oro becomes a negative example, readers are invited to enjoy and handle some of the yield of his plundering. The book positions its audience between explicit moralizing and implicit—or complicit—pleasure. An analogous phenomenon sometimes occurs in picturebook versions of the myth of Midas: while they criticize Midas’ wish on ethical grounds they provide aesthetic delight in their visual depictions of the golden touch. Despite its frequently didactic presentation, the myth of Midas can be tricky to teach with.

While it may be possible to attribute the mixed message of *Mythology* to a lack of authorial care, I will explore how its consequences can be further interpreted regardless of cause or intention:

- The ambivalence of the message recapitulates—in make-believe and miniature—the experience of visiting and enjoying a museum containing ancient artifacts obtained through questionable means.
- More generally, museums are sites of multivalent messaging (Mason 2011, 27), and the museum-going experience articulates the self amidst a multiplicity of objects and narratives (Preziosi 2011, 56); *Mythology* could be seen as offering an opportunity for a similar exercise of identity.
- And Miller (1993) proposes that postmodern culture itself is a complicated system of mixed messaging in which the subject is constituted by the push-pull of (capitalistic)

acquisitive desires and (democratic) ethical commitments—a dynamic which we can clearly see in *Mythology*.

While *Mythology* explicitly seeks 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 cultural subjects whose identity is partly established and expressed through a more complex interaction with objects and navigation of mixed messages.

### Bibliography

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