

Midas (XI.90-145)



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Midas' story is an extension of the Orpheus story and the Bacchus story. Bacchus left Thrace after his followers killed the grieving Orpheus and the god proceeded to Lydia. There Silenus, a satyr and the foster father of Bacchus, gets lost and then captured by some farmers who take him to their king, Midas, who is also a follower of Bacchus. Recognizing a fellow worshiper, Midas proclaims a ten-day feast and finally returns Silenus to the grateful god, who offers as a reward anything Midas wants. The king makes the proverbial bad choice, that everything he touches may turn to gold, forgetting that, once the novelty wore off, eating would pose a major problem. Faced with the unanticipated consequences, Midas asks for removal of what has become his curse. Eventually he washes it off and transforms the Pactolus River into a gold-bearing river.

In the story immediately after this, Ovid continues with Midas as the main character. Not having learned anything, Midas avoided wealth and lived in the forests; there he had the misfortune to witness a musical contest between Pan and Apollo judged by the mountain-god Tmolus. Dissenting from the judge's correct decision, Midas was given the ears of an ass. When he attempted to conceal his shame under a purple head-dress, the slave who cut his hair could not keep the secret. The slave spoke the words into a hole, which he then covered over; reeds grew out of this land and whispered the story, which quickly spread.

Clearly Midas as an exemplum is meant to be a warning about several things; it is worth noting that the modern phrase of a "Midas touch" does not include any of the negativity that Ovid associates with the unfortunate king who appears as all too human. Those intrigued by the story of Midas are urged to read a version of the story from the perspective of an imagined wife found in *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, edited by Michael Hoffman and James Lasdun; the poem was written by Carol Ann Duffy and is entitled "Mrs. Midas."

Outline:

90-99 Silenus is led to Midas and honored with a feast.

100-105 Midas is granted a wish for returning Silenus to Bacchus and chooses badly.

106-119 Everything Midas touches turns to gold.

119-126 Trouble arises when Midas tries to eat and drink.

127-133 Midas hates his "gift" and asks that it be removed.

134-145 Bacchus tells him to go to the source of Sardis' river and wash off the curse. After Midas does so, the river to the present day leaves traces of gold everywhere.