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The Classical Reception of Bacchus and Romantic Critique in *Midas* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

A recepção clássica de Baco e a crítica romântica em Midas*, de Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*

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Abstract: Drawing upon the findings of studies on Classical Reception, this paper employs an analytical approach to examine how Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's mythological drama *Midas* transcends the mere reproduction of ancient tradition, instead functioning as a critical and symbolic reworking of classical myth. The play incorporates literary and philosophical elements that express the Romantic and personal vision of the author, revealing her ability to reconfigure narratives of Antiquity to confront modern tensions, such as materialism and disconnection from nature. The present study investigates the representation of Bacchus as a Dionysian figure, in the Nietzschean sense, who reveals himself in *Midas* as a symbol of the Dionysian principle, life, intoxication, celebration, and transformation, in opposition to the figure of Midas and his pursuit of control, rationality, and material possession. Mary Shelley incorporates this duality and reinterprets the myth through an ethical and aesthetic lens, offering a renewed and critical perspective on the classical tradition while emphasizing the significance of embracing the Dionysian aspects of human experience.

Keywords: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley; *Midas*; Bacchus; Classical Reception theory; romanticism.

Resumo: À luz dos estudos de Recepção Clássica, este artigo analisa como o drama mitológico *Midas*, de Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1922), transcende a mera reprodução da tradição clássica, atuando como uma reelaboração crítica e simbólica do mito antigo. A peça incorpora elementos literários e filosóficos que expressam uma visão

romântica e pessoal da autora, revelando sua habilidade em reconfigurar narrativas da Antiguidade para confrontar tensões modernas, como o materialismo e a desconexão com a natureza. Em especial, o estudo investiga a representação de Baco como figura dionisíaca, no sentido nietzschiano, que se revela em *Midas* como símbolo do princípio dionisíaco, vida, intoxicação, celebração e transformação, em oposição à figura de Midas e sua busca por controle, rigidez e posse material. Mary Shelley, ao incorporar essa dualidade, reinscreve o mito em uma chave ético-estética própria, promovendo uma leitura regenerativa e crítica da tradição clássica, ao passo que reitera a necessidade de se olhar para formas dionisíacas de existência.

Palavras-chave: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley; *Midas*; Baco; recepção clássica; romantismo.

1 Opening Remarks

Classical Reception studies provide a critical framework for examining how authors across historical and cultural contexts reimagine texts from Antiquity, reshaping them to address the specific issues of their own eras. In the context of English Romanticism, this process takes on specific forms. Classical myths are not viewed as models to be preserved, but rather as symbols to be reimagined in light of new philosophical, aesthetic, and social values. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley makes a unique contribution to this discussion through her drama *Midas*, which was written in 1820 and published posthumously in 1922. This work reconfigures the Greco-Roman myth not only as a critique of modern materialism but also as an affirmation of a Romantic sensibility characterized by an appreciation for nature, transformation, and simplicity.

Nevertheless, this paper analyzes how Mary Shelley reinterprets the traditional understanding of the Greek god Bacchus, who is typically associated with inebriation and ecstasy, as a symbol of spiritual freedom and reconnection with nature, contrasting this with the destructive obsession of Midas with wealth and material riches. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Classical Reception studies (Hardwick, 2003; Martindale, 1993) and contemporary discussions surrounding gender in literary tradition, as well as a detailed analysis of the dramatic text, this paper proposes a new interpretation of how the play incorporates social critique,

Greco-Roman mythology, and romantic aesthetics. The argument is that the play not only revisits an Ovidian myth but also reinterprets it, suggesting a symbolic displacement that challenges the domination of nature and reaffirms the ethical and poetic value of human connection with it.

In recent decades, the field of Classical Reception studies has expanded significantly, offering a more nuanced understanding of how ancient materials are continually reshaped within modern cultural frameworks. As Martindale (1993) emphasizes, reception should not be seen merely as the afterlife of classical texts, but as a dynamic dialogue that constructs meaning across temporal and ideological boundaries. In this way, reception involves not only reinterpretation, but also acts of appropriation, resistance, and creative transformation that illuminate the evolving relationship between Antiquity and modernity.

Within this perspective, Mary Shelley's *Midas* can be read as a conscious exercise in classical reception undertaken by a female writer in a field historically dominated by male voices. By retelling the myth, the author transforms the classical legacy through a feminist and ethical rearticulation, turning it into an instrument for critiquing the modern world and fostering a new sensibility more attuned to the earth, the cycles of life, and otherness. In doing so, her drama transcends a purely mythological play, contributing to a renewed vision of the classical tradition, whose reach extends beyond the constraints of time and gender.

2 Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and the Return to the Classics

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, a member of Leigh Hunt's literary circle, was known for her efforts in engaging with classical Antiquity during the English Romantic period. This group included notable poets such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Leigh Hunt, who shared a strong interest in revitalizing classical culture through new forms of literary expression. Like her contemporaries, Mary Shelley reinterpreted myths from Antiquity, aligning them with modern social and cultural matters. Although her contributions were not fully acknowledged during her lifetime, her theatrical works, especially *Proserpine* and *Midas*, demonstrate how she balanced tradition and innovation by reimagining Greco-Roman myths.

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The concept of classical reception serves as an important methodological reference for understanding the dynamics of creative adaptation. As Hardwick (2003) asserts, classical reception is not limited to reproducing works from the classical era. Instead, it involves the process of reinterpretation through the lens of contemporary values and perspectives. This shift allows texts from Antiquity to be liberated from their traditional status and transformed into vehicles for creativity, reflection, and social criticism. Mary Shelley is a clear example of this approach, as she uses classical myths to question social conventions, such as excessive materialism and the disconnection from nature. In addition, the author incorporates a feminine perspective into her interpretation of classical myths, portraying them as a performative field in which the past is not static but continuously reinterpreted. This approach enables writers, artists, theorists, and feminist critics to not only revisit mythology but also to challenge and disrupt it. Consequently, classical reception can be conceptualized as a symbolic domain wherein meanings derived from the past are subject to reinterpretation with renewed emphases and tensions.

In the XIX century, as a matter of fact, women writers faced significant barriers regarding access to formal classic education, predominantly reserved to men. Besides that, female writers like Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley showed the possibility of appropriating classical tradition as an autodidactic matter, defying the patriarchal cloud surrounding classical studies. Comet (2013) observes that, as male poets often worshiped Greece as ideal and monumental, authors such as Wollstonecraft reimagined Antiquity in a closer and more intimate way, focusing on natural and emotional aspects which connected more directly to their personal experiences.

Mary Shelley offers a compelling example of this dynamic, as she critically appropriates the language and formal elements of the classical tradition to recast mythological narratives from a feminine perspective. In *Proserpine*, the author's decision to depict the protagonist as an active agent in her own story, alongside the notable absence of male characters such as Jupiter, represents a deliberate act of subverting the patriarchal paradigm that pervades Greek and Roman myths. Thus, the narrative focus transitions from male authority to the dynamics of relations between

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women, particularly the emotional and symbolic bond between Ceres and Proserpina. By emphasizing emotions such as care, shared suffering, and feminine resilience, Mary Shelley brings an intimate and emotional perspective to her drama. As Mellor (1993) argues, this can be seen as a political act in itself—a means of inserting the female voice into the literary tradition by employing formal and thematic strategies that challenge the heroic, male-dominated dramas of the canon. In doing so, *Proserpine* not only reclaims motifs from mythology, but also transforms them into a potent critical instrument capable of reimagining feminine power.

The adaptation and reinterpretation of classical myths is essential for understanding how British authors, including women, have appropriated mythological characters to address social and cultural issues of their time. In *Midas*, the author goes beyond merely retelling myths; she reinvents them through the lens of Romantic philosophy. The central themes of the work, such as power, materialism, and the relationship with nature, reflect Mary Shelley's concerns about her present context as well as the tensions between the rational ideals of Enlightenment thinking and the emotional and natural values of Romanticism. The classical reception in Mary Shelley's works reveals a dual strategy: on one hand, she reaffirms the relevance of Antiquity by presenting it to a new audience; on the other hand, she uses tradition to criticize patriarchal and materialist structures. In *Midas*, this approach results in a powerful reflection on the relationship between power, wealth, and nature, aligning with Romantic values as it reimagines old myths in a new context.

The author adapts elements from the Ovidian myth to Romantic questions, which, by moving away from Enlightenment assumptions, value the subjective, the emotional, and the mystery that permeates nature. Rather than emphasizing rationalism or control over the natural world, Mary Shelley proposes a more nuanced and symbolic interpretation of the myth. In this interpretation, the concept of the golden touch, which symbolizes domination, is relinquished in favor of the pastoral and simplicity of the bucolic. This change signifies a Romantic philosophy that seeks solace in nature and emotional freedom as a response to the excesses of industrial society. The play thus explores the contrast between material and spiritual wealth, while proposing a critique of greed by

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exalting simplicity. The figure of Bacchus functions as a catalyst for these transformations, thereby symbolizing the reconnection amongst men and nature, a central theme within Romanticism.

Consequently, Mary Shelley makes use of the plays and myths to explore the political and social issues of her time. According to Cox (1996), she draws from theatrical genres, incorporating elements of tragedy and comedy, and later moves into pastoral forms. Although her work has faced criticism for lacking theatrical qualities and for the influence of Percy Bysshe Shelley, pointed out by the editor of *Proserpine and Midas*, it is important to recognize that through her emulation of earlier writers, Shelley expresses her interpretation of classical works and demonstrates her engagement with literary tradition.

It is also relevant to reflect on *Midas* not only as a play that resees the past, but also as a text that transcends its historical context. The interpretation of this reading must not be constrained by nostalgia or a historicist perspective. The Classical Reception studies broaden perspectives on the relationship between classical culture and its reinvention in other historical contexts. As Hardwick (2003) emphasized, reception does not limit itself to preservation, but implies constant renewal, since the classical text is reinterpreted according to the vision and context of the author engaged in reception. Hardwick (2003) also states that this approach facilitates the study of migrations and adaptations of Antiquity in late cultures, and thus highlights the creative role of the texts that receive it. Consequently, the classics become the focus of critical scrutiny and reinterpretation, as the modern text gains intrinsic value.

Moreover, these studies offer novel insights into how nineteenth-century women writers, often marginalized due to their lack of formal education, engaged with the Greco-Roman tradition. It is evident that authors such as Mary Shelley, who possessed a profound understanding of classical languages and ancient mythology, played a pivotal role in redefining the classics as an integral part of women's cultural heritage.[1] As stated by Comet:

[1] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's intellectual upbringing was unquestionably distinctive, particularly for a woman of her era. Mary Shelley, the daughter of the political philosopher William Godwin and the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft, was raised in an environment that placed a high value on critical thinking and literature, even

> For we are accustomed to a Hellenism that is masculine in orientation, bound to institutions of learning and authority, and predominantly German in its mediation. To speak in generalities, the canonical writings of the male Romantics figured Greece as a monumental inheritance, as an ancestral voice—albeit, at times, a provocatively silent one—that aroused in the modern poet both feelings of inadequacy and lofty ambitions. Women's writing, by contrast, frequently envisioned a Greece that was tenuous, seen and felt in natural residues and dying breezes, rather than encased in marble statues or temples poised against the erosions of history (Comet, 2013, p. 3).

This quotation offers a compelling criticism of classical reception within the intellectual and literary traditions of the West. It highlights the dichotomy between a classical heritage traditionally encoded by male authority and a "more feminine reimagination" of Antiquity, particularly within Romantic and post-Romantic literary contexts. Comet (2013) also observes that dominant Hellenism, as canonized, is masculine in its orientation, closely tied to institutional authority and philosophical rigor, and often transmitted through German scholarship (for example, Winckelmann, Schlegel, and Nietzsche). Within this tradition, Antiquity becomes a monumental legacy, an idealized origin with which modern (male) poets must contend. It serves both as a source of inspiration and as a burdensome standard of comparison, evoking feelings of inadequacy and higher ambition, a concept that echoes Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence (Bloom, 1997). In this sense, Hellenism is portrayed as monumental, authoritarian, and often inaccessible.

In contrast, women's writing is positioned as operating "outside or parallel" to this dominant paradigm, offering a more ephemeral, sensorial, and affective engagement with classical Antiquity. Rather than

following the early death of her mother. From a young age, she had access to her father's extensive library and interacted with influential intellectuals such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This privileged upbringing contrasted sharply with the experiences of the majority of women in the 19th century, who faced significant limitations in terms of access to formal education and participation in the literary world, with the result that they were discouraged or prevented from fully developing their intellectual potential.

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monumentalizing Greece in marble statues or temples, women writers capture it in the intimate textures of nature. This evokes a poetics of transience that resists the male impulse to worship and possess Antiquity. Such an approach aligns with feminist critical theories that value embodiment, marginality, and lived experience over abstraction and institutionalization. This reorientation of Hellenism has several implications. First, it provokes a revision of the canon, questioning the criteria by which cultural heritage is deemed legitimate. Second, it challenges the idea that classical reception must be "epic", arguing instead for fluid, situated, and affective forms of remembrance. Finally, it opens space for feminist interventions in classical studies, reception theory, and Romanticism, fields typically dominated by male voices and male-defined aesthetics.

Regarding the creation of Romantic myths, Koszul, the editor responsible for the publication of *Proserpine* and *Midas* in 1922, observes how Romantic writers reinterpret classical works to align with the new narrative exigencies:

> For indeed there is more than a personal interest attached to these writings of Mrs. Shelley's. The fact that the same mind which had revelled, a few years earlier, in the fantastical horrors of Frankenstein's abortive creation, could now dwell on the melancholy fate of Proserpine or the humorous disappointment of Midas, and delight in their subtle poetical or moral symbolism—this fact has its significance. It is one of the earliest indications of the revival, in the heart of Romanticism, of the old love of classical myths and classical beauty (Koszul, 2021, p. 10).

As Comet (2013) has observed, Mary Shelley's approach differs from that of her male contemporaries, who see Antiquity as a mirror to help mold the present. In contrast, she projects modern questions onto traditional structures of the past, thereby subverting their original authority. In *Midas*, the character Bacchus criticizes the excessive pursuit of wealth and advocates for a balanced existence in harmony with nature. In this sense, the play questions materialism, encouraging a return to more natural ways of living. This theme resonates with the Romantic qualities that reflect Mary Shelley's concerns about using mythology to comment on the

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societal lifestyle of her time. Although firmly rooted in classical tradition, Shelley's interpretation of the myth offers a unique perspective, providing critical scrutiny of the pursuit of absolute power and control over nature.

In *Metamorphoses* (1994), the Latin poet Ovid portrays Midas as someone who, upon realizing the negative consequences of his desires, including, in earlier accounts, the transformation of his daughter into gold, begs to be liberated and is ultimately purified in the Pactolus River. Mary Shelley retains the arc of regret, but amplifies it symbolically; her version emphasizes the renunciation of material power, and the ethical stance of the protagonist, who ultimately chooses a life in communion with nature. Consequently, the play shifts the focus of the punishment onto inner transformation, aligning the myth with the Romantic critique of modern alienation.

In this way, the author updates an ancient myth and reallocates its meanings. Bacchus, presented as *'λευθέριος'* (the liberator), is both the giver of gifts and the agent of an ethical transformation—one that enables Midas to abdicate his power and reorient himself symbolically. Therefore, redemption does not occur through divine intervention, but through a conscious choice marked by loss. Through this interpretation, Mary Shelley transforms the myth into an allegory of subjective liberation from the traps of unlimited desire. By shedding new light on the classical narrative, she repositions classical tradition as a space for moral reflection and cultural critique, thus reaffirming its relevance in the face of modern tensions.

3 The (Mary) Shelleyan Reading of Midas and Bacchus

Mary Shelley's mythological drama *Midas*, written in blank verse, was composed in 1820 while the Shelleys were residing in Italy. The play was not accepted by English children's magazines as she had hoped, and was not published until 1922 by Koszul. Featuring two lyrical poems by Percy Shelley, the play depicts the musical competition between Apollo and Pan, King Midas's intervention, and his subsequent transformations—from the moment he was given donkey ears to the infamous gift of turning everything he touched into gold. Since its publication, critics have devoted more attention to Percy Shelley's poetry than to Mary Shelley's dramaturgy. However, since the 1990s, this trend has begun to reverse,

with scholars such as Richardson (1993) and Pascoe (2003) turning to Proserpine and Midas as key figures in their proposed mythical revisions.

Mary Shelley referred to her work *Midas* as a little mythological comic drama written in verse. From a young age, she was an avid reader, and her deep familiarity with classical literature is evident in the complete title of her famous novel, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818). In fact, her favourite authors included Hesiod, Homer, Ovid, and Virgil (Thompson, 2008). *Midas* reflects this rich intertextual heritage, showcasing her extensive knowledge of Greek and Roman references, particularly those found in Ovid's Metamorphoses.

Initially, *Midas* engages with gender debates, as it incorporates two poems by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a genre traditionally associated with male poets, within the blank verse structure crafted by Mary Shelley. According to Richardson (1993), lyric poetry was linked to male authorship, whereas everyday or domestic poetry was considered more appropriate for women. The structure of *Midas* reflects this division: while Percy contributed lyrical poetry, Mary composed her play in blank verse, employing a literary style characteristic of 19th-century writers. Although, as Cox asserts:

> Mary Shelley's Midas and Proserpine - importantly, written partially in collaboration with her husband - continue the [Hunt] group's collective project by crafting a mythological diptych that indites on stage the forces of oppression. Midas is a powerful attack upon the money-getting […] The curtain rises on a pastoral world where even Midas is engaged in "rural tasks". However, Midas is almost immediately distracted by the appearance of Apollo with "crown of gold", "gold … on your silken robes", "gold-inwoven sandals", and "golden lyre" (Cox, 1996, p. 49-50).

The play is based on the mythological tale of Midas from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Consisting of 15 books containing around 246 narratives about the origins and transformations of gods, humans, and nature, the work recounts the tale of Midas in Book XI, verses 85–193. While maintaining this mythical structure, Mary Shelley inverts the order of events and inserts new symbolic layers. The first act depicts the comedy

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of the donkey's ears and Apollo's subsequent punishment after Midas favors Pan's music. The second act features the encounter with Silenus, Midas's desire for the golden touch, and his final transformation.

Silenus, a satyr follower of Bacchus, appears drunk in the forest and is welcomed by Midas into his palace, a gesture that goes beyond simple hospitality and is part of a ritualistic logic originating from the Orphic tradition: "Orpheus had initiated Silenus and Midas into the orgiastic rites, and thus, the Phrygian king welcomed his guest with a feast that lasted ten days and ten nights. Afterwards, he returned Silenus to Bacchus" (Maraschin, 2014, p. 3, own translation).[2] In his first appearance, the faun is described by Mary Shelley as:

> Asph. He is a queer old dog,
> Yet not so laughable. 'Tis true, he's drunk,
> And sings and reels under the broad, green leaves,
> And hanging clusters of his crown of grapes. —
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 58)

This image evokes the traditional depiction of the drunken and jovial satyr, a companion of Dionysus—God "commonly imagined as roaming at the head of a revel-rout of followers, some semi-divine and some human, Satyrs, Seilenoi and nymphs […]" (Hard; Rose, 2004, p. 175)—who is often associated with indulgence and drunken wisdom. However, Mary Shelley uses this representation to explore deeper themes, as "he was in fact a god of the fertility of nature; and even if he tended to become a wine-god and god of ecstasy principally, he was never restricted to that sphere [… being] a god whose epiphany subverts the norms of everyday morality and civic society" (Hard; Rose, 2004, p. 175-6). Though Silenus initially appears as a comic character, his presence in the play anticipates the contrast with Midas's insatiable pursuit of wealth and its power, as subsequent analyses will show.

The following narrative details Sillenus's return to Bacchus and his generosity towards the king.

[2] "Sileno e Midas haviam sido iniciados por Orfeu nas orgias, por isso o rei frígio recebe o seu hóspede com uma festa que dura dez dias e dez noites. Depois, devolve Sileno a Baco" (Maraschin, 2014, p. 3).

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> Asph. I spoke of old Silenus;
> Who having missed his way in these wild woods,
> And lost his tipsey company—was found
> Sucking the juicy clusters of the vines
> That sprung where'er he trod: —and reeling on
> Some shepherds found him in yon ilex wood.
> They brought him to the king, who honouring him
> For Bacchus' sake, has gladly welcomed him,
> And will conduct him with solemnity
> To the disconsolate Fauns from whom he's strayed.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 60)

The satyr's reception not only reinforces the king's generosity, but also suggests an attempt to access the sacred dimension of Dionysus through his proximity to the god's agents. In the Orphic tradition, living among liminal beings—such as Silenus, who passages between the grotesque and the wise—represents the possibility of symbolic initiation, one that grants access to truth through drunkenness, excess, and the transgression of rational boundaries. Midas's benevolence, therefore, is not innocent: he seeks to extract wisdom and power from a figure who embodies both animality and archaic knowledge. To achieve this, the king creates an atmosphere of recognition:

> Silen. (very drunk) Again I find you, Bacchus, runaway!
> Welcome, my glorious boy! Another time
> Stray not; or leave your poor old foster-father
> In the wild mazes of a wood, in which
> I might have wandered many hundred years,
> Had not some merry fellows helped me out,
> And had not this king kindly welcomed me,
> I might have fared more ill than you erewhile
> In Pentheus' prisons, that death fated rogue.
>
> Bac. (to Midas) To you I owe great thanks & will reward
> Your hospitality. Tell me your name
> And what this country is.
> […]
> Midas, you are my friend, for you have saved

> And hospitably welcomed my old faun;
> Choose your reward, for here I swear your wish,
> Whatever it may be, shall be fulfilled.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 60-66)

In this context, Bacchus emerges as a mediator between the visible and the invisible, as "the god who sends ecstatic madness which disrupts the ordered" (Bremmer, 1990, p. 100). In gratitude for Midas' hospitality in welcoming Silenus, Bacchus offers the king the opportunity to make a wish, establishing a dynamic of exchange between mortals and gods. This interaction highlights the importance of *xenia* (hospitality) in ancient Greek culture, where hospitality was regarded as a sacred virtue that was often rewarded by the gods. The granting of a wish to the king, under the condition of prudence, marks a liminal moment in which the divine utterance not only offers a gift, but also tests the level of awareness of the one who requests it:

> Bac. Pause, noble king, ere you express this wish(.)
> Let not an error or rash folly spoil
> My benefaction; pause and then declare,
> For what you ask shall be, as I have sworn.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 61)

By ignoring Bacchus's advice, Midas reveals his greed and inability to comprehend the symbolic value of the gesture. He fails the ritual initiation dimension, choosing the literal meaning of gold instead of the metaphor of inner transformation. At this point, Mary Shelley cleverly subverts the heroic logic of ascension myths, revealing the king as a tragicomic figure incapable of grasping the true meaning of Dionysian power. Despite the warning, Midas responds with ambition:

> Mid. What [!] may I choose from out the deep, rich mine
> Of human fancy, & the wildest thoughts
> That passed till now unheeded through my brain,
> A wish, a hope, to be fulfilled by you?
> Nature shall bend her laws at my command,
> And I possess as my reward one thing
> That I have longed for with unceasing care.

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> […]
> Let all I touch be gold, most glorious gold!
> Let me be rich! and where I stretch my hands, [51]
> (That like Orion I could touch the stars!)
> Be radiant gold! God Bacchus, you have sworn,
> I claim your word, — my ears are quite forgot!
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 61-62)

This request is not just a desire for material wealth; it reflects an ideology centered on the possession, objectification, and domination of reality. Midas does not seek beauty, wisdom, or pleasure; he wishes to transform the world into a lifeless substance. Gold, a symbol of absolute value in the social imagination, appears here as a metaphor for the reduction of diversity to uniformity and of life to stagnation. By placing this choice in the hands of the king, Mary Shelley creates a symbolic scene representing the failure of modern desire. Through this, the author offers a scathing critique of the Enlightenment subject and the emerging capitalist model, which views the world as a resource, nature as a storehouse of wealth, and the human touch as an instrument of exploitation.

As promised, Bacchus grants Midas his wish:

> Bac. Yes, thoughtless man!
> And much I fear if you have not the ears
> You have the judgement of an ass. Farewel!
> I found you rich & happy; & I leave you,
> Though you know it not, miserably poor.
> Your boon is granted, —touch! make gold!
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 62)

By granting the wish with grief, Bacchus not only fulfils the role of the mythological god; he assumes the archetype of the initiator who witnesses his disciple fail his first trial. His speech carries irony, compassion, and melancholy: he recognizes that Midas did not comprehend the nature of his *dádiva* (gift), and, because of this, his destiny is to suffer. His concession is not a punishment, but a consequence. The touch that transforms everything into gold, far from being a desirable wish, reveals itself as an ontological poison, for what was supposed to generate life now only petrifies it. Such responsibility falls perfectly upon Bacchus,

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for, after all, he is the "[…] God of the seasonal winter festivals, of the sap of plants and wine, of the stirring of the forest, and of the very cultic behaviour that excites mortal men […]" (Torrano, 1996, p. 122-3, own translation).[3] Bacchus' response reflects the patterns of threat and return. By desiring material goods through the negation of the natural world, Midas confirms traditions narrating the god's entry into a community, the resistance he encounters, and the resulting consequences, culminating in the acknowledgment of his power and divinity, as will be analyzed further.

Moreover, the strong connection between the god and theatrical performance is evident, as Mary Shelley also employs the dramatic form in her writing.

> There is thus a twofold analogy between the nature of Dionysos and the nature of theatrical performance. Dionysos is a permanently dual god, being at once Greek and eastern, masculine and feminine. His relationship to human beings is marked through and through by the mystery of an absence and the intensity of a presence. […] Greek tragedy similarly calls into question and blurs the essential polarities of familial and civic identity by presenting human beings in a troubled light, by raising questions about the relationship between the doer and the deed and between thoughts, words, and acts […]. (Dowden, Livingstone, 2011, p. 142)

In *Midas*, Mary Shelley demonstrates how a myth can be adapted to reflect contemporary concerns, particularly those of the Romantic era, such as the conflict between nature and civilization, and the critique of material values. Engaging with ancient sources, the author maintains the classical narrative core while creating a work that functions as social criticism and philosophical reflection on the human condition. Therefore, the interdisciplinary field of classical reception offers a framework to examine the transformation of ancient texts and myths as they move

[3] "[…] Deus das festas sazonais de inverno, da seiva vegetal e do vinho, do frêmito da floresta, e do próprio comportamento cultual que empolga os mortais homens […]" (Torrano, 1996, p. 122-3).

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through various historical, cultural, and artistic contexts, an approach that underlies the analysis presented here.

That said, it is believed that Midas's gift results in sensory deprivation, which sharpens Mary Shelley's criticism: the desire to attribute value to everything destroys the value of the experience itself. The curse of the golden touch, which turns food and wine into sterile matter, can be interpreted as the radicalization of the modern project of controlling nature—a project that, according to the author, inevitably leads to dehumanization. Midas's alienation is not only physical, but also sensorial and existential. Deprived of senses, textures, and pleasure, he becomes a spectral figure, a symbol of the decadence of material accumulation as a means of achieving happiness. The departure from Bacchic ecstasies, wine, communion, and pleasure represents the rupture with the very vital essence that Dionysus symbolizes.[4]

> Mid.: Alas! I cannot bite! as it approached
> I felt its fragrance, thought it would be mine,
> But by the touch of my life-killing lips
> 'Tis changed from a sweet fruit to tasteless gold,
> Bacchus will not refresh me by his gifts,
> The liquid wine congeals and flies my taste.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 66)

The above passage clearly illustrates Mary Shelley's critique of greed and materialism as forms of both physical and spiritual alienation. This rupture with sensibility is dramatized through the loss of Bacchic ecstasy, characterized by bodily celebration, drunkenness, eroticism, and connection with natural cycles. Bacchus, "God of wine and inebriation, of mystical ecstasy ('*mania*'), and of the subversion of ordinary identity […]" (Ribeiro Jr., 2010, p. 61, own translation),[5] primarily represents an openness to alterity, the otherness within ourselves, and to irrational

[4] In the play, the god of wine and revelry is referred to as *Bacchus*, the Roman name. However, in this paper, he is also called *Dionysus*, which is his original Greek name. Both names refer to the same deity.

[5] "Deus do vinho e da intoxicação etílica, do êxtase místico ('mania') da subversão da identidade normal […]" (Ribeiro Jr., 2010, p. 61).

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creation. Deprived of wine, taste, and communion, Midas is excluded from the Dionysian life force. He becomes a gold-covered automaton, incapable of nourishing himself—a powerful metaphor for the modern human condition, in which wealth accumulation comes at the cost of connection with the sensory and emotional dimensions of the world.

> Mid. No more, thou slave!
> Gold is my fear, my bane, my death! I hate
> Its yellow glare, its aspect hard and cold.
> I would be rid of all. — Go bid them haste.
> (Exit Lacon.)
> Oh, Bacchus! be propitious to their prayer!
> Make me a hind, clothe me in ragged skins —
> And let my food be bread, unsavory roots,
> But take from me the frightful curse of gold.
> Am I not poor? Alas! how I am changed!
> Poorer than meanest slaves, my piles of wealth
> Cannot buy for me one poor, wretched dish: —
> In summer heat I cannot bathe, nor wear
> A linen dress; the heavy, dull, hard metal
> Clings to me till I pray for poverty.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 67)

This alienation gradually deepens until the king is driven to despair and begs for relief. Midas's plea is not only for the curse to be undone, but also for him to be reconnected with reality. His suffering is both physical and symbolic: he has been exiled from the realms of pleasure, nourishment, and fertility—the very things that Bacchus represents.

In the final movement of the narrative, the god hears Midas's prayers and ultimately decides in his favor:

> Zopyr. The sacrifice is made, & the great God;
> Pitying your ills, oh King, accepted it,
> Whilst his great oracle gave forth these words.
> "Let poor king Midas bathe in the clear stream
> Of swift Pactolus, & to those waves tran[s]fer
> The gold-transmuting power, which he repents".
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 67-68)

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Bacchus's instruction to bathe in the Pactolus River should not be seen merely as a functional antidote. It is a ritual gesture of purification that forms part of an initiatory logic leading to communion with the gods. The river represents a return to the origin through its flow, symbolizing rebirth and the dissolution of the ego: by submerging himself, the king abdicates material power to rediscover the cyclical movement of life. Shelley's critique of modernity, therefore, reveals itself to be deeply philosophical; at stake is not only desire, but also the civilizing model that privileges dominion and control over flow, and gold over water. Thus, the ritual bath in the Pactolus symbolizes a physical, spiritual, and symbolic transformation. As a purifying element, water holds the power to restore inner harmony, as Brandão observes: "Dionysus and his follower ran, pursued by the priest, toward a river. This is clearly an allusion to some form of ritual bathing, either as a preliminary or a conclusion to a religious ceremony" (Brandão, 1987, p. 116, own translation).[6]

Consequently, the purification episode culminates in a moment of redemption and reconciliation. This ritual represents more than a magical reversal of the curse; it symbolizes the adoption of a new ethos grounded in the rejection of accumulation and the revaluation of sensibility: nature, the body, aesthetic experience, and communion with the cycles of the natural world. By submerging himself in the Pactolus River, Midas completes the Dionysian rite of reintegration into the symbolic order of organic life. This renunciation of the instrumental logic of the world echoes the fundamental ideas of Romanticism, particularly the search for a non-hierarchical relationship between the individual and nature.

The following scene of delivery and gratitude, in which Midas promises annual festivities and sacrifices to Bacchus, marks a turning point in the play. This signifies not only religious devotion, but also a realization: the king, having been transformed by the experience of privation, recognizes Bacchus not merely as a gift-giver, but as a symbol of a new possible order: a Dionysian ethic of impermanence, celebration,

[6] "Dioniso e seu séquito corriam, perseguidos pelo sacerdote, em direção a um rio. Trata-se, como é óbvio, de uma alusão a alguma prática de banho ritual, como preliminar ou conclusão de uma cerimônia religiosa" (Brandão, 1987, p. 116).

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and reconnection with natural rhythms. In this sense, Midas's rebirth transcends the classical morality of divine punishment, as Mary Shelley constructs a narrative of transcendence rather than condemnation. The king who renounces the palace, gold, and rigid forms of wealth becomes an archetype of the subject who, having touched the abyss of excess, returns to the earth. Gold is replaced by the purple of grapes, cold marble by the warm green of leaves and moss, and golden cutlery by brown wood. The symbolic inversion is complete—and profoundly Romantic.

> Mid. Oh joy! Oh Bacchus, thanks for this to thee
> Will I each year offer three sucking lambs—
> Games will I institute — nor Pan himself
> Shall have more honour than thy deity.
> Haste to the stream, — I long to feel the cool
> And liquid touch of its divinest waves.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 68)

Unlike more moralizing versions of the myth, in which punishment is final and reinforces the status of the transgressor, Mary Shelley offers a regenerative reading: Midas is capable of transformation. This interpretation is grounded in contemporary approaches from Classical Reception studies, which view myth as dynamic and mutable, allowing it to engage in dialogue with both the past and the present. Furthermore, such a framework enables a displacement that transcends specific cultural, social, and political contexts, wherein different audiences and authors reappropriate classical texts to address their own concerns. As Martindale (1993) explains, interpretation is always tied to reception: there is no "pure" access to the ancient text, only historically and culturally situated reinterpretations. Thus, this reformulation of the myth aligns with Mary Shelley's broader project of reimagining Antiquity through contemporary lenses attuned to critical engagement with symbolic and political structures. Though brief and aimed at a young audience, the play clearly exemplifies classical reception as an ethical re-signification, whereby ancient material is adapted to illuminate modern concerns, in this case, the value of simplicity over greed, and the return to nature in contrast to a masculine arrogance driven by accumulation and appropriation. This

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departure from the tragic solemnity of the ancient myth also enables the quasi-pedagogical tone of Shelley's work.

With regard to the literary context in which the author was situated, Abrams (1971, p. 92) notes that Romanticism establishes a metaphysics of the organic whole, in which a return to nature represents a form of healing from modern fragmentation and alienation: "an individual confronts a natural scene and makes it abide his question, and the interchange between his mind and nature constitutes the entire poem, which usually poses and resolves a spiritual crisis". The king who once sought to transform the world into gold, a dead and homogeneous substance, now turns toward the multiple, the ephemeral, the living. The gesture is profoundly Romantic: Mary Shelley reimagines the myth as an allegory of modern deviation and the possibility of reconciliation with sensibility and communion with nature.

This inflection also aligns with what Berlin (1999) identifies as the Romantic revolt against Enlightenment rationalism. Midas's abandonment of his golden, marble palace filled with ornaments and his decision to live in a leafy hut surrounded by greenery and moss dramatizes a rupture with the ideals of progress, technical reason, and domination over matter. Through this, Mary Shelley constructs a utopian image that reflects Romantic critiques of industrial modernity: true power lies not in controlling nature but in listening to its rhythms and sharing in its vital energy. The author then presents the most symbolic moment of the play: Midas's rebirth. He rejects the luxuries of the palace, gold and artificial objects, all that once represented his former identity, and begins to celebrate the beauty of the natural world, viewing it no longer as a possession but as a shared mystery. This vision constitutes a re-enchantment of the world, in the sense McGann (1983) attributes to Romantic poetry: art as a means of restoring the value of the sensible in a world disenchanted by utilitarianism.

In this new state, the character finds joy in the colors of fruits, in the aromas of flowers, in the palette of nature that surpasses any mineral wealth. The celebration of the grape, the countryside, and simple objects, wooden cups and plates, rustic garments, and beds of straw, constitutes a true Romantic liturgy of existence. Like Bacchus, Midas is reborn:

> Mid. I see again the trees and smell the flowers
> With colours lovelier than the rainbow's self;
> I see the gifts of rich-haired Ceres piled
> And eat. (holding up the grapes)
> This is not yellow, dirty gold,
> But blooms with precious tints, purple and green.
> I hate this palace and its golden floor,
> Its cornices and rafters all of gold: —
> I'll build a little bower of freshest green,
> Canopied o'er with leaves & floored with moss: —
> I'll dress in skins; — I'll drink from wooden cups
> And eat on wooden platters—sleep on flock;
> None but poor men shall dare attend on me.
> All that is gold I'll banish from my court,
> Gilding shall be high treason to my state,
> The very name of gold shall be crime capital.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 69-70)

Midas, who once sought to dominate nature through wealth, now embraces a pastoral life, finding true treasures in the land, fruits, wood, and simplicity. This transformation reflects a return to the Romantic ideal of harmony with nature. In this context, Mary Shelley's work takes on deeper meanings. The adaptation of the myth serves as a critique not only of materialism but also of patriarchal power structures. Instead of a definitive punishment for Midas, the story offers a redemption shaped by his conscience. Unlike some figures in classical mythology who face eternal torment, Midas experiences a journey of renewal—he reawakens to the beauty of nature, its cycles, and the pleasures of bucolic existence.

> Mid. Look at those golden columns, those inlaid walls;
> The ground, the trees, the flowers & precious food
> That in my madness I did turn to gold: —
> Pull it all down, I hate its sight and touch;
> Heap up my cars & waggons with the load
> And yoke my kine to drag it to the sea:
> Then crowned with flowers, ivy & Bacchic vine,
> And singing hymns to the immortal Gods,
> We will ascend ships freighted with the gold,

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> And where no plummet's line can sound the depth
> Of greedy Ocean, we will throw it in,
> All, all this frightful heap of yellow dirt.
> Down through the dark, blue waters it will sink,
> Frightening the green-haired Nereids from their sport
> And the strange Tritons—the waves will close above
> And I, thank Bacchus, ne'er shall see it more!
> And we will make all echoing heaven ring
> With our loud hymns of thanks, & joyous pour
> Libations in the deep, and reach the land,
> Rich, happy, free & great, *that we have lost*
> *Man's curse, heart-bartering, soul-enchaining gold*.
> (Shelley, 2021, p. 70-71, own emphasis)

This approach also aligns with a feminist and symbolic reading of the myth. Frosch (1996) argues that *Midas* and *Proserpine* reflect Mary Shelley's literary vision more than Percy's, especially in how the male characters are challenged by feminine or natural forces that unsettle them. In *Midas*, the king is ridiculed for his ambition and ultimately realizes the futility of his desire. His reconnection with Bacchus marks a return to wholeness—an integration of reason and instinct, culture and nature, masculinity and fertility. Mary Shelley's choice of Bacchus is particularly revealing. As Brandão points out, Dionysus is "an essentially agrarian god, god of vegetation, god of generative powers" (Brandão, 1987, p. 123, own translation),[7] deeply tied to the earth's cycles and transformation. His presence here is more than mythological; he stands for opposition to rigidity, excessive rationalism, and absolute control. Dionysus is fluid, liminal, and invites metamorphosis:

> Dionysos was in essence the god who comes: he appears, he manifests himself, he makes his presence known. He was an itinerant epiphany; all geography was arranged to suit his mobile activities. Present everywhere, he had no home. […] always on the move and perpetually changing form, [he] was never sure of being recognized as he went from

[7] "Um deus essencialmente agrário, deus da vegetação, deus das potências geradoras" (Brandão, 1987, p. 123).

> town to village wearing the mask of a strange power, unlike any other. There was always the chance, moreover, that he would be denied membership in the race of gods. Roving was too much his natural condition to permit his arrivals, his comings and goings, to be confused with those of the other gods (Detienne, 1989, p. 5).

At the same time, the play can be seen as a subtle dramatization of the tensions between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in Nietzsche's (2007) philosophy. The king seeks to control the permanence of gold, which distances him from the fluid and transformative Dionysian existence. His curse of turning everything into gold is an eternal expression of the Apollonian desire to stabilize the unstable. By retelling the myth of Bacchus, *'Ἐλευθέριος'* (the liberator), Mary Shelley revisits Antiquity through different lenses. Her version critiques 19th-century industrial and patriarchal society, while also suggesting a spiritual and symbolic rebirth linked to the earth and the ecstasy of nature.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Midas* demonstrates that classical myths can serve not as static inheritances but as dynamic instruments of cultural reflection. Through the lens of Classical Reception studies, the play reveals itself as an act of what Lorna Hardwick (2003) calls transformative mediation, a process through which ancient material is reinterpreted in a new ideological landscape, producing meanings that speak directly to the concerns of modernity. Mary Shelley's adaptation of the Midas myth is not merely reproductive; it actively reconfigures the moral, aesthetic, and symbolic coordinates of the classical narrative, bridging past and present through a dialogue that is both critical and regenerative. As Anastasia Bakogianni (2016, p. 98) clarifies:

> Classical texts are often incomplete, disputed, recovered from a variety of sources, and reinterpreted by each generation of classical scholars. Classical reception focuses on the way in which the classical world is received in subsequent centuries and, in particular, on those aspects of the classical sources that are altered, marginalized, or neglected. […] Reception is about our dialogue with the classical past, whatever form

> that takes, and as a two-way conversation rather than as a monologue prioritizing one or the other.

This dialogical understanding of reception illuminates Mary Shelley's *Midas*, a work that reshapes Greco-Roman myth not as static inheritance but as living conversation. In the drama, the encounter between Bacchus and Midas becomes precisely such a dialogue between materialism and sensibility, excess and transformation, echoing the broader Romantic project of re-enchanting the ancient world through a Romantic ethic of simplicity and communion with nature and a Dionysian aesthetic of metamorphosis, vitality, and liberation from rational control.

In *Midas*, Bacchus emerges as a multifaceted and contradictory figure. He gives Midas a gift, witnesses his downfall, and ultimately offers him the possibility of healing. As the god of wine and penitence, representing ecstasy and revelation, Bacchus challenges the Enlightenment belief in absolute control. He promotes an ethics of surrender and connection with nature, encouraging an awareness of human limitations. Rather than simply rewriting the myth to criticize material greed, Mary Shelley offers a symbolic alternative: a life in harmony with nature, the body, and the reality of impermanence. As her favorite poet noted, "nought may endure but Mutability" (Shelley, 1880).[8] In this context, her king becomes more than just a tragic figure; he represents the alienated modern individual who rediscovers the sacred through renunciation and connection with the divine aspects of nature.

4 Final Remarks

Midas reveals Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's sustained interest in Greco-Roman mythology, a recurrent and structuring element in her dramatic work. In revisiting the myth of Midas, she does not simply return to Antiquity but rather reconstructs it—imbuing it with new meanings and placing it within a modern debate on power, greed, and redemption. Through the lens of classical reception, the author demonstrates how

[8] Cf. Shelley, 1880.

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ancient myths can be reappropriated in a critical manner, serving as vehicles for ethical, political, and existential reflection in contemporary contexts.

Thus, Bacchus's presence reinforces the ritualistic and regenerative dimension of the play. He is not merely a god who bestows gifts and foretells curses; he also catalyzes consciousness and acts as a mediator between excess and moderation, between ruin and redemption. By reclaiming this mythical figure, Mary Shelley imbues him with symbolic meanings that challenge the limits of Enlightenment reason and normative masculine power. Her engagement with classical reception, therefore, is not passive: she reshapes the myth to question structures of domination, propose new forms of subjectivity, and create an aesthetic that weaves together poetry, politics, and philosophy. In this sense, *Midas* becomes a vehicle for social and existential critique, and his golden touch, once a symbol of desire and power, becomes a call for reconnection with the natural world and inner freedom. Shelley's critique invites reflection on the moral principles that drive individuals towards accumulation, offering a broader commentary on modern excess and the urgent need to redirect our gaze towards more ethical and sustainable ways of living.

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