A serpent, seeing the helpless head on the beach, coiled
to attack, but Apollo appeared, drove it away, and, in pique,
turned the serpent to stone, its mouth still yawning and ready
to strike at the dead head. Enough, the god thought, is enough.
The shade, free now to flee to the land of shades below,
could recognize those landscapes it passed through before, as it searched
through all those ashen faces for Euridyce's dear face—
which he at last beholds. He takes in his eager and airy
arms her beloved wraith, and side by side they walk
through the blessed fields. He leads a step ahead and looks back
again and again to see how each time she follows him still.
A happy ending, in part. But Bacchus, not at all pleased
at those women whose crime had lost him the songs of his sacred bard,
turned those women to trees. They felt their feet catching hold
in the earth, and they writhed and twisted, only to snag the more surely,
as a bird, caught in a snare that the clever trapper has set,
flapping, fluttering, helpless, is only entangled tighter.
The bark grew up their calves and thighs. Their bellies were wood,
their breasts and shoulders, oak, and their arms were leafy branches.
This was only a start. Bacchus, still angry, disliked
being in Thrace and left it, abandoned the place for Tmolus,
whose vineyards he much preferred. With his old coterie, he settled
there by the Pactolus' banks, in which gold had not yet been found.
But among his satyrs and merry pranksters, where was Silenus,
his jolly tosspot pal? Missing? How could that happen?
It turns out that Phrygian peasants have taken him captive, tied him
with vines and wreaths, and brought him into their king's palace.
It isn't at all surprising. He's one of the usual suspects,
whatever the problem may be. That king, however, is Midas,
himself one of Bacchus' train. He'd been brought into the cult
by Orpheus himself—and the king recognized his fellow
enthusiast, laughed, freed him at once, and threw a grand party,
which lasted a good ten days. The eleventh, he sent Silenus
back to the court of the god who was also his foster child.
Bacchus, delighted to see the old reprobate, was disposed

to grant Midas a favor—a minor miracle, something
to do at parties perhaps. He invited the king to choose
something amusing. The king, whose fate it was to misuse
this happy chance, overreached himself in his greed and requested
whatever he touched might turn at once to glittering gold.
This wasn't a good idea, as the god understood, but he'd promised
and had no choice. In sadness, he nodded his head and granted
this terrible gift. The Phrygian king was delighted and started
home. On the way he played with his wonderful power, testing
to see if it always worked. He touched one thing and another,
broke off the branch of an oak and saw the green twig turn
yellow and gleam like a jeweler's bauble. He picked up a stone,
and it was a nugget of solid gold. Or a clod of earth?
That, too, was instantly gold. A sheaf of wheat, and it changed
to gold in his hand. An apple was gold—you would think it had come
as a gift of Hesperus' daughters from their magical tree. He touched
the wall of a house and it, too, turned gold. A pillar? Even that
was solid gold. It was lovely, elegant fun! He tried pouring
water over his hands, and the cascade turned into precious
metal there in midair. He was rich beyond all dreaming,
could not even think what to hope for, or what to touch next.
He would need a definite plan, a reasoned course of behavior. . . .
But that would all come later. He ordered his servants to serve
a great feast, a banquet to celebrate this momentous
occasion with different kinds of meats, and breads, and wines.
But abruptly his mood changed as he reached for a fragrant loaf
and watched it turn from sweet and doughy to unappetizing
gold. A morsel of chicken? It chilled, congealed, turned hard,
and was also gold. And the wine he tried to sip turned metal.
Hungry, thirsty, afraid, he had nothing to eat or drink
but these goldsmiths' simulacra of food, these vitrine victuals,
a nightmare menu of wealth to break one's teeth on, and heart.
He might as well have tried to nibble the golden plates
on which the food turned golden as soon as he touched it. Rich,
he is nonetheless impoverished, starving, hates his power,
and no longer wants the blessing that turns out to be a curse.
He lifts his hands to the skies and prays to Bacchus for pity,
for pardon, for some remission from what otherwise will be
his certain death. "I have sinned," he admits. "I am truly sorry.
Save me from myself!" The gods may be hard of hearing,
but they are not stone-deaf. Sometimes they hear contrition,

as Bacchus did, and restored him to what he had been before.
"Go to the stream that flows by the town of Sardis and climb
to the water's source. Plunge yourself into that cleansing flow,
and there you may wash away your greed and the gilt of your
guilt."
This the king did, and the power he'd asked for was taken away.
No more did whatever he touch turn to precious metal,
but the strange gift leeched out into the stream, which still
produces gold from that vein at the source, and nuggets appear
along the watercourse and even in fields alongside it.
Midas, now a changed man, hated the thought of wealth.
He lived in the woods and the fields, simplifying his life
and worshiping Pan. In wisdom and peace, you might think—
but no,
stupid is always stupid and never likely to change.
Poor benighted Midas was fated to get into trouble
again, for that was his only talent. The mountain Tmolus
looms over the sea, with the slopes of Sardis on one side
and, on the other, the lesser hill that they call Hypaepae,
where Pan liked to come to play his musical pipes to admiring
listeners, mostly the nymphs, who heard and beamed approval.
Delighted, Pan took on airs, assumed his playing was matchless
and that not even Apollo could make better music than his.
A rash and preposterous boast, but, having made it, he could not
back down with any good grace. A contest? someone suggested.
Of course! Why not? And Pan proposed the judge be Tmolus,
the ancient lord of the mountain in whose benevolent presence
he'd done so well for so long. Tmolus appeared on his seat
to hear the musicians vie with each other—he shook his ears
clear of trees and bushes. His forehead was decked with oak leaves,
and here and there hung acorns, which jiggled whenever he
spoke.
"I am prepared," he announced. "You may begin when ready."
Pan performed at his best, his simple songs on the pipes
that quite delighted our Midas, who happened to hear the recital.
When Pan's last number's echoes died away, the judge
turned to the Sun to invite Apollo to do what he could.
The golden head of the god was wreathed in Parnassus' laurel,
and his cloak, which swept the ground, was splendid with Tyrian
purple.
In one hand he held his lyre inlaid with jewels
and ivory panels. The other strummed with an ivory plectrum.
He struck a pose and sang; the contest and day were his,

all his, as Tmolus announced, as he signaled to Pan to put down
the rude pipes and bow his head to the master, his better.
It wasn't at all a close call, and all agreed with the judge—
all, that is, but our poor misguided Midas, who railed
that the referee was deaf, the contest was fixed, and Pan
had been wronged and robbed. Apollo, not at all pleased, decided
that Midas' ears were defective and needed immediate treatment,
whereupon they commenced to grow longer, larger, grotesque
rabbit ears at first, and then they were donkey ears,
shaggy, twitching, and terribly funny. Midas was shamed
and tried however he could to hide these monstrous otic
appendages. He affected a sizable purple turban
to cover his asinine ears. No one would ever suspect!
Only his hairdresser—he, that slave who tended his tonsure,
was sworn to keep the secret. He kept, at least, a straight face,
but had to tell someone, unburden himself of this rich
bêtise. He trusted no one, but went deep into the woods,
dug a hole in the ground, and spoke to the mute brown earth,
imparting
the great god's marvelous joke. Then he filled up the hole
and walked back home. You would think a secret buried that way
would stay buried, but no, the reeds that grew in that spot
at the end of the season whispered into the winds the truth
of what they were so deeply persuaded had happened. And winds
scattered the news to the normal ears of the rest of the world.
Satisfied now, Apollo ascends into air and flies
from Tmolus across the sea to the Hellespont—the strait
of Helle, daughter of Nephele—where he comes to earth in
the land
Laomedon rules, the son of Ilus. Hard by the sea
on a promontory, an ancient altar stood to Jove,
who thunders throughout the world. There Apollo discerned
Laomedon, who had started building himself the mighty
citadel of Troy. An enormous undertaking.
Apollo approved it and even resolved to help. He and Neptune
together put on the guise of mortals and offered themselves
as masons who, for a price, would build Laomedon's wall.
Done and done, and the walls rose up, but the king refused
to pay what he'd promised and owed. Indeed, he swore by
the gods
that he'd never promised and didn't owe them a thing. The gods
would not suffer such lies, and Neptune decided to give
a fair reward to the king for his deviousness. The sea