

King Midas 2

Length: 7 min 50 sec

Summary

King Midas comes across Pan in a forest and is entranced by his music. When Pan boasts he is a better musician than Apollo, the god of music, Apollo challenges him to a musical contest, with a mountain, Tmolus, as the judge. Apollo wins the contest but Midas, who has overheard the contest, claims that Pan is much the better musician. In anger Apollo punishes the king by giving him the ears of an ass. Midas tries to hide them under a turban but has to share his secret with his barber. Burdened by his secret, the barber whispers it into the ground only to have the reeds reveal, when the winds blow through them that 'Midas has donkey's ears, the king has the ears of an ass.'

Starting-points

- Try asking what the class remembers about King Midas from the first story. What adjectives might they use to describe him? What did he do wrong in the first story (*he didn't think before he spoke*)? Has he learnt his lesson?
- This is also a story about keeping a secret. Is sharing a secret ever justified? Why are secrets so difficult to keep? Note: this is a good opportunity to speak with students about how a secret that makes them uncomfortable or worries them should always be shared with someone they trust.

Pause points

1 min 19 sec: *'I am a finer musician even than golden Apollo when he plucks his golden lyre.'*

- What have we learnt about Pan so far? (*He is wild and boastful.*)
- How is Midas affected by Pan's music? (*He is 'enchanted and entranced' by it.*)
- What do you think will happen next?

2 min 18 sec: *... from either side of the mountain two huge, grey, stone ears unfolded.*

- Which two instruments do Apollo and Pan play? (*The lyre, pan-pipes.*) Whose music do you think Midas is likely to prefer and why?

4 min 10 sec: *And with the frown of Apollo King Midas found himself suddenly strangely changed.*

- What do you think has happened to King Midas? What might Apollo have done to him?

6 min 1 sec: *And out of the top of his head two twitching, bristling, grey donkey's ears pointed up at the ceiling.*

- How do you think the barber reacts when he sees the king's ears?
- Do you think he will keep the secret? If not, to whom do you think he will tell the secret and why?

Questions for discussion

As with Midas 1, you might find this story is good for discussing character. What are the adjectives the children would use to describe the four main characters in the story and why? You may find the following helpful:

- Apollo (*vain, proud, vengeful, powerful*)

- Midas (*rash, courageous, consistent, naive*)
- Pan (*wild, boastful, skilful, confident, repentant*)
- the barber (*loyal/disloyal, greedy, simple, over-confident*)

It is not surprising that King Midas prefers Pan's wild music to the orderly and harmonious music played by Apollo since he is a worshipper of Dionysus, the god of drinking and drunkenness, wild music and wild dancing. But he should have learnt to think before speaking and, while it may be his honest opinion that Pan's music is better than Apollo's, perhaps he should have learned from Pan's response to losing the contest — he dropped to his knees and lowered his head — and accepted the mountain's decision.

The barber is very quick to say that he can keep a secret, even before he knows the nature of the secret, and he is even readier when he knows how well he is going to be paid. But such is the nature of the secret that he simply cannot keep the news to himself.

The story also provides an opportunity to examine the hierarchy of the gods.

- How are the gods portrayed? In what ways do they differ from each other?
- What is the difference in *status* between Apollo and Pan?
- Should/might Pan have been punished for his boastfulness?
- Should the barber have been punished for not keeping his promise not to share the secret?

Apollo, the god not only of music but also of archery, prophecy and the sun, is one of the Olympian gods, the most powerful deities in Greek mythology. Pan, on the other hand, is a woodland deity and in appearance, like Silenos, he is part human and part animal. He is immortal but not able to influence human affairs to the same extent as Apollo or Dionysus. His name survives today: it is his unseen presence that can cause **panic** (from the Greek, *panikos*), an irrational terror that can come upon a person suddenly and unexpectedly, especially in wild and lonely places.

Suggested activities

- Use the description of the barber struggling to keep the secret to explore figurative language. ('But it was as though he had a mouse pouched in his cheek. Every time he opened his mouth he thought the secret was going to jump out.') We talk about bursting to tell someone something: ask the children to come up with other verbs or phrases that convey what it feels like to have an exciting secret, something that you want to share with others but you know you cannot (e.g. details of a surprise party).
- Give the children the paragraph from the transcript which describes Pan's and Apollo's music. On the basis of the storyteller's description, whose music do they prefer? Does Pan or Apollo's music have any modern equivalent? Ask the children to highlight onomatopoeic words in the description of Pan's music and suggest other onomatopoeic words the storyteller could have used to describe sounds from nature. They can also look at the similes the storyteller uses to describe Apollo's music. Which of the two descriptions do they think is more effective?
- Write an article for a newspaper gossip column with the headline, 'The truth behind the king's turban', with direct quotes from the barber.
- Ask the children to imagine that they are judges on a television talent competition. They must choose their favourite artist or group and then set out the reasons why their artist or group is the best.