

Punishment through Neglect: The Absence of Physical Metamorphosis in Ovid's Daedalus and Icarus

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, published around 8 CE, is one of the most well-known collections of myths from the ancient Roman world. Ovid used the theme of transformation throughout the epic to tie many disparate stories together. Even today, the myth of Daedalus and Icarus remains one of the most famous out of the *Metamorphoses*, often used as a cautionary tale against over-confidence and pride. Despite its notoriety and its inclusion among myths of metamorphosis, there does not seem to be a transformation in this story. Some scholars have argued that there is a physical metamorphosis, others, that the metamorphosis is metaphorical, and still others, that it is of a psychological nature. This paper first proves the lack of any physical transformation before providing an explanation for such an absence. *Metamorphoses* cannot take place without both a divine being and their approval, and Daedalus lost the favor of the gods when he pushed Perdix from the Acropolis; as such, he is no longer worthy of receiving a metamorphosis, even to save his own son.

Ovid's highly selective use of metamorphic vocabulary (Anderson 1963) throughout this episode demonstrates that although the flight of Daedalus and Icarus may have seemed metamorphic to mortal onlookers (Davisson 1997), there was no real physical metamorphosis. A physical metamorphosis can only be carried out by, and with the approval of, gods and other divine figures. Although there are many types of, and reasons for, these transformations, all which take place within the *Metamorphoses* are carried out in this way. Ovid ensures that no gods play any part in the myth of Daedalus and Icarus; since there are no gods, there can be no metamorphosis. Ovid excludes the gods not only by refraining from mentioning them, but by

rooting the myth in real geographic locations in the Mediterranean rather than in divine spaces, in which many other myths are set.

The reason behind the absence of the gods and their unwillingness to help lies in Daedalus' criminal past. Daedalus intended to kill his nephew, Perdix, out of envy for his inventive nature. Daedalus' actions unwittingly led to a metamorphosis, when Minerva saves Perdix by turning him into a partridge (Pavlock 1998). This rescue has two effects on Icarus' fate: first, that Daedalus has used up any goodwill from the gods, and no longer deserves any favors. Second, that the gods allow Daedalus to be punished by losing his own son to the same fate he had intended for his nephew. Ovid makes clear parallels between the two scenes by framing one as a successful metamorphosis, and the other as unsuccessful (Faber 1998), showing that while the gods are more than capable of saving a life with an instantaneous metamorphosis, they have deliberately chosen to abandon Daedalus and his son.

There is no solid textual evidence to support a physical transformation of Daedalus and Icarus. Ovid uses almost no metamorphic language, and the absence of any gods in the story means that no metamorphosis is possible. The responsibility for Icarus' tragedy falls to Daedalus, having been punished for his own misdeeds. Ovid's story incorporates many themes found throughout the *Metamorphoses*: subversion of natural order, punishment for such subversion, and parallels between synonymous characters like Icarus and Perdix. This paper takes a slightly wider look at the context of this passage and its relation to other myths within the *Metamorphoses*.

Works Cited

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