

Technology and the Artist: Ovid's Daedalus and Riordan's *The Battle of the Labyrinth*

The myth of Daedalus looms large in Rick Riordan's *The Battle of the Labyrinth* (*BoL*), the fourth book in the Percy Jackson & The Olympians series. Daedalus and the Labyrinth are two important characters in the book, embodying ideas about art, technology, the ethics that govern them, as well as the dangers they pose to the environment and to humanity more generally. In this paper, I argue that Riordan makes use of Ovid's Daedalus and Icarus episode in *Metamorphoses* (8.152-235), along with the subsequent story of Daedalus and Perdix (8.236-59). Many of the themes that Ovid articulates in these two episodes are shared by Riordan's narrative: the problem of hybris, the absence of the divine, crime and punishment. Moreover, by recasting the Daedalus myths, Riordan shares with Ovid larger concerns regarding art and technology, their affinities, possibilities, and limitations. Both authors use the myth to assert a constant preoccupation with the problem of human intervention in nature and the fragility of ethical behavior in humans.

Riordan's strategy of adapting Greek myths successfully combines the gratification of children with the mission of educating them on various issues ([Murnaghan 2011:349](#)). Much like the ancient authors, Riordan treats myths as available for manipulation in a way that appeals to his audience, while simultaneously reclaiming and redefining the Classics as popular stories ([Murnaghan 2011:343](#)). Yet Riordan closely follows the sophisticated narrative of Ovid's *Met.* 8 that presents Daedalus as a brilliant inventor, a *homo faber*, who commits hybris (8.188-89; [Hoefmans and Hoeffmans 1994:141](#)). Moreover, he is unable to control his jealousy for his talented nephew Perdix (8.250-51) and is punished with the death of his son, Icarus ([Faber 1998:84](#)). Scholars have also identified the philosophical underpinnings of Daedalus'

technological achievements, which go back to Hesiod and the Prometheus myth ([Hoefmans and Hoeffmans 1994:143](#)).

Similarly, Riordan, presents his Daedalus as the consummate artist: “He picked up his project. It was so beautiful, my heart leaped—metal wings constructed from thousands of interlocking brown feathers.... Part of me knew it could never fly. It was too heavy... But the craftsmanship was amazing. Metal feathers caught the light and flashed thirty different shades of gold” (*BoL*,128; see also 277). His portrayal follows closely that of Ovid, which continues the story of Daedalus beyond the death of Icarus, by relating his previous murder of Perdix precisely because of jealousy for the young man’s talent (*BoL*, 171-75). Daedalus’ morality is called into question and so is the product of his artistic endeavor.

Moreover, just as in Ovid—and Greco-Roman thought more generally—the Labyrinth stands for artistic creation, so for Riordan the Labyrinth symbolizes technology taking a life of its own away from human control: “Daedalus set his sword on the workbench. ‘The maze is no longer mine to control, Annabeth. I created it, yes. In fact, it is tied to my life force. But I have allowed it to live and grow on its own. That is the price I paid for privacy.’ ‘Privacy from what?’ ‘The gods,’ he said. ‘And death. I have been alive for two millenia, my dear, hiding from death’” (*BoL* 282). Though technology may be able to confer exceptional powers to humans, it cannot substitute the need for a moral compass, as Daedalus’ complex and flawed character vividly demonstrates. The idea is further expounded in the related theme of Pan’s death, who represents the end of wild nature (*BoL* 314). Sadness permeates Riordan’s book, based on loss and longing for human connections, and aims to galvanize its characters into protecting the endangered environment.

The paper ends with an evaluation of Riordan's educational goals, against his commercial enterprise which is the result of his novels' success ([Morey and Nelson 2015:247](#)). A sensitive reader of Ovid's engagement with the artist and his work, Riordan in the *BoL* contemplates the relationship between art and technology while also seeking to carve a place for his art in the modern world.

Bibliography

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