

Ovid's Metamorphoses, Bk VIII, lines 200-216. Commentary

- u u - u u - - - u u - u u - x impedi ebat o pus. //post quam manus ultima coepto 200 - u u - u u - - - u u - u u - x imposi ta est, gemit nas //opi fex lib ravivit in alas - u u - - - - - u u - u u - x ipse su um cor pus //mo taque pe pendit in aura. - u u - - - - - u u - u u - x instruit et na tum// “medi o” quē “ut limite curras, - u u - u u - - - - - u u - x Icarē,” alit “mone o, // ne, si de missior ibis, - u u - - - - - u u - u u - x unda gra vet pen nas, //si celsior, ignis adurat: 205 - u u - u u - - - - - u u - x inter ut rumque vo la. //nec te spec tare Bo oten - u u - u u - - - - - u u - x aut Heli cen iube o //stric tumquē O rionis ensem: - u u - u u - - - - - u u - x me duce carpe vi am.” //pari ter prae cepta vo landi - u u - - - u u - - - u u - x tradit et igno tas //ume ris ac commodat alas. - u u - u u - u u - u u - u u - x inter o pus moni tusque //ge nae madu ere se niles, 210 - u u - u u - u u - u u - u u - x et patri ae tremu ere //ma nus. dedit oscula nato - u u - u u - u u - - - u u - x non ite rum repe tenda su o, //pen nisque le vatus - u u - u u - u u - u u - u u - x ante vo lat com itique ti met, //velut ales, ab alto - u u - - - - - u u - u u - x quae tene ram pro lem //pro duxit in aera nido, - - - u u - - - - - u u - x horta turque se qui //dam nosas quē erudit artes 215 - u u - u u - - - - - u u - x et movet ipse su as //et nati respicit alas.	After the final handiwork was applied to the enterprise, The artisan unfurled both wings And chanced his own body to the quivering air And he instructs the boy; 'Icarus, hasten through the middle course And I warn you, lest, if you are too low The waves may weigh your feathers down, If too high, the flames may scorch you. Fly between both. I order you not to look at Bootes or Hercules and the brandished sword of Orion. Take the route I dictate. As he delivers the instructions for flying He straps the untried wings to his shoulders. Between working and admonishing the old man's cheeks grew wet And the hands of the father trembled. He gave his boy a never-to-be-repeated kiss. Aloft on his wings he flies ahead, and fears for his companion, similarly fledged. From on high he beckons that tender child into the abode of the air And encourages him to follow, and teaches him the ruinous skills And gyrates his own wings and looks back at his boy.
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Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC -18 AD) was born in Sulmo, 90 miles east of Rome. His father wanted him to become a lawyer. However, he lacked the ruthlessness needed to be a politician, his inclination and skill lay in poetry. He studied in Athens, Asia Minor and Sicily and returned to Rome to enjoy success as a poet in the new order established by Augustus. Horace and Propertius were among his friends though he never met Virgil. Exiled to Tomis on the Black Sea in 8 AD for an unknown misdeemeanour he died there ten years later unrecalled.¹

'As a story-teller and a guide to Greek myth and Roman legend he was valued by later Latin writers, he was read, quoted and adapted in the Middle Ages and he was the favourite Latin poet of the Renaissance.'²

His principle works are the *Heroides*, *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria*, *Tristia* and the *Metamorphoses*. The latter, a work in 15 books recounts a history of the world from creation to the deification

1 Carey, (*Vox Romana, a Latin Anthology*), 1970, p113.

2 Carey, 1970, p114.

of Julius Caesar. It is written in hexameter, the metre of epic verse as exemplified in Virgil's Aeneid. Debates continue about its 'epic' status. As it is only the hexameter verse known in the works of Ovid we can assume that he regarded it as such though many describe this work as an *epyllia*, a collection of short narrative poems, in this case strung together.³ The metre is regular (see scansion above). In line 206 the dactyl in the fifth foot helps to scan 'Booten'. However, in line 214 the diphthong in 'aera' in the fifth foot may need to be split into two vowels to create the expected dactyl. Line 215 is the only one to begin with a spondee when Daedalus offers encouragement.

Daedalus & Icarus

The extract above is from Book 8, lines 200 to 216 and describes Daedalus and Icarus taking to the air on homemade wings. The entire episode runs from line 183, '*Daedalus interea Creten longumque persus...*' to line 235, '*...et tellus a nomine dicta sepulti*', though the story of Daedalus himself continues. Daedalus is the architect of the Minotaur's labyrinth, among other things. He marries a slave-girl, Naucratis, and Icarus is their son.

In the commentary that follows I propose to focus on the salient motifs and language used by Ovid. It is aimed at readers looking for more context to the allusions in this passage.

Lines 200 - 202.

'*manus ultima*' is usually translated as 'final touches' or similar.⁴ I have offered 'final handiwork' to approximate the Latin. The use of '*coepto*' for enterprise or work hints at the possibility that this 'last hand' may also be the a 'beginner's hand'.

The description prior to '*postquam manus ultima coepto imposita est*' shows the child Icarus playing with the feathers and making impressions in the wax with his thumb. Ovid may be contrasting the child's 'toy' wings, with the final/fatal hand his father applies, fatal because once the master engineer has dismissed the child's efforts his own genius constructs a functioning flying device. Yet the fact that the child can 'soften the yellow wax with his thumb' shows the inherent fatal flaw in the construction.⁵

E J Kenney gives reasons for 'throw' for '*libro*' rather than 'balance etc'.⁶ I have offered 'chance' as this conveys a little more the effort of trying to keep a weight balanced. Hollis elaborates on this image of Daedalus hovering unsteadily.⁷ Arguably the similarity between '*libro*' and '*liberi*' (children) suggests a first attempt and lack of skill.

Line 203.

Women are never far from the mind of Ovid. Here we see him use the word '*natus*' for 'son'. It is possibly his favourite word for son in this story. It is repeated at line 211 and 216. It occurs frequently. It is related to the verb '*nascor*', to be born. '*Natus est*.' 'He was born'. '*Filius*' would be the obvious choice. Ovid shies away from '*puer*' which could indicate innocence (as used to describe the child Ceres favours in Fasti IV. 538-554) or '*adolescens*' which could suggest impetuosity. In this hyper-male environment where an engineer instructs his apprentice in a job of work, Ovid refers back to the vessel of the womb, the female from whom life - a life about to be lost - comes forth.

3 Lee, ed. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I), 1992, p15.

4 Loeb, Franks Justus Miller, (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*).1977, p421

5 Raeburn, (*Metamorphoses, a New Verse Translation*), 2004, p303.

6 Kenney, (*A Commentary on Ovid's Metamorphoses*), 2024, p146.

7 Hollis, (*Metamorphoses, Books 8*), 1970, p60.

Lines 203 - 206.

Icarus is advised to take the middle course. The word itself hangs in the middle of the line, a neat placement by the poet (suspended here between its own wings of inverted commas; "*medio*", a device Ovid would not have used). This middle way is a path between the forces of two gods; Helios and Poseidon, Fire and Water. One could read this as Daedalus giving his son life-advice in general, to steer a course between the extreme of Aggression (Fire) and Desire (Water). The term in this context evokes Aristotle's Golden Mean or even the The Middle Way of the Buddha.⁸

Line 204

Kenney notes '*curras*' meaning 'to travel' only exists in classical poetry.⁹ Cassell's Dictionary gives 'hasten' which is surely the intention Ovid wishes to convey here.¹⁰

Lines 206 - 207.

Daedalus and Icarus fly from Crete in a north easterly direction.¹¹ Icarus is told to avoid certain stars. The Ptolemaic system is the world view. These stars are proximate. Hollis mentions that the constellations in question; Bootes, Hercules and Orion were used by sailors for navigation and that is how they are being employed here.¹² However, as the sun is out the stars can't be seen. This is rather a poetic device by Ovid and the reference would have made sense to an ancient audience to whom the night sky was very familiar. Bootes has a club (often a scythe) and spear, Hercules has a bow and arrow, Orion a sword (*ensem strictum*); all life-threatening to the fledging Icarus. Kenney translates 'with his sword drawn' which emphasizes the danger¹³. Hollis notes that the 'drawn sword' ('naked sword'¹⁴) of Orion might be dangerous but dismisses it, not taking into account the other constellations.

A caveat may be added here. Orion is usually depicted holding a club and shield.¹⁵ The sword of Orion is in his belt..so not 'drawn' or 'naked'.¹⁶ Ovid uses "*destricto ense*" in *Fasti* 2.99. to indicate a drawn sword. It is possible that here Ovid is using the verbal adjective from *stringo* in the sense of *constringo* to mean a sword held tight to the body, the *gladius*, a short broad sword which would align very well with its place in the constellation of Orion. Ovid may be using '*ensem strictum*' to employ extra syllables or to place '*strictum*' beside '*iubeo*' in the text, evoking the severity of the order given by Daedalus.

Lines 208 -211

During the business of constructing the escape the father's cheeks 'grew wet'; '*genae maduere (maduerunt)*'. A harsh choice by Ovid. He doesn't use '*flebilis*' or '*fleo*', '*lacrimans*' or '*lacrimo*'. The act of weeping itself is omitted and we are left with the unmanly result. The father cannot hide his love for his son. His hands tremble as a final kiss is bestowed. Both Kelley and Hollis note Virgil's '*bis patriae cecidere manus*' (*Aen.* vi. 33).¹⁷

Line 209

'*ignotas umeris accommodat alas*'. Context makes it clear that he is fixing the wings to Icarus's shoulders not his own. (Daedalus is already airborne several lines earlier.) However,

⁸ Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, 'Buddha of Berenike among the most exciting discoveries of 2023'.

⁹ Kenney, 2024, p147.

¹⁰ Simpson, 1977, p163.

¹¹ Graves, 2002, v1, p291.

¹² Hollis, 1970, p60.

¹³ Kenney, 2024, p147.

¹⁴ Raeburn, 2004, p304,

¹⁵ Hislop, 2014, p135

¹⁶ Philip, 1965, p13.

¹⁷ Hollis, 1970, p60.

considering the importance of personal pronouns in Latin and the fact that word order is not a priority (see comment on line 216 below) it may have been prudent to add one here.

Innes translates 'ignotas' ('unknown') as 'novel', suggesting a desirable new thing.¹⁸ I have translated as 'untried' to illustrate the unknown quality.

Lines 212 -214.

Both Hollis and Kenney [comment on this simile](#) appearing in A.A. ii, 65-66. Hollis further mentions its adaptation by Valerius Flaccus in his *Argonautica*, vii, 375-7.¹⁹

Line 215.

Hollis and Kenney comment on the unusual use of 'erudio' as against 'doceo'. We can note that Ovid favours 'tougher' verbs (see *instruo* in Line 203) in describing Daedalus' methods. (The latter was the man who hurled Talos, his talented apprentice of whom he was jealous, to his death from the Acropolis.²⁰) 'Doceo' conveys the idea of learning in the liberal arts not technical skills. Thus 'docti - doctorum' = the learned.²¹

'Damnosas' hints that Daedalus already knows the fatal outcome. Cassell's dictionary lists 'self-injuring' as a meaning for 'damnosus' taken from an occurrence in Plautus (d. 184 BC).²² This famous playwright would have been well-known to Ovid. Ovid wishes to convey that to know how to operate the wings themselves is self-destructive. Knowledge of flight is a form of hubris, an affront to the gods, and therefore punishable.

Line 216

'Suas' separated from 'alas' suggests that Daedalus may be looking back at the boy's wings as well. The line, famously, is lifted wholesale from A. A. ii. 73.²³ Kenney calls it a 'superfluous addition'.²⁴ See comment on line 209 above for omission of 'suas'.

Much could be said about the *perdix* section that follows and human souls transferring to birds which is an ubiquitous trope across cultures, but space precludes.²⁵ Suffice to say that Daedalus's tears may be due to a premonition that through assuming the form of a bird his son is predestined to enter the realms of shades presently and that the remainder of his own days will be spent under that shadow.²⁶

Ovid Bibliography

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18 Innes, (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*), 1955, p184

19 Hollis, 1970, p60 & Kenney, 2024, p147.

20 Howatson, (*The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*), 1989, p167.

21 Simpson, 1977, p200.

22 Simpson, 1977, p166.

23 Hollis, 1970, p60.

24 Kenney, 2024, p147.

25 Tsang Nyon Heruka, 1982, pp. 162-173. The consciousness of a boy killed in a horse-riding accident passes into a pigeon.

26 Reddit.com, *The Souls of the Martyrs will be Housed in Green Birds*, [Accessed 10 May 2025]

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Evidence The primary evidence of the extract itself is very well integrated into the commentary, and is supported by evidence drawn from elsewhere in the Met. as well as from wider ancient poetry and a range of secondary scholarship. While a few of the secondary sources are perhaps a little unconventional, the use of scholarship is largely appropriate and well-integrated. At times it would be nice to see greater engagement with the view of scholars cited, rather than simply quoting their opinions, however relevant.

Summary The audience for this commentary is quite broad, on the one hand, given that readers of varying levels of Latin would benefit from its content, and yet focussed nonetheless. The only exception to this is the opening, which feels directed at the complete newcomer to Ovid, and is therefore a little at odds with the more sophisticated level of engagement with the text elsewhere. Nevertheless, the student has set themselves a brief and largely adhered to it very effectively.

Analysis The approach in this commentary has allowed for a good deal of textual interpretation by the student, and the arguments are convincing. There is a good understanding of foreshadowing and thematic build-up, and the commentary explores important aspects of lexis, word placement, and poetic choices. While more could be said in places about particular techniques, there is a clear focus to the commentary and this makes it of specific use to any reader approaching the text. It is especially pleasing when the commentary gives not only information regarding the more esoteric aspects of the passage, but also explains their purpose in the poem. In places, however, I would have liked to see a little more opinion given where other scholars are cited. Greater delving into the use of allusion, while challenging at this level, would have taken the analysis to a higher level still.

Citation While there are places where additional reference to further reading would benefit the reader, the references both to the text itself and the secondary scholarship are largely easy to follow and correctly formatted. It isn't usual to number the bibliography (it could be confusing given the numbered footnotes) but the list of works cited is otherwise well-presented.

Format The line-by-line approach to the text is easy to follow, and the remit is observed throughout, so that there is little extraneous material within the commentary itself. However, I would argue that some of the introductory text covering Ovid's life and work is superfluous, and the words might better have been used to give the background on the themes explored within the discussion of the poetics.

Language The Latin has been translated with significant thought as to the meaning in context, and this is