

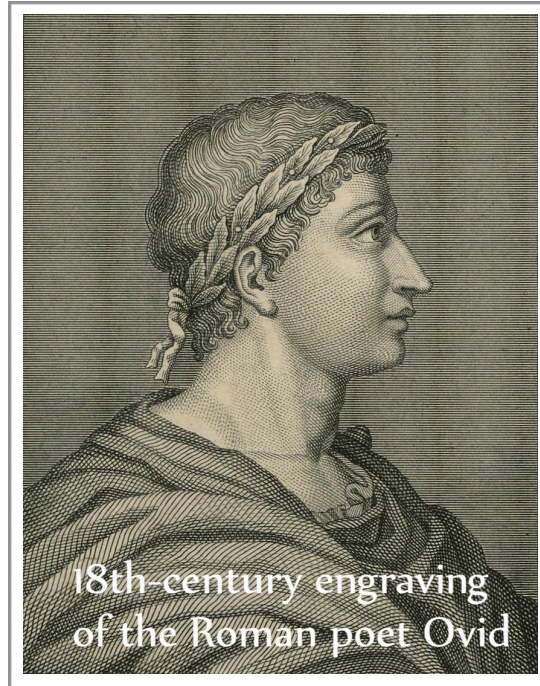
## Ovid's Account of Icarus<sup>1</sup>

Enclosed by the sea, Dædalus abhorred Crete and his extended exile and longed to see his native soil. "Minos," he said, "may watch the land and the sea, but at least the skies are still beyond his reach. That will be the way of our escape. Let Minos have everything besides. He does not rule the air."

So he spoke. And he turned his thoughts to arts unknown till then and varied from the course of nature. He arranged feathers in order, beginning from the least, the shorter ones succeeding the longer so that they looked as if they grew on an incline, just as the rustic pipe sometimes rises by degrees with unequal straws. Then he bound those in the middle with thread and the lowest ones with wax. And, so arranged with a gentle curvature, he bent them to imitate real wings of birds.

His son Icarus stood by his father, not knowing that he was handling what would become his own undoing. Sometimes with a smile, he caught at the feathers which the shifting breeze was ruffling. Sometimes he softened the yellow wax with his thumb. By his playfulness, he hindered the wondrous work of his father.

After he put on the finishing touch, Daedalus poised his own body on the two wings and hung suspended in the beaten air. He also gave a pair of wings to his son and said to him, "Icarus, keep to the middle path. If you fly too low, the water will clog your wings. If you fly too



18th-century engraving  
of the Roman poet Ovid

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<sup>1</sup> From Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Fable 3, Book 8, Lines 183–259. Translated by Henry Thomas Riley and edited by William Walter.

high, the sun's fire will scorch them. Fly between the two. And I warn you not to look at Boötes, nor Helice<sup>2</sup> or the drawn sword of Orion. Make sure you do what I say." Daedalus then fitted the untried wings to his son's shoulders. As he gave his admonitions and fitted his son, his cheeks were wet and his hands trembled. He kissed his son—a kiss which would be his last—and lifted up on his wings, took flight like a mother bird leading her tender young from the high nest into the air. Daedalus called to his son to follow, showing him how to use his marvelous invention. As he carried himself aloft on his wings, he looked back on those of his son.

A fisherman at his quivering rod, the shepherd holding his crook, and the plowman standing on the plough tail all beheld the two in the air and were astonished, thinking that each of the two was some kind of angel, comfortably navigating the air as if it were land. On the left hand they flew by Samos<sup>3</sup>—sacred to Juno—, Delos and Paros, and on the right they passed Lebynthus<sup>4</sup> and Calymne<sup>5</sup>, both known for their honey.

The boy, however, left his father's wise advise and flew more recklessly, and intending to reach heaven itself, pursued his course higher. The scorching sun soon softened the fragrant wax that fastened his wings and it melted. He shook his naked arms. Without his oar-like wings, he could no longer keep himself aloft. He called out to his father, but as he did so, he plunged head first into the sky-blue

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<sup>2</sup> another name of the constellation called the *Greater Bear* [Ursa Major], into which Callisto [an attendant of Artemis, or Diana, the goddess of the hunt] had been changed (Translator's note). According to one legend, Artemis had transformed him into the bear, but in another, Hera.

<sup>3</sup> This island, off the coast of Caria in Asia Minor, was famous as the birthplace of Juno, and the spot where she was married to Jupiter. She had a famous temple there. (Translator's note)

<sup>4</sup> This island was one of the Cyclades, or, according to some writers, one of the Sporades, a group that lay between the Cyclades and Crete. (Translator's note)

<sup>5</sup> This island was near Rhodes. Its honey is praised by Strabo. (Translator's note)

water, which received its name from him.<sup>6</sup>

The unhappy father, now no more a father, said, “Icarus, where have you gone?” But when he spied his son’s wings in the blue waters, he cursed his own craft. He buried his son’s body in a tomb, and the land was called from the name of him buried there. As he was laying the body of Icarus in the tomb, a bird beheld him from a branching holm-oak<sup>7</sup> and chirped with delight.



It was a partridge—one of its kind, never seen before and just lately made a bird. Its prattling was a grievous reproof to Dædalus. Ignorant of fate’s decrees, his sister had made him the teacher of her twelve-year-old son, who was eager to learn. It was Daedalus’s nephew Perdix, who, having observed the backbones of fish, cut a continuous row of teeth in iron with a sharp edge, and so discovered the use of the saw. He had been the first, too, to make a compass, by binding two arms of iron of equal length to one center. With the one arm fixed, the other arm could be moved to form

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<sup>6</sup> The island of Samos being near the spot where he fell, received the name of Icaria. (Translator’s note)

<sup>7</sup> Ovid here forgot that partridges do not perch in trees; a fact, which, however, he himself remarks. (Translator’s note)

a circle. The bird, singing with delight, was indeed his nephew Perdix<sup>8</sup>.

Envious of his nephew's inventions, Dædalus had once thrown him headlong from the sacred citadel of Minerva with the pretext that he had fallen by accident. But Pallas Athena, who looks favorably on ingenuity, received him and made him a bird. And, in the middle of the air, he flew upon wings. His strong genius, once so active, passed into his wings and into his feet and his name remained the same as before. Remembering its former fall, this bird does not aspire to the upper heights with its wings or make its nest in the branches and the lofty tops of trees, but flies near the ground and lays its eggs in hedges.



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<sup>8</sup> Ovid uses the name "Perdix" for Talos. *Perdix* is the Latin and scientific name for the partridge. In his work *Metamorphosis*, as the title implies, Ovid narrates the transformation of one thing into another. In this tale, Ovid explains the origin of the partridge, a bird that does not use its wings as most birds. (Editor's note)