

Kanye West's Transformation of the Myth of Icarus in "Wolves"

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Kanye West is a household name. Whether you have heard of him because of his award-winning music or through his frequent media controversies, it would be a difficult task to find someone who was unfamiliar with Kanye West. Kanye's latest studio album, *The Life of Pablo*, received widespread success and was streamed more than 250 million times in a period of just ten days. One particular song, "Wolves," was released more than a year before, and quickly became a fan favorite.¹ The song begins with an eerie wolf-like howling sound that instantly captivates the listener. "Wolves" explores an array of emotions, ranging from hope to fear to love. Ultimately, the song is about humility, as Kanye expresses frustrations at his own shortcomings and acknowledges his faults. Vic Mensa and SIA are also featured on the track, performing a respective hook and verse. Vic Mensa's hook reinforces the notion of Kanye's acceptance of his own imperfections by alluding to the well-known myth of Icarus. Vic unmistakably refers to this myth with the lines, "don't fly too high, your wings might melt, you're just too good to be true". Vic and Kanye then utilize the myth to emphasize the consequences of soaring too high, which in this case refers to Kanye's ample ego and hubris. Through the use of the first and third person perspectives, Kanye is able to articulate his own emotions as well as provide self-criticism. He expresses frustration at his arrogance and chastises himself for being "too wild." This theme of humility and self-reproach is advanced by the explicit Christian ideology used at the end of the song: "What if Mary was in the club, 'fore she met Joseph with no love." Kanye addresses his parents' disappointment with his childish arrogance: "If your

¹ For your convenience, lyrics have been provided at the end of this paper.

mama, if your daddy, knew how you turned out... you too wild.” The failure to live up to parental expectations is another common trope of the Icarus myth. By highlighting these specific aspects of the myth in his song, Kanye reinforces the idea of his ego and hubris leading to his downfall, and he reprimands himself for it. As Kanye’s target audience is well aware of his frequent media spectacles and his distasteful self-admiration, he is able to reimagine himself as a modern day Icarus in the context of his public celebrity. Thus, “Wolves” resonates with Kanye’s own life, and his acceptance of his own failings and hubris demarcates a moment of growth and maturity for Kanye, a sentiment his audience is eager to embrace.

The earliest known reference to the myth of Icarus comes to us in the form of a pottery fragment dating from mid-sixth-century-BCE Athens.² However, the earliest known literary mention of Icarus comes to us from the second-century-BCE Apollodorus, who recorded a handbook of Greek mythology entitled *The Library*.³ This means that while there is no singular surviving play or poem dedicated to Icarus, the myth was still in circulation and prevalent through oral tradition long before it was recorded as part of a larger collection. The myth has since been rewritten and reinterpreted by a variety of authors throughout the years, with “different authors emphasizing different aspects of the myth.”⁴ In summary, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, are imprisoned on the island of Crete. Daedalus, a master inventor, fashions a pair of wings for out of wax and feathers to escape. Before setting off, Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too high or else the sun would melt the wax and cause the wings to disintegrate. However, Icarus, being youthful and foolish, absentmindedly disregards his father’s warning and flies too close to the sun. Accordingly, Icarus’ wings melt and he plummets into the sea to his

2 Marks 2012.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

death as Daedalus can only watch in horror. Some accounts have Icarus intentionally disobeying his father,⁵ while others write it off as an innocent, but fatal, mistake.⁶ Perhaps the best-known reinterpretation of Icarus comes to us from Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*.

Ovid's version emphasizes Icarus' youthful ignorance and blatantly foreshadows his demise. Daedalus gives his son a “not-to-be-repeated kiss” and is “afraid for his companion” (*Metamorphoses* 294-6). Meanwhile, Icarus is described as “playfully getting in his father’s way” and being “unaware of any danger” (*Met.* 274, 269-70). His youth is highlighted by Ovid's description of the boy as a “fledgling,” a term that denotes his innocence and lack of experience (*Met.* 301). Ovid presents Icarus as deliberately disregarding his father's words: “he audaciously began to play and driven by a desire for the sky, deserts his leader and seeks altitude” (*Met.* 311-3). It is Icarus' own youthful arrogance and ambition that cause his demise. This sentiment is echoed by a majority of other ancient authors. Apollodorus merely states that “the infatuated Icarus disregarded his father's injunctions,” but it is clear that in this variant, Icarus chooses to disobey his father (*Epitome.* 1.13). Diodorus is more forthcoming in his criticism of Icarus, declaring that Icarus “disembarked the island in a reckless manner” and attributes Icarus' death to “the ignorance of his youth” (*Library* 4.77.6, 4.77.9). However, Diodorus fails to specify whether Icarus was deliberately defying his father or was just merely forgetful. It is left up to the reader to interpret whether Diodorus portrays Icarus as intentionally rebellious, simply foolish, or a bit of both. Diodorus is intentionally vague, hoping to give a more encompassing account of attitudes towards the myth. Like any good historian, Diodorus takes the objective approach and lets his reader make his or her own inference. The author clarifies that he is indeed presenting a

5 See Ovid and Apollodorus, to be discussed later.

6 See Diodorus and Pausanias, to be discussed later.

myth: “Now as for these matters, even though the myth is a tale of marvel, we nonetheless have thought it best to not leave it unmentioned” (*Lib.* 4.77.9). Another author, Pausanias, tries to rationalize the myth by claiming that Daedalus and Icarus actually attempted to escape via specially designed sails for boats that Daedalus invented. Pausanias merely says that Icarus was a “clumsy helmsman” and leaves it at that (*Descriptions* 9.11.5).

Before we can begin to analyze how Kanye adapts a well-known Greek myth in a modern rap/pop song, we must first deconstruct how the myth was used in its own time. It is a common misconception that myths were used for mere entertainment because “they have too much cultural significance.”⁷ They have the ability to “teach moral or cosmic lessons,” which allows them to promote and reinforce ideologies on a societal level.⁸ They often “avoid happy endings,” serving a cautionary purpose as does the Icarus myth.⁹ By failing to listen to his father's warning, Icarus fails what Dowden describes as an “initiation ritual,” in which the protagonist undergoes a trial into joining adulthood.¹⁰ Whether through arrogance or ignorance, by intentionally disregarding his father's words, an act that is universally understood as taboo, Icarus fails his initiation ritual and subsequently dies.¹¹ The obvious lesson imparted upon the reader or listener is that it is best to listen to one's father, and, if you don't, then you may die. It is also interesting to note that according to Dowden, these initiation rituals were frequently associated with wolves, such as the legend regarding the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus.¹² Whether or not Kanye knew this and deliberately made this thematic connection I am

7 Dowden 1992: 22.

8 Dowden 2011: 110.

9 Dowden 1992: 170.

10 Dowden 1992: 110.

11 Lipson 1982: 95 - “In many cultures, disobeying one's own father would be unthinkable.”

12 Dowden 1992: 110.

not sure, but I like to give him the benefit of the doubt. However, the myth goes deeper than reinforcing the already agreed upon cultural standard of listening to one's parents. Icarus is blinded by his youthful hubris. His ignorance through lack of experience is emphasized as his downfall: his arrogant ambition overwhelms the common sense of heeding his father's grave warning, resulting in his death. This is how modern scholars and audiences often interpret the myth: "Some writers have seen Icarus' fate as a warning for people to be aware of their limitations."¹³ Several millennia after the Icarus myth was first recorded, let alone circulated or created, humans still recognize and relate to its original message.

It comes as no surprise that Greek mythology is prevalent in our society. Just as it was able to thousands of years ago, it can still convey a moral message. Greek mythology is especially useful when teaching morality to children, and many of us are first introduced to Greek mythology in elementary school. In one teaching book for school children, the Icarus myth is renamed "The Voice of Experience".¹⁴ As well as stressing the importance of listening to one's parents, topics such as "parental authority, the youthful quest for knowledge and experience, and the adventure and lure of the unknown" are discussed.¹⁵ While ancient sources tend to focus on the parental aspect of the myth, modern sources frequently prioritize Icarus' adolescent desire to soar higher and explore. The *Credo Encyclopedia* on "Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology" states that the Icarus myth is synonymous with the "human desire to fly higher."¹⁶ The fact that an encyclopedia emphasizes this particular element of the myth indicates that it is a significant component of the collective modern interpretation. Dowden summarizes

13 Marks 2012.

14 Lipson 1982: 92.

15 Lipson 1982: 96-97.

16 Marks 2012.

this sentiment best when he says “The fall of Ikaros from the sky because he was flying too close to the sun teaches us about the difference between the wise retraining of older age and the recklessness of the young: wise old men fly safely through life, but young people too easily yield to the lures of the world, forgetting the truths they were taught, and take a hard fall.”¹⁷ This is precisely what Kanye West's “Wolves” is all about.

By incorporating a Greek myth into a modern rap/pop song, Kanye pays homage to the myth's beginnings in oral tradition. Like any other reinterpretation, the specific aspects of the myth that Kanye selects and transforms, alter the myth itself. By the very fact of adapting an ancient myth in a present-day song, Kanye has re-contextualized Icarus within an entirely new frame of reference: that of the contemporary genre of rap. Kanye has chosen to focus on the particular aspects of the myth that the modern world is most fixated on: parental disappointment and foolish ambition. These are unsurprising choices, as they allow Kanye to better connect with his audience. Since myths are able to promote and reinforce ideology, it makes sense that Kanye would choose to emphasize the specific characteristics of the myth that his audience would be most familiar with. Because of the prevalence of Greek mythology in modern society, any listener will instantly think of themes of disobedience and reckless abandon when they pick up on Kanye's allusion to Icarus. However, in reimagining himself as Icarus, Kanye goes beyond the ancient and modern understandings of the myth and transforms it into a tale of humility. By emphasizing the negative characteristics embodied by Icarus, and therefore himself as an extension of Icarus, Kanye is able to rebuke his own childish and arrogant behavior.

The most blatant and undeniable reference to the Icarus myth comes when Vic Mensa sings the hook for “Wolves.” He sings, “Don't fly too high, your wings might melt, you're much

17 Dowden 2011: 330.

too good to be true." As previously noted, the notion of flying too high and falling is a crucial facet of the modern interpretation of the myth. The reference to wings melting as a result of soaring too high is an unmistakable allusion to Icarus. Vic's vocals literally echo this sentiment. Vic sings the hook in what is known as declamation or word painting: the words that Vic sings mirror the melody of the song. As Vic sings about flying too high, the accompanying bass and synth slowly begin to rise in scale as well. When Vic concludes his hook with, "I'm just bad for you, I'm just bad, bad, bad for you," the bass immediately drops back down to a lower pitch, evoking a 'falling' sentiment and imagery as the wolf-like howling resumes. This sudden change in melody breaks the optimistic 'soaring' atmosphere and transitions the song back into the melancholy tune that is largely the theme of the song.

Although Vic's hook is the most obvious reference to Icarus, the song as a whole explores the emotions and morals prevalent throughout the myth. Kanye has taken a Greek myth and refashioned it for modern society with himself as a 21st-century Icarus. Like Icarus, Kanye's hubris has led to his downfall, and the song begins by exploring one's own self-induced agony in the aftermath. Kanye breaks the melodic wolf howling intro by crying, "lost out, beat up" – it is clear that he is in a state of despair. Kanye engages with the listener by directly addressing them as "you." He insinuates parental disappointment in their children's recklessness: "if mama knew how, how you turned out, you too wild, you too wild". Following this, Kanye ends his verse with, "and I need you now." Obviously, the pronoun in this sentence refers to one of Kanye's parents, presumably his mother, whom Kanye has repeatedly stated was a tremendous influence in his life.¹⁸ Kanye's concluding cry for help is reminiscent of Icarus' own demise. Ovid writes

18 Kanye's 2012 hit song "Clique" emphasizes the profound love Kanye that has for his mother and the impact her loss had on him: "Went through deep depression when my momma pass. Suicide, what kind of talk is that?"

that, “with his father's name on them, his lips are taken under by the deep blue sea” (*Met.* 319). The modern *Mighty Myth* classroom reader corroborates this image, portraying Icarus as calling out his father's name before he perishes: “Icarus began to cry out, 'Father, father, help me! I am falling!’”¹⁹ With this single line, Kanye draws a direct comparison between himself and Icarus.

Despite the fact that for most of the song Kanye seems to address the listener with the 'you' pronoun, the audience knows that Kanye is also referring to himself. Kanye has reinterpreted the Icarus myth with himself in the center of it. Thus, when Kanye says, “if mama knew how you turned out, you too wild”, he is speaking in the third person about himself. Kanye is channeling his deceased mother and expressing her disgust at seeing her son exhibiting such impetuous and self-destructive tendencies. This would not be the first time Kanye has invoked the spirit of his mother in his music. In his 2014 single, “Only One,” Kanye said that, “my mom was singing to me, and through me to my daughter.”²⁰ By invoking the spirit of his mother, Kanye is able to criticize himself more effectively with an outside lens, a perspective in particular that carries a tremendous amount of weight— Kanye is not one to invoke his mother lightly. Kanye, or rather his mother through Kanye, repeats the phrase “you too wild” eight times in the first verse alone, emphasizing Kanye's contempt for his own recklessness. SIA repeats the very same phrase six times, slightly adjusting it to say, “I was too wild.” The transition from the 'you' to 'I' pronouns indicates Kanye's own understanding and acceptance of his behavior. After having his mother rebuke him for it, over the course of the song, Kanye comes to realize that his conduct is impermissible. The overkill of the expression emphasizes Kanye's own disgust at his unruly actions.

19 Lipson 1982: 94.

20 Philips 2015.

Kanye's audience is well aware of his infamy for being 'too wild'. Kanye has frequently been criticized for being ill mannered, and he has developed a reputation for acting out. Kanye's most notable controversy was of course the 2009 Taylor Swift MTV Video Music Awards debacle, in which he interrupted the nineteen-year-old singer in the middle of her acceptance speech to commend Beyonce on having the “greatest music video of all time.”²¹ The incident blew up and Kanye immediately became one of the most hated men in America. Countless celebrities and critics slammed Kanye. His actions even prompted a comment from President Obama, who called Kanye, “a jackass.”²² Kanye has frequently commented on and apologized for his outlandish behavior. In 2010 at the MTV Video Music Awards, Kanye debuted his future hit “Runaway.” The song is an explicit follow up to the prior year’s incident. Kanye reproaches his own arrogance and disrespectful conduct, calling for a toast “for the douchebags, the assholes, and the scumbags,” a category that he makes no illusions that he is identifying with. The song was generally interpreted as an apology to Taylor Swift and returned Kanye to the favorable side of public opinion. Thus, when Kanye sings about being “too wild,” his audience immediately picks up on the underlying context behind his admission of guilt and sympathizes with him.

Like Icarus, at the root of Kanye's wild behavior is his hubris. Kanye's megalomaniac ego is well established and documented. Kanye has declared himself to be “the biggest rockstar on the planet,” “a creative genius,” and “the most influential person in footwear right now,” among other boastful claims.²³ In a *Time* magazine article entitled “The 100 Most Influential People,” entrepreneur and scientist, Elon Musk, proclaims, “Kanye West would be the first

21 “MTV Video Music Awards.” Music Television. September 13, 2009.

22 Pitney 2011.

23 Lowe Interview 2013.

person to tell you he belongs on this list.” However, Musk then continues on and defends Kanye, citing West's belief in himself as one of the reasons for his success. Kanye's desire to be the best is what pushes him to be such an outlandish and abrasive figure. Kanye is never afraid to voice his opinion and does so unapologetically. “Who am I to have an opinion?” Kanye rhetorically asks in one interview. “You're Kanye West,” responds the interviewer. “Exactly.”²⁴ Kanye's success and popularity have given him a platform to speak his mind. Because of his notoriety and status, Kanye does not feel the need to sugarcoat his beliefs: he communicates them unadulterated and unfiltered. Kanye's opinion of himself is so high, that at times he believes he can do whatever he wants, regardless of the consequences. “When someone comes up and says something like, ‘I am a God,’ everybody says, who does he think he is? I just told you who I thought I was: A God.”²⁵ This flagrant arrogance is what led him to interrupt a nineteen-year-old country singer during her acceptance speech. However, Kanye is “aware of the dynamics of his celebrity,” and knows that he must attempt to refine his behavior.²⁶ This is the self-reproachful and humbled side of Kanye that we see in “Wolves:” a young man aware of his shortcomings who attempts to reconcile with them.

Kanye has re-contextualized the myth of Icarus within his own life. He has demonstrated an attempt to soar ever higher fueled on by his own self-admiration and ego. Like Icarus, he fails to listen to the cautions of his parents and acts out inappropriately, causing him to fall from his 'throne.’²⁷ However, Kanye is not so arrogant as to ignore his own faults and he acknowledges them. In 2014 he was featured on a song with Rick Ross, entitled “Sanctified”, where he raps,

24 Breakfast Club Interview 2015.

25 Lowe Interview 2013.

26 Brown 2013.

27 Kanye West released a collaborative album with Jay-Z in 2011, entitled *Watch the Throne*.

“God sent me a message, said I'm too aggressive. Really!? Me!? Too aggressive!?” His rhetorical question is accompanied with a sarcastic tone, indicating that Kanye is well aware of his own behavior and media persona. In the more recent “Wolves,” we see a pacified Kanye, one who is almost repenting for his sinful behavior. This idea of contrition is strengthened by the Christian ideology that Kanye embeds in the end of the song: “Cover Nori/Saint in lamb’s wool.” Even the way in which Kanye performs the song demonstrates his penitence. Rather than rapping traditionally in the manner that made him famous, Kanye opts to pursue an alternate route of artistic expression by singing through Auto-Tune. Kanye has said, “I don't like Auto-Tune, I need it,” elaborating that it allows him to bend his voice in a manner that he cannot.²⁸ Thus, the simple act of performing through a questionable technique in order to please his listeners must certainly be considered a humbling moment for Kanye. Kanye’s docility and reverence for his audience are also demonstrated through the production and release of “Wolves.” While its initial 2015 performance included Vic Mensa and SIA, its subsequent 2016 release replaced these artists with another verse by Kanye, much to the outrage of fans. Kanye listened to his audience and addressed their concerns, admitting his mistake by tweeting, “Ima fix wolves.”²⁹ The final release of the song saw the return of the fan-beloved Vic and SIA features, exemplifying Kanye’s ability to criticize himself as well as his fervent desire for self-improvement.

Kanye uses the Icarus myth as a metaphor for his own desire to fly ever higher and surpass all those around him. Kanye has claimed that not only does he want to be the force behind creating a billion dollar company, but that he wants to “be the anchor of the first trillion

28 Breakfast Club Interview 2015.

29 West Twitter 2016.

dollar company” as well, no easy feat to accomplish.³⁰ Like Icarus, Kanye's dreams are fueled on by his own hubris and youthful exuberance and he is destined to fall. The closing lines of the song, “we surrounded by the fucking wolves,” indicates that Kanye has already fallen from his untouchable platform. He realizes that he too is human, susceptible to the same faults and vices as anybody else. However, unlike Icarus, Kanye has not yet failed, and his dream still persists. He has learned from his mistakes and is ready to correct them. And while it is unlikely that he will start the first trillion-dollar company, his influence in the music world and pop culture continues to grow and flourish.

Kanye has completely reworked the Icarus myth, expanding upon the well-established themes of reckless abandon and youthful arrogance in order to criticize himself. In doing so, he transforms the myth into a vessel for self-reproach and penitence. Kanye’s reinterpretation of the Icarus myth evokes sympathy from his audience, who is ready to give Kanye another chance.

30 Lowe Interview 2013.

“Wolves”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64m8yBzeOkk>

[Hook: Kanye West]

Lost out, beat up
Dancin', down there
I found you, somewhere out
'Round 'round there, right right there
Lost and beat up
Down there, dancin'
I found you, somewhere out
Right down there, right 'round there

[Verse 1: Kanye West]

Lost and, found out
Turned out, how you thought
Daddy, found out
How you turned out, how you turned out
If mama knew now
How you turned out, you too wild
You too wild, you too wild
You too wild, I need you now
Got to love you
Found you, found you
Right now, right now
Right now, right now
If your mama knew how
You turned out, you too wild
You too wild, you too wild
You too wild, and I need you now
Lost in... my doubt

[Bridge: Vic Mensa]

Cry, I'm not sorry
Cry, who needs sorry when there's Hennessy?
Don't fool yourself
Your eyes don't lie, you're much too good to be true
Don't fire fight
Yeah I feel you burning, everything's burning
Don't fly too high
Your wings might melt, you're much too good to be true
I'm just bad for you
I'm just bad, bad, bad for you

[Verse 2: Sia]

I was lost and beat up
Turned out, burned up
You found me, through a heartache
Didn't know me, you were drawn in
I was lost and beat up
I was warm flesh, unseasoned
You found me, in your gaze
I found you, oh Jesus
I was too wild, I was too wild
I was too wild, I was too wild
I was too wild, I was too wild

[Partial Hook: Kanye West]

And I need you now
Lost and found out

[Verse 3: Kanye West]

You gotta let me know if I could be your Joseph
Only tell you real shit, that's the tea, no sip
Don't trip, don't trip, that pussy slippery, no whip
We ain't trippin' on shit, we just sippin' on this
Just forget the whole shit, we could laugh about nothin'
I impregnate your mind, let's have a baby without fuckin', yo
I know it's corny bitches you wish you could unfollow
I know it's corny niggas you wish you could unswallow
I know it's corny bitches you wish you could unfollow
I know it's corny niggas you wish you could unswallow
I know it's corny bitches you wish you could unfollow
I know it's corny niggas you wish you could unswallow
You tried to play nice, everybody just took advantage
You left your fridge open, somebody just took a sandwich
I said baby what if you was clubbin'
Thuggin', hustlin' before you met your husband?
Then I said, "What if Mary was in the club
'Fore she met Joseph around hella thugs?
Cover Nori in lambs' wool
We surrounded by the fuckin' wolves"
(What if Mary) "What if Mary
(Was in the club) was in the club
'Fore she met Joseph with no love?
Cover Saint in lambs' wool
(And she was) We surrounded by
(Surrounded by) the fuckin' wolves

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