

## PINDAR, OLYMPIANS I AND IX

Pindar rejects the current version of two myths, that of Tantalos and Pelops (*O. I*) and that of Herakles' conflict against Poseidon, Apollo and Hades (*O. IX*). In each case, he gives two reasons for his stance: a particular reason (that the stories implicitly impugn divine omniscience or omnipotence) and a more important general reason (that it is imprudent to alienate the gods). Piety without profundity is typical of Pindar.

In *Olympians I* and *IX*, Pindar rejects certain myths, and gives his reasons for doing so. In *I*, he substitutes a new version of the myth for the current one; in *IX*, he mentions a set of stories only to reject them. The rejection of myths by a creative writer is not in itself unusual: all such writers drawing on myth selected and adapted their material, and the choice of one version implies the rejection of another or others. The body of mythical material was in a state of constant evolution. Myths were shaped by writers, especially poets, of all periods: they were fully aware of this and regarded it as part of their function. Changes, major and minor, were made in the traditional material without explanation or apology. Creative writers did not feel the need to justify their stand<sup>1</sup>, and even a mention of alternative versions is rare. (An example occurs in Hesiod, *Theogony* 27-28, where the Muses' inspiration runs: «We have the power to say much that is false but resembles the truth; we have the power, too, when we wish, to speak truthfully»; the implication being that Hesiod's inspiration is true, what other poets say is false.) The unusual feature of Pindar's treatment of myth in *O. I* and *IX* is that he gives his reasons for the stand he takes: his adaptations are overt and documented, not merely implicit. In both cases, the reasons given are twofold: particular and general, the general being rather more important.

In *O. I*, the myth of Tantalos and Pelops is introduced — as commonly in Pindar's use of myth — on a flimsy pretext, as a digression. Apos-

<sup>1</sup> If tragedy — where myths were much manipulated — had only a *parabasis* like that of comedy, where the dramatist spoke *in propria persona*, some insights might be gained.

trophising Pelops, Pindar promises (37), «Son of Tantalos, I shall tell of you in a way different from my predecessors». He refers to other versions disparagingly (28 *sqq.*), «There are many wonders, and the speech of mortals is beyond the true account. Stories tricked out with meretricious lies deceive them». However (33), «days to come» will decide the truth of the matter. The myth Pindar rejects is not known to us from any earlier writer<sup>1</sup>, but a scholiast paraphrases it: «Tantalos chopped up Pelops, put him in a cauldron, stewed him and set some of the meat before the gods. The story goes that only Demeter partook of it in ignorance. When Zeus realised what had happened, he told Hermes to put the meat back in a cauldron and restore the boy safe and sound»<sup>2</sup>. In Pindar's new version, Poseidon falls in love with Pelops and carries him off. The traditional story is dismissed as a fabrication put about by jealous neighbours to explain the boy's absence<sup>3</sup>.

Pindar's stated reasons for making the change are the particular one (52), «For me it is impossible to call one of the blessed ones a glutton. I hold aloof», and the general one (53) «No gain frequently falls to the lot of evil speakers»; cf. (35) «It is seemly for a man to speak well of the gods. For less is the blame». In discussion of the particular reason, debate has centred on the meaning of «gluttonous» in this context<sup>4</sup>. It has been explained that Pelops was served «at the last course» (50), when only a glutton would eat such substantial fare; or that Demeter was gluttonous to deviate from the normal divine diet of nectar and ambrosia. Neither of these explanations is adequate. If we are to

<sup>1</sup> Pindar's maligned «predecessors» cannot be certainly identified. The story must have been current in literature as well as in popular belief, as Pindar explicitly criticises poets who propagate it, rather than people who believe it (29). Homer may be intended (cf. *N.* VII 20 *sqq.* on Homer's skill, used for deception); but the only Homeric reference to the Pelops myth is very allusive (*Od.* XI, 582 *sqq.*, Odysseus sees Tantalos, punished for an unspecified crime, in the underworld). Or Pindar may mean Hesiod; but it would be paradoxical for a writer of Pindar's scintillating style to accuse the earthy Hesiod of «extravagant writing» (29). Perhaps the story was current in the epic cycle. Scholiasts in explaining the version of the myth rejected by Pindar quote a line of Bacchylides. It seems possible that in the disparaging reference to his «predecessors» Pindar intends a gibe at Bacchylides, who may in turn be derived from epic.

<sup>2</sup> This version is found too in later writers: Pindar's bowdlerisation gained no favour, «days to come» deciding against him.

<sup>3</sup> Pindar compromises with the tradition by retaining in his new version certain features which belonged in the old one, but are now either redundant or positively awkward.

<sup>4</sup> «Cannibal» is a mis-translation.

stress the particular reason, possibly Pindar's point, obliquely expressed, is that Demeter as a goddess would be incapable of consuming the food in ignorance, and so if she did consume it, it was through gluttony. It is then non-omniscience that Pindar really refuses to accept. But undue stress has been laid on this passage, with its particular reason. (It is more important to know why Pindar refuses to call a god gluttonous, than to ascertain the precise meaning of this word.) The passage is often taken to be parallel with some lines of Euripides — *IT* 386sqg. There, Iphigeneia says, «I judge the banquet given by Tantalos for the gods incredible, that they enjoyed feasting on the boy: I think that men, being murderers themselves, impute evil to the god». But there are important differences between the two passages: Euripides thinks of murder, not gluttony, and refuses to credit—or discredit—the gods with human actions. Pindar is not primarily concerned with the nature of the gods, but rather with what it is proper to say about them. His motivation is — to return to his general reason — simply that if one speaks well there is less blame, and that blasphemers are liable to suffer; he is looking at the situation from the human point of view.

It may be pertinent to add that Pindar uses similar language in another passage, *P.* II 52 sqg., «I must avoid intense biting slander»<sup>1</sup>, where he is defending himself against charges of slandering Hieron, then his patron. To alienate a god or prince — powerful and demanding due respect — is to court trouble; ill-speaking is avoided for reasons of prudence.

In *O.* IX, Pindar introduces a story — or, rather, three stories conflated into one — about Herakles, only to reject it. He mentions Herakles' conflict against Poseidon, Apollo and Hades (28-35), then immediately dismisses it (35), «Cast this account away from me, my mouth». The reasons given for rejection are again particular and general. The particular reason is (41), «Keep warfare and all battle away from the immortals»; the general reason is (37 sqg.), «It is a hateful skill to slander the gods, and to boast beyond measure is in tune with madness». Once again, the general reason is more important; but, if we are to stress the particular reason, it becomes relevant that Pindar seems to violate his own injunction in two other passages: in *N.* I 66 sqg., where Herakles fights the Giants, and in *Paian* VI 87 sqg., where the gods fight at Troy — Apollo against Hera and Athena, Zeus too being involved. However, these passages differ somewhat from *O.* IX: in the first, the parties are really mortal, and in the second the fighting is

<sup>1</sup> κακαγορίαν, *P.* II, 53; cf. κακαγόρος here.

of god against god — about, not against, men. In *O. IX*, Herakles, still a mortal, fights against the Olympians. It may be suggested that Pindar's objection is not to the gods fighting, but to a conflict between god and man — especially if the man wins. Herakles would be guilty of the same impolitic presumption in fighting the gods as Pindar would be in decrying them. Further, the gods, if omniscient, would know Herakles' destiny and not fight; if omnipotent, would win. As in *O. I*, the concern underlying the particular reason is probably with divine omnipotence and omniscience<sup>1</sup>.

The general reason given in *O. IX* for passing over the myth is very similar to that given in *O. I* for changing it: to speak ill of the gods is anathema to the poet; he wishes to avoid presumption verging on madness. Once again, his choice of theme is motivated by prudence, by a fear of the consequences, by the need to avoid *hybris*<sup>2</sup>.

It has now been argued that in both *O. I* and *O. IX*, the particular reasons for rejecting myths are less important than the general ones. In both cases, there may be an assertion of divine power implicit in the particular reasons given; but in introducing these particular reasons, Pindar makes it clear that he is more concerned with what he may say about the gods than with the divine nature. The general reasons Pindar gives for his adjustments show a pious, but not very profound, thinker wrestling with unpalatable aspects of the mythical tradition. This accords with Pindar's religious thought as revealed elsewhere in his work, which has many axiomatic assertions of the need for men to remember their mortality and dependence on the gods; and frequent acknowledgements of the gods' power and man's relative insignificance. Elsewhere too he advocates a prudent silence: «Silence is often the wisest thing for a man to devise» (*N. V* 18, where the same technique of halting in mid-account is to be found) and «On what is not pleasing to Zeus I am completely silent» (frg. 81). But *O. I* and *IX* are of unique interest in that they afford explicit statements of Pindar's policy in choice of mythical material, and give in full his reasons for avoiding certain types of story.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to making a radical change in the story of Pelops and rejecting the tales of the gods doing battle against Herakles, Pindar discreetly doctors two myths about Apollo which apparently detract from his omniscience (*P. III* 27-29; *IX* 44-49).

<sup>2</sup> *Hybris* is linked with madness also in *O. II* 95 and frg. 5.