The Efficacy of Exempla: Modes of Immortality in Pindar’s Third Pythian

Throughout the poetry of the Greek archaic period, the collection of *kleos* has been identified as a constant theme. In the poetry of Pindar the location in which one gains *kleos* is moved from the battlefields of epic to the arenas of the victory ode. Through song, Pindar claims to offer a twofold prize to the athletic victor: “initially, reward and compensation for superhuman efforts; in the long run, a reputation that will continue after death” (Willcock, 17). One of the poems in which the Pindaric assertion of *kleos* is clearest is his Third Pythian, a victory ode composed c. 476-467 BC for Hieron, the tyrant of Syracuse. In the ode, Pindar attempts to persuade Hieron that the poet and his ability to impart poetic *kleos* on the tyrant were worthwhile gifts for him. To support assertions, Pindar borrows heavily from cultic imagery, sets up an elaborate juxtaposition between himself and the cultic deity Asclepius, and supplements this opposition with further mythological exempla. At the heart of the distinction drawn between Pindar and Asclepius are two manners in which men seek immortality. Whereas Asclepius seeks to conquer death through corporeal medicine, Pindar states that he can do so through song. By setting the conversation in these terms, Pindar sets the inherently futile act of attempting to foil fate through mortal *technē* against the attainment of immortality by means of good repute and *kleos*, an avenue afforded to men by poetic remembrance of their great deeds.

Previous studies of the Third Pythian have turned their attention to Pindar’s use of cult and the juxtaposition he employs. Slater (1988) called our attention to the cultic significance of the comparison of Pindar and Asclepius, arguing that their introduction into the ode and the acts that they perform mark them as cultic figures: both come on the scene in a blaze of fire and both offer healing and immortality to their followers. Currie (2005) furthers this idea in his lengthy chapter on cultic imagery in the poem and argues that the immortality promised should not be taken as metaphorically as first thought, but that actual cultic rites could be detected in the ode and immortality was actually expected, as Hieron was in failing health. However, to my knowledge, little work has been undertaken on the third aspect of the ode, namely how mythological exempla fit into the scheme of this opposition. Throughout the poem, Pindar makes mention of the myth of Koronis and Apollo, the story of Chiron, the death of Asclepius, the marriages of Kadmos and Peleus, the union of Semele and Zeus, and the *tisis* of Achilles to support his overall theme of poetic immortality.

This paper aims to explore these exempla and to examine their relationship to the poetic theme of the search for immortality and the elaborate juxtaposition between Pindar and Asclepius. It will argue that these myths seek to persuade Hieron by presenting depictions of the relative efficacy of Pindaric and Asclepian power that support Pindar’s general claim that poetic immortality is superior to its corporeal counterpart. All of the exempla used to describe the story of Asclepius depict the ineffectiveness of their subjects: the sexual ineptitude of Apollo, Chiron’s futile attempt at healing himself, and the disastrous effects of Asclepius’ attempts to bring immortality to men. Set against these instances are the exempla of effective figures associated with the poetic *kleos* of Pindar: Peleus and Kadmos’ sexual ability not only to secure divine brides, but also to impregnate them, the birth of Dionysus, a boon for mankind, from the union of Semele and Zeus, and the *tisis* of Achilles, the prime example of poetic glory. Through these myths, Pindar portrays the relative effectiveness of the two juxtaposed roads to immortality: the hubristic, destructive path through attempts at corporeal immortality and the proper, effective way through poetic *kleos*.

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