The Curb and the Spur: Daring and Restraint in Pindar’s Presentation of *Ethos*

In defense of his decision to write a treatise on the techniques that authors use to achieve sublimity in literary style, Ps.-Longinus claims that the system that keeps sublimity in check is just as important as emotion and boldness in achieving the desired effect: “We must remember also that mere grandeur runs the greatest risk if left to itself without the stay and ballast of scientific method and abandoned to the impetus of uninstructed temerity (ἀμαθεῖ τόλμῃ). For genius needs the curb as often as the spur (δεῖ γὰρ αὐτοῖς ὡς κέντρου πολλάκις οὕτω δὲκαὶ χαλινοῦ)” (2.2.2, trans. Fyfe, rev. Russell). Pindar, a poet whom Ps.-Longinus and other ancient critics identify as exemplary of grandeur and sublimity, anticipates this tension of the curb and the spur, boldness and restraint, in his application of praise and combines these two qualities in his presentation of the ethical character of the speaker. At the moment of issuing bold praise of the victorious athlete, the Pindaric speaker often emerges in the first-person and calls attention to his restraint in applying praise at the same time as he calls attention tohis boldness. These first-person statements present the speaker engaged in the ethical pursuit of what is good, the object of his praise. Building on scholarship by Bundy (1962), Young (1968), Race (1990), and Miller (1993), I will argue that Pindar often presents the speaker as exercising a combination of boldness and restraint in the act of issuing praise, and dramatizes the *ethical* process involved in depicting the good.

The ode that best exemplifies the speaker’s combination of boldness and restraint is Olympian 13, which also treats the tension on a thematic level with the story of Bellerophon’s discovery of the bridle and the bit. At the beginning of the ode, the poet claims that in order to praise Xenophon of Corinth he must get to know the athlete’s city. The speaker characterizes Corinth as the seat of personified Order, Justice, and Peace, who ward off Hubris, “the bold-tongued mother of Excess” (10, trans. Race). By getting to know Corinth, the poet gets to know the virtues that will allow him to check excess and hubris in his praise of Xenophon. This knowledge of restraint is important because the poet also avows that he issues bold praise: “I have noble things to tell and straightforward confidence urges my tongue to speak; and one cannot conceal the character that is inborn” (11-13, trans. Race). The speaker identifies the object of his praise as “the noble” or “the good” (καλά 11) and declares that his tongue is motivated by “straightforward confidence” (τόλμα…εὐθεῖα 11-12). Pindar returns to the topic of the straightforward and confident voice when he praises the athlete directly in a catalogue of victories later in the ode: “But I, in casting whirling javelins on their straight path, must not hurl those many shafts from my hands beside the mark” (93-95). In the metaphor, Pindar’s words are whirling javelins that travel on a straight path; he throws straight, with force, but does not allow his javelins of praise to stray outside of the mark.

In first-person statements like these and others I will examine (e.g. *Nem.* 6.26-28, *Nem.* 9.54-55, *Pyth.* 1.42-45, *Ol.* 2.83, 89-95, *Ol.* 13.11-13, 44-46, 93-97), Pindar presents the praise poet in the process of composition, as he prepares to “tell noble things.” In the pursuit of what is noble through a combination of boldness and restraint, he enacts the fine balancing act that this presentation requires, which in turn validates his praise of its achievement. In his discussion of ethics, Aristotle employs a similar metaphor: “Will not then a knowledge of this Supreme Good be also of great practical importance for the conduct of life? Will it not better enable us to attain what is fitting, like archers having a target to aim at?” (*Nic. Eth.* 1.2.2, trans. Rackham). In this passage Aristotle is concerned with identifying the target. Pindar accomplishes this feat of identification and describes the target, what is good or noble in the victorious athlete, but what is more, he demonstrates how best to shoot or throw.

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