

## Pindar's Peaceful Rapes

Studies of sexuality in Pindar generally focus on the poet's erotic characterization of victors and victory (Carne-Ross 1985: 25-30), but Pindar's treatment of sexuality in his mythical narratives has received little critical attention. Scholars have treated individual poems, especially *Pythians* 3 and 9 (Floyd 1968; Robbins 1978; Winnington-Ingram 1969; Woodbury 1972, 1982; Carson 1982; Gerber 2002; Kearns 2013), but none has offered an overview of the theme of sexuality. This paper demonstrates that Pindar describes sexual relationships between gods and mortals in almost universally positive terms and mitigates the violence of divine rape with words connoting pleasure and marriage. This trope, I argue, should be understood within the context of a poetic and religious project that enjoins the poet, and his audience, to respect the gods.

Pindar's piety and his reluctance to speak ill of the gods are a recurrent theme in the mythological narratives. For example, the poet repudiates versions of the myth of Pelops that claim Demeter actually took a bite of the boy's shoulder before realizing she was being served human flesh (*Ol.* 1.46-50). He explains that he cannot accept this story because it implies a flaw in divine omniscience (*Ol.* 1.52). Likewise, the poet rejects stories of Herakles battling the gods on similar grounds (*Ol.* 9.29b-41). Indeed, the *Odes* are full of stories of impious malefactors and their punishments (Tantalos: *Ol.* 1.54-58; Typhos: *Ol.* 4.7, *Pyth.* 1.13-28, *Pyth.* 8.16; Ixion: *Pyth.* 2.21-41; Asklepios: *Pyth.* 3.47-58; Bellerophon: *Ol.* 13.60-93, *Isth.* 7.44-48). The poet, then, continually reinforces the need to respect the gods through conspicuous examples of the unhappy fates of those who did not.

This paper argues that Pindar's depictions of sexual relationships between mortals and immortals are a further example of his concern for piety. The poet juxtaposes language of pleasure and consent with the vocabulary of abduction and rape, conveyed most often through

forms of ἀρπάζειν. Thus, although Poseidon abducts Pelops (ἀρπάσαι, *Ol.* 1.40), their relationship is described as “the loving gifts of Kypris” and a reciprocal boon (χάρις) that eventually enables Pelops to obtain his bride (*Ol.* 1.75). Zeus also “snatches” Protogeneia but then lies with her “peacefully” to produce an heir for the childless king Lokris. The juxtaposition placement of ἔκαλος between ἀναρπάσαις and μίχθη (*Ol.* 9.58-59) is oxymoronic and shows the poet’s concern to soften the implication of coercion; further, the rape is quickly elided by Lokris’ joy in his adopted son (*Ol.* 9.62). Likewise, Apollo’s union with Kyrene is accomplished by rape (ἄρπασ’, *Pyth.* 9.6), but Pindar mitigates its violence with a description of Aphrodite presiding over their “sweet acts of love” (γλυκεραῖς εὐναῖς, *Pyth.* 9.12) and “mutual marriage” (ξυνὸν...γάμον, *Pyth.* 9.13). The vocabulary of marriage continues throughout the poem, with Apollo called Kyrene’s husband (πόσις, *Pyth.* 9.51) and she his bride (νύμφαν, *Pyth.* 9.55). The poet’s use of marital language to describe what must be a brief liaison reinforces the pleasurable and reciprocal nature of the relationship between Apollo and Kyrene and deflects attention away from the fact that it is accomplished by rape.

This paper concludes by examining the exception to the rule of happy relationships between gods and mortals: the story of Koronis. Her liaison with Apollo is also described in terms of marriage (γάμον, *Pyth.* 3.13) but the outcome is very different: in punishment for her sexual betrayal of the god, Koronis is afflicted by a plague and dies “with heavy suffering” (*Pyth.* 3.42). Thus, I argue, Pindar’s characterization of divine relationships further demonstrates the poet’s attention to piety by providing examples of mortals who receive marvelous boons through their unions with gods, as well as a cautionary tale of a mortal whose “folly” in “despising” divine power (*Pyth.* 3.12-313) destroys her.

## Works Cited

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