Is Pythian 4 An Epinician?

Over the past century interpretations of the composition of Pindar's fourth Pythian ode have changed little. In 1890, Basil Gildersleeve stated "[the ode] seems to have been prepared at the urgent request of Demophilus… The poem was a grand peace offering, and the reconciliation had doubtlessly been quietly arranged in advance."(Gildersleeve1885:278) This hypothesis was repeated a century later in Bruce Braswelll's commentary on the ode: "the plea was carefully staged to afford a public demonstration of the king's clemency, which would also have been a gesture of reconciliation to the political opposition. Since Damophilus was the direct beneficiary of Pindar's successful plea… it is hardly a bold guess to presume that the exile also paid for the fourth Pythian. This view, however, does little to address the paradox of a victory ode commissioned by a patron exiled by the *laudandus*. This problem provokes the question: Is Pythian 4 an Epinician? The text begins with an appeal to the muse that she stand beside the victorious king in order to intensify the breeze of songs owed to the children of Leto and Pytho. (Σάμερον μὲν χρή σε παρ' ἀνδρὶ φίλῳ… στᾶμεν, ὄφ᾿ρα κωμάζοντι σὺν Ἀρκεσίλᾳ, Μοῖσα, Λατοίδαισιν ὀφειλόμενον Πυθῶνί τ' αὔξῃς οὖρον ὕμνων) (Pyth 4. 1-5). Pindar's language places the victory in a subordinate position to the debt of song owed to Apollo. Indeed, the only mention of Arcesilaus' victory in the Pythian Games is at line 67 where it is recalled in passing. Instead of Arcesilaus' victory, the ode dwells on the myth of Jason's return from his youthful exile with Chiron (70-120), his father's reception of him (120-30), and the Argonauts' successful exploits to retrieve the Golden Fleece (130-260). Many interpreters have thought the myth's emphasis on homecoming implies Demophus' guiding hand; but, if the appeal for epatriation were the primary function, how is the ode an epinician? Moreover, recent scholarship has challenged the validity of the commission model of

epinician poetics; Pythian 4 as described does not fit into that model easily.

In this paper I propose that Pindar wrote Pythian 4 at the prompting of his own interest in the situation (Cole 1992: 130-60 sees this possibility in the royal odes). On this view, he undertakes a delicate and complex interaction with the potentate to whom he is writing, utilizing praise, gnomes, mythical exempla, and warnings to convey his message. This interpretation soles certain long standing problems in the final stanza of the poem. The praise of Demophilus found in this passage would be at best unimpressive to Arcesilaus if the ode were paid for by Demophilus himself. Conversely, if Arcesilaus had commissioned the ode as a political demonstration of his own clemency, the backfiring would operate in a different direction, further alienating members of the political community sought to win back through the great heartedness of his gesture. As an interested third party of independent standing, Pindar offers a mediating voice to navigate the complexities of the political situation. The self-confident, assertive poetic voice we hear in the passage – a voice that figures prominently in other Pindaric odes for tyrants— supports this interpretation. By hinting at pessimistic parallels with the myth's villain, Pelias (4.250 especially), and exhorting clemency in the manner of Zeus (4.292), Pindar advises the king through myth. Further, Pindar's emphasis on the youth and personal growth of Demphilus while in exile (4.280-97) encourages parallels with Jason, who while in exile learned from the kindly centaur Chiron. The final lines of the ode, καί κε μυθήσαιθ', ὁποίαν, Ἀρκεσίλα, εὗρε παγὰν ἀμβροσίων ἐπέων, πρόσφατον Θήβᾳ ξενωθείς (4.297-9), make the strongest claims for Demophilus. In his exile he has learned from Pindar. Should he return to Cyrene, at the symposium he will convey knowledge acquired from his Theban Xenos.

Bibliography

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