

“I Cannot Call The Blessed Ones Gluttonous.” Myth Criticism in Pindar’s *Olympian One*

“I Cannot Call The Blessed Ones Gluttonous.” With these words, the speaker in Pindar’s *Olympian One* rejects the traditional, well-known tale that Pelops was killed by his father Tantalus and eaten by the gods. Instead he replaces it with a version in which Pelops was honored highly by being brought to Olympus. This instance of explicit myth criticism in antiquity is one of the earliest and, as this paper shall show, most remarkable ones (for an overview see Vöhler 2010; cf. in particular Köhnken 1974, Farenga 1977, Gerber 1982, Köhnken 1983, Howie 1984, Nagy 1986, Hubbard 1987, Hansen 2000).

The epinician *persona*’s primary motivation for criticizing the traditional version of the Pelops myth is religious indignation aiming at correcting wrong beliefs about the gods, brought forward, as is often believed, by the conservative aristocrat Pindar who was trying to defend his archaic piety against the revolutions sweeping away the old order at the beginning of the fifth century BCE (cf. Wilamowitz 1922: 235-236).

This paper will suggest a different picture, namely that Pindar changed the traditional version of the myth deliberately in accordance with the rationalistic religion of his time with the purpose of achieving the primary objective of the epinician ode, that is, the exuberant praise of the Olympic victor Hiero of Syracuse. For by ‘correcting’ the myth, Hiero is brought into an exact metaphorical parallelism with Pelops, to the effect, first, that Hiero’s current victory is represented as a great achievement due to its corresponding with Pelops’ abduction to Olympus; and, second, that a decidedly more important victory, i.e. the Olympian victory with a chariot, is prophesied as lying ahead, corresponding to Pelops’ subsequent winning of Hippodameia by his victory in a chariot race.

This interpretation will not only help understand the ode itself better than before by showing that it is a highly coherent and pragmatically meaningful song of praise that fits to its “Sitz im Leben” (and this to a higher degree than as according to, e.g., Köhnken 1974 and 1983; *pace*, e.g., Farenga 1977). In addition, this paper will, by treating *Olympian One* as a case-study, also shed light on the general status of myth in early Greek poetry at the intersection of religion and self-reflexive creativity: Pindar’s treatment of the Pelops myth testifies to the fact that myths, at least in the early Classical period, were not simply received narratives, but that they were actively used as powerful poetic tools to purposefully generate meaning, in particular in the pragmatic dimension (*pace* positions that relate the change of the Pelops myth to a decidedly lesser degree to the *hic et nunc*: cf., e.g., Nagy 1986, Hansen 2000) – and this not only with an aesthetic effect, but, insofar as this goal often, if not always entailed explicitly and/or implicitly criticizing, altering and thus deliberately interpreting (supposedly) traditional versions of myths, with the effect of advancing progress in the early classical theological-philosophical project of building and expanding the edifice of rational religion, in lockstep with (or perhaps rather as a vital part of) Presocratic philosophy. After all, the new versions of the myths were not meant to be mere “stories,” but indeed to be the most accurate accounts of religious truth.

This paper will take two steps: first, it will give a very brief outline of the ode and its contents. This will lay the basis for, second, explicating what exactly makes *Olympian One* so remarkable and interesting as a testimony for ancient myth criticism in the early Classical period. The result will be an interpretation of the ode that will prove its aesthetic and religious dimensions to be not only not exclusive, but to be semantically highly complementary; and an interpretation that will adequately determine the place and function of the ode in the overall cultural-historical context of its time.

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