

## The Songs of Gods and Men

This paper will investigate the corpus of internal songs in archaic Greek epic, arguing that mortal and immortal internal singers, through their songs, work toward different ends: mortal internal singers hymn the deeds of mortal men so as to achieve (literary) immortality, whereas the immortal internal singers emphasize the frailty and brevity of human mortality, in addition to the fact that human suffering comes from the gods. The idea that song is used to achieve literary immortality is not new (e.g. Nagy 1999), nor have individual internal singers gone without attention from scholars (e.g. Clay 2006, Peponi 2009). These have been useful and productive studies, but there has been no comprehensive study of the entire group of internal singers, so they lack the ability to say anything about these internal singers and their songs as a whole. Therefore, I will examine the internal singers in Homer, Hesiod, and the *Homeric Hymns* to prove that the songs of gods and the songs of men have very different goals.

Regarding the gods, mortal and immortal songs share similar content. In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Hermes sings a theogony to Apollo. Likewise, in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the Muses sing their own theogony and then instruct the narrator to do the same (which then is presented to us as the *Theogony* itself). In the *Hymn to Apollo*, the Delian maidens sing a hymn to Apollo, then to his mother and sister, which finds a parallel in Hermes' other song in his *Homeric Hymn*, which he sings about himself, his mother, and his father.

Differences begin to appear when examining the songs about mortals. Most famous are those songs by Phemios and Demodokos in Homer's *Odyssey*, which celebrate the *nostos* of the Greeks, the quarrel of Odysseus and Achilles, and ruse of the Trojan horse—songs about the *kleos* of mortal men. So too the Delian maidens, after their hymn to Apollo and his family, sing about “the men and women of old,” which is the content of epic and the poetry of *kleos*—that

which keeps dead men alive in the minds of those still living. But, not fifty lines later in the same poem, the Muses on Olympos sing a very different song. After praising the gifts of the gods, they sing the miseries of men, who have their misery from the deathless gods and live a mortal, helpless life, destined to age and die. The suffering of mortals and emphasis on their helplessness and mortality is certainly different than the *kleos* poetry sung by mortals, which seeks to immortalize mortals through song and memory.

By examining the content of internal songs holistically, we can gain a better understanding of how members in the mythic hierarchy negotiate their status within that hierarchy. Mortals strive to move up a realistic amount without displacing anyone else; they recognize and respect the superiority and power of the gods, and they realize they cannot achieve literal immortality (and that any attempt at which would be hubristic), but they can achieve literary immortality through memory and song. The gods, on the other hand, seek to maintain their position of power by praising their own greatness, while likewise trying to keep mortals in their place by emphasizing human mortality and tacitly refusing to contribute to their literary immortality by avoiding praise of human achievement.

### Bibliography

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