

Conclusion

Epinician poetry does not simply praise the athletic victor in the present, but situates the victory within a much broader temporal framework. The epinician poet seeks to understand the glorious present moment against the backdrop of the heroic past and also in relation to the “whole of time” as it extends into—or “approaches from”—the future. Accordingly, the epinician poet is constructed as a figure who knows the present, the past, and “the things that will be.” In this respect, epinician poetry models the poet along traditional archaic lines, as a figure parallel to the prophet. But the way in which the epinician poet presents his knowledge of past, present, and future is not simple or straightforward. It is complicated in interesting ways by the complex character of his audience and the circumstances of performance. These require especial delicacy and tact on the poet’s part, leading him to present his knowledge in complicated, and sometimes puzzling, ways.

In this book, my goal has been to interpret some prominent but potentially confusing conventions of Pindar’s epinician poetry by exploring the ways in which they function in the context of oral performance on the occasion of the epinician celebration. My hope is that analyzing break-off, invocations of the Muse, allusions to tradition, and wishes and prayers for the future in this way will have sharpened our awareness of how difficult and complicated the epinician poet’s task is, and brought out some previously unnoticed aspects of it.

To recap, in chapter 1 I suggested that break-off characterizes the epinician poet as a performer who strives to please the various groups within his audience by avoiding what might seem “excessive” to any

one of them. “Excess” in these contexts is not defined with reference to any kind of universal, abstract, or objective standard. Instead, it depends on the perceived or anticipated responses of various individuals and groups within the poet’s audience—the victor, the victor’s fellow citizens, and the gods. It emerges from this observation that the concepts of “limit,” “proportion,” and “measure” are more complex in Pindar’s epinician poetry, and more closely related to the variables oral performance entails, than is initially apparent. It is also clear that the gods have as much significance for the poet’s performance as do the mortals in his audience. Finally, the idea of the hero from myth as the athlete’s paradigm or exemplum also turns out to contain some complications. The poet must draw some critical distinctions between hero and athlete—distinctions that are no less significant than the parallels between the two.

Next, in chapter 2, I considered the way in which epinician poetry represents the past. I concluded that the rhetoric of praise obliges the epinician poet to adopt a somewhat contradictory position regarding the value of the past, and also the past’s accessibility. The past plays a far more complicated rhetorical role in epinician poetry than it does in epic; this arises from the circumstances of performance. Epic poetry praises heroes who lived in the distant past, but epinician poetry praises a present-day athletic victor who may be provoked by any suggestion that the memory of the past could outweigh his own more recent achievements. This potential problem generates further complications: poetic “truth” comes to have a meaning in the epinician context different from its meaning in epic, and the poet has a correspondingly different kind of authority.

In chapter 3, finally, I investigated the epinician outlook on the future. I concluded that wishes and prayers for the future have an integral role to play in the context of the epinician celebration. Although these wishes and prayers often contain cautionary notes concerning the future’s uncertainty, they are uttered in an essentially positive spirit. Read in conjunction with other epinician themes and conventions, they turn out to contain a double message. Through them, the poet simultaneously appeases the gods and reassures the athletic victor. He presents himself as someone who is capable of negotiating with the gods for happy future outcomes, and this is designed to reassure the victor as well as the other audience members. At

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the same time, thanks to his tactful expression in these prayers, which always contain the admission that the poet can do nothing without the gods' help, the poet appeases the gods, making them less likely to grow resentful and reverse the victor's and his city's current success. This kind of mediation makes the epinician poet like a prophet—not in the sense that he can predict the future, but in his ability to influence future outcomes, thanks to his understanding of the “conditional probabilities”¹ according to which the cosmos works and has worked, now and in the past.

All three time frames—past, present, and future—are important. But perhaps in the end the future has the most crucial significance for the epinician performance. Like other kinds of success, athletic victory is disorienting—for the victor himself, and for his family and his city. It constitutes a crisis, and may precipitate dire consequences. It may inspire other mortals to talk maliciously, and this may end in violence and political disorder. Resentment on the gods' part in the face of so much mortal celebration may prompt them to punish the victor and all the mortals around him. Exulting in his success, the victor may be tempted to think himself a god, and this may lead him to act with hubris and violence.

In the face of these assorted potential crises, the epinician poet's (seemingly impossible) task is to maintain equilibrium so that the future will turn out well. He does so by exercising extreme care in the way he talks about the past, the present, and the future. He also influences the way in which the past, the present, and the future are talked about by others. His promise, implicit in the rhetorical argument of the epinician ode, is to secure for the athletic victor “calm weather” [εὐδία] and “peace” [ἡσυχία] that will extend into the future—that is, “tranquillity,” at least insofar as mortals can attain it, “for the rest of his life” [ἀμφὶ βίωτον, *O.* 1.97] if not “for the whole of time” [χρόνον ἅπαντα, *O.* 13.24; cf. ὁ πᾶς χρόνος, *P.* 1.46].

1. Cf. Peradotto 1990, 67–68.