

# PINDAR

## OLYMPIAN 1

### CLASS OBJECTIVES:

- **Cultural:** understand key cultural elements behind Pindar's poetry: the significance of athletic victory, the uses of mythology to create a common history, etc.
- **Literary/Historical:** to learn the terms necessary to understand the structure and performance of Pindar's poetry.
- **Interpretive:** to observe the ways in which Pindar's flow of stories and ideas, as well as the techniques with which he juxtaposes and balances them, creates the experience of his poetry.
- **Past to present:** Look at the different translations of the poems to define places where the original is particularly difficult to align with English, as well as noting where the time period and agenda of these translations leads to substantially different presentations.
- **Thematic:** Examine ideas of masculinity; ideas of human achievement and its relations to the gods, and the gods' interactions/relations with the humans who achieve excellence.
- **Discussion:** to work from the text, finding specific passages and images that illustrate the above issues; to compare different possible readings of the same passage

### **This handout has several elements:**

1. Three translations of the poem (pp. 2-10)
2. A reproduction of parts of the excellent Cummings Study Guide to Pindar Olympian 1 (pp. 11-18). *[The full guide is available at <http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides7/olympian1.html>]* This guide includes:
  - a. a list & definition of key names
  - b. an introduction to the choral ode/victory ode
  - c. a summary of the poem, including narratives of the myths to which Pindar alludes
  - d. various other helpful information. You may want to consult it first.
3. From the Cummings Study Guide page, there are further links to two additional versions of the poem. Although we will concentrate on the three here, it would be a good idea to consult those as well.

## PINDAR, OLYMPIAN 1

Translation by Diane Svarlien

Water is best, and gold, like a blazing fire in the night, stands out supreme of all lordly wealth. But if, my heart, you wish to sing of contests, [5] look no further for any star warmer than the sun, shining by day through the lonely sky, and let us not proclaim any contest greater than [Olympia](#). From there glorious song enfolds the wisdom of poets,<sup>1</sup> so that they loudly sing [10] the son of Cronus, when they arrive at the rich and blessed hearth of Hieron, who wields the scepter of law in [Sicily](#) of many flocks, reaping every excellence at its peak, and is glorified [15] by the choicest music, which we men often play around his hospitable table. Come, take the Dorian lyre down from its peg, if the splendor of [Pisa](#) and of Pherenicus placed your mind under the influence of sweetest thoughts, [20] when that horse ran swiftly beside the Alpheus, not needing to be spurred on in the race, and brought victory to his master, the king of Syracuse who delights in horses. His glory shines in the settlement of fine men founded by Lydian Pelops, [25] with whom the mighty holder of the earth Poseidon fell in love, when Clotho took him out of the pure cauldron, furnished with a gleaming ivory shoulder. Yes, there are many marvels, and yet I suppose the speech of mortals beyond the true account can be deceptive, stories adorned with embroidered lies; [30] and Grace, who fashions all gentle things for men, confers esteem and often contrives to make believable the unbelievable. But the days to come are the wisest witnesses. [35] It is seemly for a man to speak well of the gods; for the blame is less that way. Son of Tantalus, I will speak of you, contrary to earlier stories. When your father invited the gods to a very well-ordered banquet at his own dear Sipylus, in return for the meals he had enjoyed, [40] then it was that the god of the splendid trident seized you, his mind overcome with desire, and carried you away on his team of golden horses to the highest home of widely-honored Zeus, to which at a later time Ganymede came also, [45] to perform the same service for Zeus. But when you disappeared, and people did not bring you back to your mother, for all their searching, right away some envious neighbor whispered that they cut you limb from limb with a knife into the water's rolling boil over the fire, [50] and among the tables at the last course they divided and ate your flesh. For me it is impossible to call one of the blessed gods a glutton. I stand back from it. Often the lot of evil-speakers is profitlessness. If indeed the watchers of [Olympus](#) ever honored a mortal man, [55] that man was Tantalus. But he was not able to digest his great prosperity, and for his greed he gained overpowering ruin, which the Father hung over him: a mighty stone. Always longing to cast it away from his head, he wanders far from the joy of festivity. He has this helpless life of never-ending labor, [60] a fourth toil after three others, because he stole from the gods nectar and ambrosia, with which they had made him immortal, and gave them to his drinking companions. If any man expects that what he does escapes the notice of a god, he is wrong. [65] Because of that the immortals sent the son of Tantalus back again to the swift-doomed race of men. And when he blossomed with the stature of fair youth, and down darkened

his cheek, he turned his thoughts to an available marriage, [70] to win glorious Hippodameia from her father, the lord of [Pisa](#). He drew near to the gray sea, alone in the darkness, and called aloud on the deep-roaring god, skilled with the trident; and the god appeared to him, close at hand. [75] Pelops said to the god, "If the loving gifts of Cyprian Aphrodite result in any gratitude, Poseidon, then restrain the bronze spear of Oenomaus, and speed me in the swiftest chariot to [Elis](#), and bring me to victory. For he has killed thirteen [80] suitors,<sup>2</sup> and postpones the marriage of his daughter. Great danger does not take hold of a coward. Since all men are compelled to die, why should anyone sit stewing an inglorious old age in the darkness, with no share of any fine deeds? As for me, on this contest [85] I will take my stand. May you grant a welcome achievement." So he spoke, and he did not touch on words that were unaccomplished. Honoring him, the god gave him a golden chariot, and horses with untiring wings. He overcame the might of Oenomaus, and took the girl as his bride. She bore six sons, leaders of the people eager for excellence. [90] Now he has a share in splendid blood-sacrifices, resting beside the ford of the Alpheus, where he has his attendant tomb beside the altar that is thronged with many visitors. The fame of Pelops shines from afar in the races of the Olympic festivals, [95] where there are contests for swiftness of foot, and the bold heights of toiling strength. A victor throughout the rest of his life enjoys honeyed calm, so far as contests can bestow it. But at any given time the glory of the present day [100] is the highest one that comes to every mortal man. I must crown that man with the horse-song in the Aeolian strain. I am convinced that there is no host in the world today who is both knowledgeable about fine things and more sovereign in power, [105] whom we shall adorn with the glorious folds of song. A god is set over your ambitions as a guardian, Hieron, and he devises with this as his concern. If he does not desert you soon, I hope that I will celebrate an even greater sweetness, [110] sped by a swift chariot, finding a helpful path of song when I come to the sunny hill of Cronus. For me the Muse tends her mightiest shaft of courage. Some men are great in one thing, others in another; but the peak of the farthest limit is for kings. Do not look beyond that! [115] May it be yours to walk on high throughout your life, and mine to associate with victors as long as I live, distinguished for my skill among Greeks everywhere.

<sup>1</sup> On this line see F. J. Nisetich, "Olympian 1.8-11: An Epinician Metaphor," *HSCP* 79, 1975, 55-68.

<sup>2</sup> reading [μναστῆρας](#), with the mss.

Odes. Pindar. Diane Svarlien. 1990.

The Annenberg CPB/Project provided support for entering this text.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0162:book=O.&default.scheme=book:poem:card&default.type=poem>

## PINDAR, OLYMPIAN 1

Translation by William Lattimore

Best of all things is water; but gold, like a gleaming fire  
by night, outshines all pride of wealth beside.  
But, my heart, would you chant the glory of games,  
look never beyond the sun  
by day for any star shining brighter through the deserted air,  
nor any contest than Olympia greater to sing.  
It is thence that the song winds strands  
in the hearts of the skilled to celebrate  
the son of Kronos. They come their ways  
to the magnificent board of Hieron,  
who handles the scepter of dooms in Sicily, rich in flocks,  
reaping the crested heads of every excellence.

There his fame is magnified  
in the splendor of music, where  
we delight at the friendly table. Then take the Dorian lyre  
from its peg,  
if any glory of Pisa or Pherenikos  
slide with delight beneath your heart,  
when by Alpheus waters he sped  
his bulk, with the lash laid never on,  
and mixed in the arms of victory his lord,

king of Syracuse, delighting in horses; and his fame shines  
among strong men where Lydian Pelops went to dwell,  
Pelops that he who clips the earth in his great strength,  
Poseidon, loved when Klotho lifted him out  
of the clean cauldron, his shoulder gleaming ivory.  
Great marvels in truth are these, but tales  
told and overlaid with elaboration of lies  
amaze men's wits against the true word.

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Grace, who brings to fulfilment all things for men's delight,  
granting honor again, many a time makes  
things incredible seem true.  
Days to come are the wisest witnesses.  
It is better for a man to speak well of the gods; he is less to  
blame.

Son of Tantalos, against older men I will say  
that when your father summoned the gods  
to that stateliest feast at beloved Sipylos,  
and gave them to eat and received in turn,  
then he of the shining trident caught you up,  
his heart to desire broken, and with his horses and car of gold  
carried you up to the house of Zeus and his wide honor,  
where Ganymede at a later time  
came for the same desire in Zeus.

But when you were gone, and men from your mother looked,  
nor brought you back,  
some man, a neighbor, spoke quietly for spite,  
how they took you and with a knife  
minced your limbs into bubbling water  
and over the table divided and ate  
flesh of your body, even to the last morsel.

I cannot understand how a god could gorge thus; I recoil.  
Many a time disaster has come to the speakers of evil.  
If they who watch on Olympos have honored  
any man, that man was Tantalos; but he was not  
able to swallow his great fortune, and for his high stomach  
drew a surpassing doom when our father  
hung the weight of the stone above him.  
He waits ever the stroke at his head and is divided from joy.

That life is too much for his strength; he is buckled fast in  
torment,  
agony fourth among three others, because he stole

and gave to his own fellowship  
that ambrosia and nectar  
wherewith the gods made him immortal. If any man thinks  
to swindle  
God, he is wrong. Therefore, they sent his son  
back to the fleeting destiny of man's race.  
And when at the time of life's blossoming  
the first beard came to darken his cheek,  
he thought on winning a bride ready at hand,

Hippodameia, the glorious daughter of a king in Pisa.  
He walked alone in the darkness by the gray sea,  
invoking the lord of the heavy trident,

and he appeared clear at his feet.

He spoke: "Look you, Poseidon, if you have had any joy  
of my love  
and the Kyprian's sweet gifts, block the brazen spear  
of Oinomaos, and give me the fleeter chariot  
by Elis' river, and clothe me about in strength.  
Thirteen suitors he has killed now, and ever  
puts aside the marriage of his daughter.  
The great danger never descends upon a man without  
strength;

but if we are destined to die, why should one sit  
to no purpose in darkness and find a nameless old age  
without any part of glory his own ? So my way  
lies this hazard; yours to accomplish the end."  
He spoke, with words not wide of the mark.  
The god, increasing his fame, gave him  
a golden chariot and horses never weary with wings.

Breaking the strength of Oinomaos, he took the maiden and  
brought her to bed.  
She bore him six sons, lords of the people, blazing in valor.  
Now he lies at the Alpheus  
crossing, mixed with the mighty dead.

His tomb is thronged about at the altar where many strangers  
pass; but the glory  
of Pelops looks afar from Olympia  
in the courses where speed is matched with speed  
and a man's force harsh at the height.  
And the winner the rest of his lifetime  
keeps happiness beside him sweeter than honey  
as far as the games go; but the good that stays by day and  
abides with him

is best that can come to a man. Be it my work to crown  
in the rider's rhythm and strain  
of Aiolis that king. I believe  
there is no man greater both ways, for wisdom in beautiful  
things and power's weight  
we shall ever glorify by skill in the folds of song.  
Some god stands ever about you, musing

in his mind over what you do,  
Hieron. May he not leave you soon.  
So shall I hope to find once more  
even a sweeter word's way to sing and help the chariot  
fleeting,

coming again to the lifting hill of Kronos. For me  
the Muse in her might is forging yet the strongest arrow.  
One man is excellent one way, one in another; the highest  
fulfils itself in kings. Oh, look no further.  
Let it be yours to walk this time on the height.  
Let it be mine to stand beside you  
in victory, for my skill at the forefront of the Hellenes.

[http://www.archive.org/stream/odesofpindaro35276mbp/odesofpindaro35276mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/odesofpindaro35276mbp/odesofpindaro35276mbp_djvu.txt)

**PINDAR, OLYMPIAN 1**  
**Translation by William Mullen**

***Strophe 1***

Water is the finest of all, while gold, like a lambent fire,  
Shines through the night in pre-eminence of superb wealth.  
And if, my heart, you wish to tell  
Of prizes won in trials of strength,  
Seek no radiant start whose beams  
Have keener power to warm, in all the wastes of upper air, than the  
sun's  
                beams,  
Nor let us sing a place of games to surpass the Olympian.  
It is from there that the song of praise, plaited of many voices,  
Is woven into a crown by the subtle thoughts of poets,  
So that they chant the praises of Kronos' son  
As they make their way to Hieron's rich hearth,

***Antistrophe 1***

Who wields his lawful scepter in Sicily's orchard lands,  
Culling the crests of every kind of excellence.  
The man is brilliant, above all,  
In blossomings of the Muses' matters,  
At which we poets often vie  
In friendly company around his board. So take from its peg your  
Dorian lyre,  
If victor's Grace at Pisa, of Victory Bearer there,  
Set your mind that day on the sweetest trains of thought,  
When the courser flaunted, hurtling down his lane of the tracks,  
A mettle that needed no touch of the lash,  
And twined his master thus into power's embrace,

***Epode 1***

The kind of Syracuse, a passionate horseman. His fame blazes  
In the man-proud daughter-city of Lydian Pelops -  
That youth with whom the mighty Poseidon fell in love,  
Because, as a babe, the goddess of fate had drawn him forth from the  
cleansing  
                cauldron  
With a gleaming shoulder, wrought of ivory.  
Oh there is many a marvel, and doubtless often; the reports of men



Are tricked beyond the just account by lying tales of cunning  
workmanship.

### ***Strophe 2***

And Grace, that shapes for mortals everything that soothes them,  
Can render believable something better never believed,  
All by the sweet esteem it brings.  
The truest of all witnesses  
Is borne by days that are yet to come.  
Seemlier for a man to speak well of the gods. You are less to blame.  
Tantalos' boy,  
I shall speak against what earlier poets assert of you -  
Shall sing how when, in return to his former hosts on high,  
Your father invited the gods to his home at Sipylos,  
To a friendly banquet, all decorum,  
The god of the radiant trident snatched you away,

### ***Antistrophe 2***

His mind wild with desire, and on golden horses bore you  
  
To the high halls of Zeus, who is worshipped far and wide -  
To whom, on a second such occasion,  
Ganymede was made to come,  
For service every bit the same.  
And when you were not to be seen - were not returned to you mother  
by men  
searching high and low -  
Why then, some envious neighbor, in secret, framed the tale  
  
That you had been chopped up by the gods with a cleaver, limb by  
limb,  
Then had been plunged into a pot they brought to the boil on the fire,  
And that they sliced you out, for the dessert course,  
Set you forth on the board, and ate you up!

### ***Epode 2***

There is no way I will say that a god's belly could be thus crazed.  
I recoil. Profit is rarely the slanderer's lot.  
If ever mortal was honored by the gods who look down from  
Olympus,

Tantalus was that man. But his great good fortune he could not  
digest,  
And surfeiting, he brought down a great curse,  
In the form of a hideous stone the father of the gods hung just above  
him -  
All ease of mind eludes him, in his vain incessant straining to get out  
from  
    under its shade.

trans. William Mullen

For further information on *Olympian 1*, see W. Mullen, *Choreia*, Princeton  
University Press, 1999.

<http://www.rhapsodes.fl.vt.edu/PindarOlympia.htm>

## FROM THE CUMMINGS STUDY GUIDE:

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides7/olympian1.html>

### Type of Work and Critical Assessment

"Olympian 1" by Pindar (pronounced PIN der) is a choral ode, a poem sung by a chorus to musical accompaniment. Because the primary purpose of "Olympian 1" and other odes of Pindar was to express in elevated language his feelings about a person, a place, an event, or an idea, the odes are classified as [lyric](#) rather than narrative poems. However, his odes contain narrative episodes based on myths.

The consensus among scholars is that Pindar was the greatest lyric poet of ancient Greece (as opposed to the greatest narrative poet, Homer) and that "Olympian 1" is among the greatest of his surviving odes. In 1513, Venetian publisher Aldo Manutio il Vecchio (Aldus Manutius the Elder) printed the first book containing the collected odes of Pindar. British poet and essayist Abraham Cowley (1618-1667) introduced Pindar's odes to England in 1656 in a translated collection entitled *Pindarique Odes*.

### Subject: Athletic Victory

"Olympian 1" honors Hieron (alternate spelling, *Hiero*), ruler of the Sicilian kingdom of Syracuse, for his triumph in a horse race in the athletic games at Olympia, in southwestern Greece on the Peloponnesian peninsula, in 476 BC.

### Odes for Athletes: *Epinicia*

An ode celebrating an athletic victory had a special name: *epinicion* (plural, *epinicia*). All of Pindar's epinicia survive; the rest of his choral odes—including hymns extolling the gods, drinking and dancing songs, funeral songs, and dithyrambs (impassioned poems addressed to the god of wine and revelry, Dionysus) are lost except for fragments of them.

There are forty-five epinicia in all. They honor the victors of contests at the Olympic games, held every four years at Olympia, a plain on the Peloponnesian peninsula of southern Greece; the Nemean games, held every two years at Nemea, a valley in the Peloponnesian peninsula; the Isthmian games, held every two years on the Isthmus of Corinth, between the peninsula and mainland Greece; and the Pythian games, held every four years near the famous Temple of Apollo at Delphi, in mainland Greece northwest of Athens. (*Pythian* is an adjective meaning "of Apollo.")

The number of odes in each category is as follows:

Olympian: 14 Pythian: 12 Nemean: 11 Isthmian: 8

## **Title of the Ode**

"Olympian 1" received its title from Aristophanes of Byzantium (257-180 BC), a Greek editor, literary critic, and grammarian. His placement of the ode as number one in the list of Pindar's forty-five odes was based on the importance of its content, not on the year in which it was written. Its importance lay in the fact that it glorified the founder of the Olympic games, Pelops. (He won a horse race that inspired the Greeks to establish the games.)

## **The Olympic Games**

Of all the athletic competitions in ancient Greece, the Olympic games were the most prestigious. Athletes vied in horse races, chariot races, footraces, wrestling and boxing matches, and other events. Each winner of an Olympic contest received a wreath woven from branches of the olive tree as his reward.

## **Significance of Victory**

A victory in the Olympic games was one of the highest achievements a Greek citizen could attain. It demonstrated that the winner possessed the character, self-discipline, skill, perseverance, and resourcefulness to succeed. On his return home, he was hailed as a hero in a glorious celebration that included the presentation of a choral ode. But his victory burdened him with the task of living up to the promise of his Olympic feat in his everyday life.

## **Stanza Formats**

Pindar's "Olympian 1" and other choral odes each contained three stanza formats: strophe, antistrophe, and epode. The strophe and antistrophe were similar in structure; the epode was different. The chorus sang the strophe (derived from a Greek word meaning to turn) while dancing across the stage and the antistrophe (derived from Greek words meaning to turn in an opposite direction) while dancing back across the stage. The chorus then sang the epode (derived from Greek words meaning to sing after—that is, to sing after the strophe and antistrophe) while standing still. Afterward, the chorus presented additional sets of strophes, antistrophes, and epodes with new wording. When a poet decided that an ode had sufficient development, he ended it with a concluding epode.

## **Musical Accompaniment and Dancing**

Stringed and piping instruments, such as a kithara (a type of lyre) and an aulos (instrument resembling an oboe), were available to accompany the singers of Pindar's choral odes. The music itself was most likely monophonic rather than

polyphonic. Pindar is believed to have composed the music and choreographed the dance steps in harmony with the meter of the poem.

### **Glossary of Characters, Places, and Terms in the Poem**

Alpheus (or Alpheos): God of the river near the plain of [Olympia](#).

Ambrosia: Food of the gods. It conferred immortality on them.

Charis: Generic term for any of three goddesses of fertility, charm, and beauty: Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and Thalia. The plural is *Charites* (or, in English, the *Graces*).

Clotho (or Klotho): One of the three Fates, goddesses who determined the fate of each human. The other two were Lachesis and Atropos. Clotho was said to have been the weaver of the thread of life. She was present at the birth of a human.

Cronus (also Cronos, Kronos): Former ruler of the universe. He was overthrown by his son, [Zeus](#).

Cyprian (or Kyprian) Goddess: Allusion to Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

Demeter: One of the chief goddesses residing on Mount Olympus. She was the sister of Zeus and goddess of agriculture.

Elis: See [Olympia](#).

Ganymede (or Ganymedes): Mortal youth whose beauty inflamed Zeus to lust after him. Zeus abducted him.

Hellenes: Greeks.

Hieron (or Hiero): King of Syracuse, Sicily. "Olympian 1" celebrates his victory in the horse race at the Olympic games of 476 BC.

Hippodameia: Daughter of Oenomaus, king of Pisatis (Pisa) in southern Greece, on the Peloponnesian peninsula.. Pelops won her as his wife after defeating Oenomaus in the horse race that inspired establishment of the Olympic athletic games.

Lydia: Kingdom in western Anatolia (part of present-day Turkey).

Lyre: Stringed instrument.

Nectar: Drink of the gods. Like ambrosia, it rendered the gods immortal.

Oenomaus (also Oenomaos, Oinomaos): King of Pisatis (Pisa) in southern Greece, on the Peloponnesian peninsula.

Olympia: Greek plain on which were held the ancient Olympic games. Olympia is about ten miles inland from the Ionian Sea on the western coast of the Peloponnesian peninsula in southern Greece. Olympia is in a region known as Elis. Olympia is not to be confused with Mount Olympus, near the Aegean Sea in northern Greece.

Olympus, Mount: Mountaintop home of the gods in northern Greece. They lived in palaces constructed by Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalwork, on the summit of Olympus, the highest peak (9,570 feet) in a mountain range between Macedonia and Thessaly near the Aegean Sea.

Pelops: Son of Tantalus, ruler of Sipylus, [Lydia](#). Pelops won a horse race at [Olympia](#) that inspired establishment of the Olympic games. Greece's Peloponnesian peninsula was named after him.

Pherenikus (or Pherenikos): Horse that won an Olympic race for Hieron in 476 BC.

Poseidon: God of the sea. He was a brother of Zeus.

Syracuse: Kingdom and city on the island of Sicily.

Tantalus (or Tantalos): King of Sipylus, [Lydia](#). He was a favorite of the gods until he attempted to deceive them. For his offense, they condemned him to eternal punishment in Hades.

Zeus: King of the gods on Mount Olympus.

## Summary of the Poem

### Strophe 1

In all the good things of nature, nothing is better than water; it brings and sustains life. In all the treasures of princes, nothing is better than gold; it shines with a fiery light. And in all the athletic contests, nothing is better than Olympic sport; it confers on the winner a crown as bright as the sun. Then the poets acclaim the victor, singing of his glory. Today, the name that rings out far and wide is Hieron (pronounced HY run).

### Antistrophe 1

This is a man who rules with a righteous scepter as king of Syracuse, a land of many shepherds and flocks. And this is a man whose horse, Pherenikus, ran to victory on Olympian fields in southern Greece near the river sacred to Alpheus (also spelled *Alpheos*). Now at his victory banquet, Hieron will listen to the music of my words sung by a chorus to the accompaniment of a lyre.

### *Comment*

Bernard Knox says a jockey in the service of Hieron rode Pherenikos, not Hieron himself (252). Apparently, Hieron reaped glory for sponsoring the horse and its rider, just as the owner of a modern professional football or baseball team reaps glory if his or her team finishes first.

### Epode 1

The glory of Hieron's name crosses the sea, even to the land of Pelops in Greece. In bygone days, Pelops was the first Olympic hero, winning glory in a chariot race that marked the beginning of the famed athletic games. When Pelops was born, it was Clotho (also spelled *Klotho*)—one of the three Fates charged with spinning the thread of human destiny—who presided at his birth and brought him forth from the washing basin. Unlike other humans, Pelops had an ivory shoulder, which reflected light from the hearth fire. His appearance pleased earth-shaking Poseidon, who became enchanted with him. Over the years, a false story about the

background of Pelops—about how he came to have an ivory shoulder—gained sway among the people.

### ***Comment***

Pelops was the son of Tantalus (also spelled *Tantalos*), ruler of Sipylus (also spelled Sipylos), a kingdom in Lydia in western Anatolia (part of present-day Turkey). Tantalus enjoyed the favor of the gods. In fact, they held him in such high regard that they even allowed him to dine with them. The “false story” to which Pindar refers in Epode 1 concerns one of these dinners. This story, with which Greeks of Pindar's time were familiar and which many of them accepted as true, is as follows:

Because Tantalus could sit at the same dining table as the gods, he began to believe that he was as great as they were. Perhaps he could even get away with playing a trick on them. Here is what he did. He murdered Pelops, cooked him to a turn, and served him to the gods, believing that they would not notice what they were consuming. But all the deities except Demeter—the goddess of agriculture—saw through the scheme and refused to eat. However, before the gods could act, Demeter had already eaten a shoulder of Pelops. The gods then brought Pelops back to life, and Demeter gave him an ivory shoulder to replace the one she had eaten. Tantalus was sentenced to eternal damnation in Hades.

### Strophe 2

Pindar says he rejects the story that Tantalus cooked and served his son to the gods. He believes it is blasphemous to associate the gods with so grotesque an account, especially one in which a goddess is tricked into eating human flesh. He then begins to tell what he believes really happened.

After dining with the gods at their invitation, Tantalus decided to repay them with a feast at his own table in his Anatolian kingdom, Sipylus. Pelops was there. On that occasion, the sea god Poseidon—overcome with lust for Pelops—abducted him.

### Antistrophe 2

Poseidon bore Pelops off in a golden chariot to the palace of Zeus. After a time, the mother of Pelops sent men to look for him, but they could not find him. It was at that time that a hateful neighbor began circulating a story that said the gods had boiled and eaten Pelops.

### Epode 2

Pindar refuses to believe that the gods could stoop to such barbarity. To spread a lie that accuses them of doing so is to invite their wrath. Keep in mind, too, Pindar says, that the gods had held Tantalus in high esteem. Surely they

would never have killed his son. As for Pelops's ivory shoulder? He had had it since birth. But what of Tantalus? The gods turned against him for committing an unforgivable offense and condemned him to hell. What could he have done to offend them?

### Strophe 3

Tantalus had stolen the food and drink of the gods, ambrosia and nectar, and shared them with his drinking friends. These are the staples of immortality, and they gave Tantalus eternal life. But the gods discovered the theft, for it is impossible to hide such a deed from them. They then returned Pelops to earth and condemned Tantalus to eternal suffering in Hades. Beneath him was a pool of water. Above him were tree branches bearing various fruits, such as figs and pears. When he stooped to drink water, it would recede. When he reached for a fruit on a branch, the wind would blow the branch out of reach. Meanwhile, after Pelops grew to young manhood, he was ready to marry.

### Antistrophe 3

His thoughts turned to a famous beauty, Hippodameia, daughter of Oenomaus, king of Pisatis (or Pisa). Pisatis is on a river bank in southern Greece in a region known as Elis. (It is the same locale where Hieron was later to win his horse race.) Because Oenomaus lusted after his own daughter, he wanted no one else to have her. So it was that he slew with his spear every suitor who tried to win her hand—thirteen in all. Pelops went to the sea and stood on the shore in the darkness. There, in the name of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, he called upon mighty Poseidon to assist him.

### Epode 3

Pelops acknowledged that wooing Hippodameia would invite her father to make Pelops his fourteenth victim. But Pelops told Poseidon that he did not wish to spend his life shrinking from danger. Rather, he wished to face it—to risk his life—to get what he wanted. His prayer did not go unanswered, for Poseidon provided him all that he needed for victory, including a golden chariot drawn by winged horses.

### Strophe 4

And so Pelops defeated Oenomaus and married Hippodameia. Over the years, she gave him six sons, all of whom became powerful military leaders. After he died, he was entombed near the river of Alpheus, where many travelers stopped to pay him homage. But his glory lived on in the athletic games at Olympia, near the same river and in the same place where Pelops drove to victory. Today, as the



winner of an Olympic horse, Hieron may look forward to unending joy and contentment.

#### Antistrophe 4

Yea, sweet is the fruit of victory in the hour of challenge. And now the time has come to crown the victor. Let it be known that on all the earth there is no man more deserving of this honor than Hieron. May the god who watches over him never have reason to abandon him, Pindar says.

#### Epode 4

As long as that god remains with you, an even sweeter victory will come your way. Even now the Muse is fashioning for me an arrow that will sing through the air another song of praise for your deeds. Be aware, though, that presiding as a king is the highest honor you can attain on earth. Desire nothing beyond this achievement but do continue to walk a monarch's path. As for me, may I be the one who will walk with you to serve you with the power of my poetry.

#### Work Cited

Knox, Bernard, ed. *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993.

### **Mythological Tale Reveals Themes**

In "Olympian 1," Pindar briefly retells the story of Pelops, a legendary Greek hero who won a horse race that inspired the establishment of the Olympic games. Recounting this tale enables Pindar to compare Hieron to Pelops and thereby present the central theme: the greatness of Hieron. Pindar first points out that Hieron is a worthy and honorable ruler, as Pelops was, then notes that Hieron won a competition in the same place that Pelops won his, on the plain of Olympia near the river of Alpheus.

Pindar then recounts the story of Pelops. However, he says one version handed down over the centuries contains an untruth: that one of the gods unwittingly ate human flesh. A malicious rumormonger concocted the lie, he says, which was an insult to the gods. Pindar's purpose in reporting this version is to present two other themes: first, that one must always tell the truth and, second, that one must always respect the gods.

Pindar next recounts what he believes is the correct version of the Pelops story, one in which the father of Pelops, Tantalus, steals from the gods. When the gods discover his wrongdoing, they confine him to Hades, there to suffer never-ending thirst and hunger. This version of the story again emphasizes the

importance of respecting the gods. It also introduces another theme: inability to escape divine retribution for wrongdoing.

### **Other Themes**

"Olympian 1" also presents these themes: the importance of traditions such as the athletic games and the happiness that an honest, hard-won victory can bring.

### **Texts of the Poem**

Translating any of Pindar's odes into a worthy version in English or any other language is extremely difficult. On the one hand, the translator must work with an ancient language and ethos and with Pindar's complex versification system. On the other, the translator must be able to present his rendering in the form of outstanding poetry that captures the essence of Pindar's spirit. Nevertheless, many translations of Pindar's odes are available. Following are links to four translations and the complete text of another translation. *[Access from Cummings study guide page; three of the translations are reproduced here.]*