Introduction

In this book, I study Pindar’s epinician poetry from the perspective of performance. I focus on the poet’s relationship to and interaction with his audience, and address questions of the following kind: How does the poet avoid offending his audience? How does he want them to understand his role as an authority on the past? In what sense does he want them to see him as a prophet of the future?

Pindar’s epinician odes were commissioned to celebrate the victories of athletes in the Panhellenic athletic contests: the Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian games. Most of them were probably performed in the victor’s hometown, upon his return from the games, by a chorus of local citizens. Although the victory ode would have been composed and rehearsed in advance of the performance, the performance itself was oral and public. In other words, these poems were composed to be performed orally. Keeping this in mind affects our interpretation of the poetry’s rhetorical conventions. Epinician rhetoric and its conventions have received much scholarly attention in the decades since Elroy

1. Almost nothing is known for certain about the performance of Pindar’s odes, but internal references and descriptions do indicate that most odes were probably performed in the victor’s hometown. On the same basis, others seem likely to have been performed at the site of the victory. Some scholars believe the shorter (monostrophic) odes to have been processional. For discussion of the nature and likely locations of formal celebrations of athletic victors in ancient Greece, see Slater 1984, 242–47.

2. This point is controversial. Heath (1988) and Lefkowitz (1988 and 1991, 191–210) contend that Pindar’s odes were not performed chorally, but Burnett (1989) and Carey (1989) defend (successfully, in my opinion) the traditional, choral view. (See also Heath and Lefkowitz 1991 and Carey 1991.)
Bundy’s groundbreaking *Studia Pindarica* appeared. But as far as I know, they have not been explored from this point of view. Analyzing epinician rhetoric from the perspective of oral performance means interpreting the conventions in the light of the immediate interaction between poet and audience. The purpose of this book is to bring out some of the ways in which this perspective on Pindar’s odes can expand and enhance our understanding of the poet’s task and the way epinician poetry works.

When we read Pindar this way, it becomes clear that the epinician poet’s task is not an easy one. Praising a person in public is awkward. It creates tensions that complicate the poet’s task and sometimes even cause him to contradict himself. By focusing on the epinician performance as such, I seek to reveal and explicate some of these tensions. Pindar’s odes are generally recognized to be highly complicated works of art, difficult for a modern reader to interpret. Thomas Hubbard notes that “Pindaric criticism of the last two centuries has . . . viewed its task as one of simplification,” owing to the fact that Pindar’s poetry is full of “lexical and metrical innovations, density of metaphor, flexibility of word order, tangential digressions, obscure connections, contradictory gnomes, ambiguous references, and frequent ellipses of thought and syntax.”

The sheer grandeur that this kind of praise requires may account in part for the obscurity. Some of the African praise poetry analyzed by Ruth Finnegan is similar, in this respect, to Pindar’s: Southern Bantu praise poetry is “obscure,” “intense,” highly figurative, and highly allusive. But the complexity and the difficulty of Pindar’s odes also reflect the fact that this poetry had to fulfill a complex social function. Leslie Kurke connects the “notorious difficulty of Pindar’s poetry” with the “multiple patterns of meaning” it contains. Thanks to the complex social world in which the poet lived and worked, the odes are full of symbolic systems that alternate and overlap with one another. The context of the performance itself is a central consid-

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eration here. Pindar’s odes had to perform the awkward task of pleasing many different audiences at once. In addition to pleasing the victor himself, the poet had to satisfy the victor’s family, friends, and fellow citizens, and also—last but by no means least—the gods.

The rhetoric required to appease these different audiences sometimes makes the poet take positions that are inconsistent. In chapter 1, I trace the Pindaric convention of abruptly breaking off a narrative and changing the subject (a gesture usually accompanied by self-commentary and self-criticism on the narrator’s part) to the poet’s need simultaneously to please a variety of difficult and differently minded groups. In chapter 2, I bring out the contradictory attitudes the epinician poet must inevitably take toward the past and its rhetorical role in his poetry. He must remember the heroic past in his poetry, but not allow it to eclipse the glorious present it is his primary task to celebrate. In chapter 3, I investigate the epinician outlook on the future. Is it an optimistic or a pessimistic one? And how much does the epinician poet profess to know about the future? Does he, or does he not, embody the prophetic role traditionally assigned to poets in archaic Greece? With respect to all these issues, I suggest that the apparent contradictions in the poet’s attitude are easier to disentangle and make sense of if we consider that claims about the future may hold one message for the victor and his family, and quite another one for the gods.

I interpret the persona constructed and projected by the epinician poet as a convention specific to the genre and its function. I read the concerns the narrator expresses (both directly and indirectly) about the responses of his audience the same way. All these themes reflect objectives and values that pertain to epinician poetry specifically. Bundy’s

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8. Here and elsewhere, when I refer to “the poet,” I am speaking of the constructed, fictional narrator of the odes—I do not mean to imply anything about the real live poet Pindar. (On the concept of narrator versus author in texts of all kinds, see Bal 1985, 119.) The identity of the “I” in Pindar has been a subject of much controversy. Scholars have argued back and forth over the question of whether the Pindaric “I” is the voice of the poet, the chorus, or some combination of these and other factors. I suggest that this is a moot point if we recognize that the chorus in a choral lyric performance sometimes speaks in its own choral voice, but often impersonates its poet-choregos (see Nagy 1990, 339–81).
Graceful errors

*Studia Pindarica* took Pindaric criticism in a new and fruitful direction by focusing on the concept of genre as such.\(^9\) Earlier Pindaric scholarship had revolved around questions of “unity.”\(^10\) Some scholars had also attempted to read the epinician ode as a historical document containing biographical information about the poet.\(^11\) Bundy, however, defined epinician poetry in terms of its function, which he identified as “praise of the victor.” He then construed the seemingly disparate themes of the epinician ode as generic conventions that in different ways all contributed to this function. On this basis, Bundy contended that the Pindaric ode was a functional unity; its superficially divergent elements were united by their common end of praising the victor.\(^12\)

Bundy paved the way for later scholars to elaborate on, and to some extent rethink, the concept that his work had made central: the genre’s function. Epinician poetry does, of course, praise the victor, but this activity is in turn necessarily implicated in a nexus of other social and political issues. Recognizing that archaic Greek poetry did not exist in a vacuum, but was integral to the social and political life of the polis, other scholars began to reassess the function of epinician poetry accordingly. Adopting an anthropological perspective on athletic victory as a social institution, they identified athletic victory as a crisis that would have had an unsettling impact on the victor’s community, and required the victor himself to be reintegrated into that community. From this perspective, the essential function of epinician poetry is mediation. The poet must, by means of his poetry, reconcile the athlete to his community.\(^13\)

Kevin Crotty, for example, concentrates on the way Pindar’s poetry regularly compares the athlete to the mythic hero whose return home typically precipitates a catastrophe. Like the returning hero, the ath-

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11. Wilamowitz 1922 provided the impetus for, and was the most prominent example of, this type of interpretation.
12. Bundy 1962, 3: The conventions of epinician poetry “point uniformly . . . to one master principle: there is no passage in Pindar and Bakhulides that is not in its primary intent enkomastic—that is, designed to enhance the glory of a particular patron.”
le, when he returns from the games, “comes with new powers or new knowledge, which may be either dangerous or beneficial to the community. He is not the same as when he set forth, and so his return is as uncertain in its outcome as the arrival of a stranger.” Leslie Kurke further elaborates on these ideas of crisis, mediation, and reconciliation. The idea of the athlete’s reintegration, she suggests, requires further complication. There is more than one community to which the athlete belongs, and with which he must be reconciled: “The victor must be reintegrated into his house, his class, and his city.” Kurke also explores reconciliation and reintegration in connection with the social, political, and economic themes that surface in the odes. Her goal is to determine how a “socially embedded poetry” comes to terms with the upheaval of the Greek archaic period.

Studies such as these greatly enhance our understanding of how the broader cultural and historical context shapes the presentation of themes in the epinician ode. In this book, I approach Pindar’s epinician odes from a slightly different angle. I am interested in how the immediate circumstances of the performance—the dynamic between performer and audience on the occasion itself—affect what is said in the ode, and also how it is said. I am particularly interested in the poet’s metanarrative commentary—the things he says in the poetry about his task and its performance. I suggest that these comments not only reflect the poetry’s function, but are also performative, in the sense that they help to fulfill that function.

In connection with all of these issues, I pose questions of the following kind: To whom does the epinician poet express himself on these topics? How does he express himself when addressing these issues? How does he orient himself vis-à-vis other poets? In approaching these questions, I have singled out some particularly distinctive conventions of epinician poetry, ones that are especially apt to puzzle a

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14. Crotty 1982, 110. In general, Crotty (vii) seeks to “find in the poems the deeper, less obvious layers of tradition” that lie behind the encomiastic motifs and conventions set out by Bundy.
17. Cf. Nagy 1990, 9: To understand the genre to which a text belongs, we need to look at the way the text represents its own performance. Cf. also Calame 1995, 26.
modern reader of Pindar. I seek to interpret these conventions in the light of the epinician ode’s context of performance, and above all with reference to the interaction between poet and audience.

*Break-off*, discussed in chapter 1, is the name given to the convention whereby the Pindaric poet interrupts himself and abruptly breaks off his narrative in order to take up a new topic. This convention sometimes prompts scholars to talk about the “impulsive waywardness” of the Pindaric poet-narrator. I ask what, in the context of the performance, the real reason for “breaking off” is likely to be on any of these occasions. Does the convention simply serve to create an air of spontaneity, as some scholars have suggested? Or does it have a more meaningful role to play in relation to the major themes and requirements of the epinician occasion? Exploring these issues involves a discussion of the role rumor plays in the world Pindaric poetry describes, and above all the role the poet must play in regulating rumor. I find that break-off in Pindar is always a safeguard against _κακάς_ (excess)—whether in a literal or a metaphorical sense. Moreover, excess is defined with regard to audience expectations rather than any objective standard. Different sectors of the epinician audience may define excess differently, and this demands exquisite tact and a nice skill on the poet’s part. The more general function of break-off is to showcase this aspect of the poet’s skill.

In chapter 2, I study the rhetorical role and representation of the past in Pindar’s poetry. This involves analysis of two central poetic conventions. The first is the invocation of the Muse. Pindaric invocations, though they resemble in structure the invocations of the Muse found in Homer and Hesiod, are less frequent and also differently positioned in the poem. I interpret this as a reflection of the different way in which epinician poetry accounts for the poet’s authority to talk about the past. This in turn arises from the more complicated role the past plays in epinician poetry. The second poetic convention I analyze in this chapter is the poet’s habit of alluding to rumor, tradition, and his poetic predecessors. Unlike the Homeric poet, the epinician poet

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18. Cf. Young 1964, 621, on Bundy’s dissatisfaction with studies prior to his own that presented Pindar as a “squabbling, inconsiderate, emotionally uncontrollable man, whose works are characterized by an irrelevant moral and religious preaching and a lack of coherence.”
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often introduces mythic material by identifying it as something that “people say.” Sometimes he says that stories about the past have been relayed by “earlier people,” or even, more specifically, by “former poets.” I investigate the epinician poet’s attitude toward rumor or ἐμος τοιν φάτες, “talk among men” (O. 1.28), and consider how he compares and contrasts himself to “former poets.” The Pindaric treatment of all these themes reflects the fact that the past plays a far more complex and ambiguous role in epinician poetry than it does in epic. The two genres also espouse quite different notions of poetic authority and poetic truth. I suggest that all these differences arise from the paradoxical position in which the epinician poet is placed. On the one hand, he must honor the athletic victor by comparing him to heroes past. However, this creates a risk lest he overshadow the present-day achievement of the athlete he is celebrating, so that he must in the end always subordinate the past to the present as a poetic theme.

In chapter 3, the final chapter, I analyze the wishes and prayers for the future commonly found in the epinician ode, usually toward the end of the poem. These often contain gloomy allusions to the precariousness of mortal happiness, so that Bundy read them as negative “foil” for the luster and celebratory atmosphere of the present. 19 I suggest that these wishes and prayers may have a more integral role to play in the epinician program. Their prominence suggests a preoccupation with the future, and this invites us to compare them with the poet’s self-presentation, elsewhere in the ode, as a prophetlike figure. This prompts various questions. What kind of influence does the epinician poet claim to have with the gods? To what extent does the poet suggest to his audience that he has any agency regarding the future? Gnomic passages in the odes regularly announce the futility for all mortals—the poet included—of trying to discern anything about the future. But at other times, some mortals are said to enjoy a kind of “knowledge of the future” (προμοθεαία). I find that the epinician poet claims (indirectly) to be like a prophet in two respects. First, he manifests a vision superior to that of his audience: he is able to compare the present with

19. Cf. Bundy 1962, 77, on I. 1.64–68: “The unqualified present, whose overwhelming importance the hymn of praise exists to enhance and perpetuate, must now be surrendered... the moment of happiness... does not abide... and the future looms ahead both to concede and to withhold the objects of our heart’s desire.”
the distant past and identify significant patterns in events over long periods of time. Second, he claims implicitly that he can successfully negotiate and mediate exchanges between the victor and the gods. The language of epinician wishes and prayers for the future is of a kind to appease the gods by acknowledging mortal limitations, especially regarding our ability to know the future. But the placement of wishes and prayers within the epinician ode is calculated to assure the victor and his friends that the prayers will receive a favorable response. In this chapter, I also interpret the themes of “calm weather” and “tranquility” regularly found in wishes and prayers for the future in the light of analogous themes in the mythic sections of the odes.

Interpreting the conventions of Pindar’s epinician poetry from the perspective of genre, occasion, and performance makes us appreciate how complex, problematic, and in some respects even contradictory the epinician project is. Praising a person in public is a tricky business. The epinician poet’s task is not a simple one. But in Pindar’s odes, the poet deploys the conventions of praise with precision and skill. In his metanarrative comments, he highlights the difficulties in his task, but at the same time presents himself as a character qualified and competent to negotiate them with success.