

Glory, Immortality, and the Power of the Poet

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Precis

The power to grant immortality is one of the primary characteristics of poetry from its earliest days. Different poets, however, writing in different genres and time periods, have portrayed this power in a variety of ways in the context of their work. In the epics of Homer, the most ancient extant works of western literature, poets are valued by the powerful people of the time. Homeric heroes are very interested in acquiring immortality, and treat the poets who can grant it to them very well. In the time of Pindar, whose odes commemorated athletic victories, we see the development of the idea that a poet not only has the power to grant immortality on his patron by writing about him, but that by doing so he, as writer, is also immortalized. The Hellenistic poets make the broadest statements of all, claiming immortality for themselves independent of any patron, as a testament to the pure power of their work.

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Stephen Murphy, in his book *The Gift of Immortality*, writes that, “From Homer to Ugo Foscoli (and beyond) the persistence of the idea of the glorifying or immortalizing power of poetry is a striking constant.¹” Indeed, the connection between poetry and immortality seems to exist at the linguistic level. It is Murphy again who asserts,

Poetic preoccupation with the power to glorify or immortalize exists as far back as the historical eye can see. Scholarly attempts to infer some characteristics of Indo-European poetry have established the centrality of the idea of Glory. Moreover, the epithet that often adheres to ‘glory’ is ‘immortal’ (unwithering).²

Schein delves more deeply into this matter, describing the centrality of glory in Indo-European poetry this way:

The earliest poetry extant in several Indo-European language families—poetry which presumably reflects earlier, original traditions—includes stories of the exploits of warrior-heroes who fight both for the benefit of their people and for their own glory. It has been shown that there are etymologically cognate, metrically identical formulaic phrases in Greek and Indic by which the poets designated both their “own medium, when it serves the function of glorifying the deeds of heroes,” and the imperishable glory attained by heroes through poetry when they have performed virtuous, victorious deeds.³

From its pre-historic beginnings, poetry was the vehicle for obtaining immortality. The early and intimate nature of this connection suggests that examining poetry, and those who composed it, in terms of this immortalizing power should prove an interesting study. This paper seeks to investigate just such a realm.

I focus on one aspect of the immortalizing power of poetry across a given time period, examining the claims made by certain Greek poets that not only their subjects, but they themselves, are immortalized by their poetry. Homer, the earliest extant poet and the closest to

¹ Murphy, 14-15.

² *Ibid*, 35.

³ Schein, 16.

the foundational Indo-European tradition, paints a picture of a society in which the poet is a respected and powerful figure, so valuable is his ability to grant immortal glory. However, the rigid demands laid on him by his genre prevent him from making many statements in the first person at all, and there are no claims to personal immortality.

Pindar, writing centuries after Homer, was freed from the strict conventions of epic hexameter, and was able to make personal statements in the course of his poems. Examining these statements shows that Pindar shares the glory of his object, and thus is immortalized himself. Like Homer, Pindar is still strongly influenced by his bond to his patron, and thus much of the glory he claims is reflected glory.

Among the Hellenistic poets, exemplified by Callimachus and Theocritus, this limitation also disappears. The patrons for whom they wrote, the successor kings of Alexander the Great, were not as directly concerned with personal glory and immortality. They were, however, deeply interested in fostering culture and learning for their own sake, and one group, the Ptolemaic Dynasty of Egypt, founded the Museum of Alexandria, an institution whose sole purpose was to act as a place for scholarship and cultural advancement. Callimachus and Theocritus, freed from the strict bonds of the patronage relationship, make the broadest claims of personal immortality. They assert that their works immortalize them directly, without reference to any patron or hero.

Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are the earliest extant works in the western canon, and in them we can hear echoes of the ancient Indo-European tradition that poetry is, fundamentally, about immortality. Thus it is with Homer that we begin, or rather, with his background.

Dating the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is difficult to determine with certainty. The epics narrate the events of the Trojan War, which is thought to have occurred in the 12th Century BC.⁴ It is unlikely that the poems were originally composed in the Bronze Age, however. Many of the weapons and tools Homer describes did not appear until much later, during the Greek Dark Age.⁵ Although the epics incorporate elements from many earlier periods, the society they portray seems to resemble most closely that of Greece around 1000 BC.⁶ We can be certain that the poems were in the final form a few centuries after that, around 700 BC. Thus, the social conditions described in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not far removed from those experienced by Homer himself, and provide a useful beginning point for understanding the place of the poet in his society.

The culture described by Homer was an aristocracy, ruled by a group of warrior-nobles called “heroes,” whose exploits are the focus of both epics. The unifying concept of this class of heroes was, more than anything else, a collection of values guiding thought and behavior, called simply enough the “Heroic Code.” This code guided interpersonal behavior and defined the goals toward which heroes should strive. On a basic level, the code called for reciprocity: heroes helped their friends, and those who had helped them in the past, and hurt their enemies.⁷ This system of repaying good with good (and harm with harm) dictated most of the social interactions in the society of the Homeric epics.

⁴ Powell, 33.

⁵ Powell, 36-37, mentions some of the most obvious inconsistencies. Sometimes shields are round, typical of the Late Bronze Age, while at other times they are “like a wall,” a much older form. Spears, too, are described according to the practice of different eras. Achilles fights with a single large, heavy spear from the Bronze Age, but he throws it like the light javelins of the 9th Century.

⁶ Finley, 50-51.

⁷ Donlan, 51.

All Homeric heroes are warriors. No other profession was possible for them, nor was any other way of life compatible with their goals. Finley describes them this way:

Few of the heroes of history, or of literature, from the Athenian drama of the fifth century BC to our own time, shared the single-mindedness of their Homeric counterparts. For the latter everything pivoted on a single element of honour and virtue: strength, bravery, physical courage, prowess, conversely, there was no weakness, no unheroic trait, but one, and that was cowardice, and the consequent failure to pursue heroic goals.⁸

The goal in question is glory. Achilles, central figure of the *Iliad*, articulates this connection between heroic combat and glory. Speaking of his possible fates to a group of fellow heroes, he says:

“...διχθαδιας κηρας φερεμεν θανατοιο τελος δε.
ει μεν κ’ αυθι μενων Τρωων πολιν αμφιμαχωμαι–
ωλετο– μεν μοι νοστος, αταρ κλεος αφθιτον εσται·
ει δε κεν οικαδ’ ικωμι φιλην ες πατριδα γαιαν,
ωλετο μοι κλεος εσθλον, επι δηρον δε μοι αιων
εσσεται, ουδε κε μ’ ωκα τελος θανατοιο κιχειη.”

“...I carry two sorts of destiny towards the day of my death. Either
If I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,
My return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting;
But if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,
The excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long life
Left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly.” (*Il.*
9.411-416)⁹

Achilles clearly realizes his options. He can stay and fight, and probably die, knowing that the glory he will gain never will, or he can return home and die in many years, but go unremembered. Glory comes only if he fights, and accomplishes heroic deeds.

Glory is only valuable, however, because it is immortal, and so to gain glory is, in a sense, to cheat death. Homeric heroes fight (and, ironically, die) for a chance to live forever.¹⁰

⁸ Finley, 28.

⁹ All translations from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are by Richmond Lattimore.

¹⁰ Schein, 16-17.

Sarpedon, son of Zeus and ally of the Trojans, expresses this idea as he prepares to enter battle near the beached ships of the Greeks. He says:

“ὦ πεπὸν εἰ μὲν γὰρ πολέμον περι τόνδε φύγοντε
αἰεὶ δὴ μέλλοιμεν ἀγῆρω τ’ ἀθανάτω τε
ἔσσεθ’, οὐτε κεν αὐτὸς ἐνὶ πρῶτοισι μάχοιμην
οὔτε κε σὲ στέλλοιμι μάχην ἐς κυδῖανειραν.”

“Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle
Would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,
So neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost
Nor would I urge you into fighting where men win glory.” (*Il.* 12.322-325)

Sarpedon, a warrior like all Homeric heroes, states that he would abandon his dangerous profession if he were assured of his immortality. It is plain that neither wealth, nor a pure love of violence motivates Sarpedon and Achilles. They fight for glory that never dies, and were their immortality already assured, they would stop fighting.

This preoccupation with immortality and its acquisition through heroic deeds brings us to poetry, our central subject. Through great deeds a hero acquired glory and became immortal by those deeds becoming the subject of song. Earlier in book 9 of the *Iliad*, as a delegation of Greeks arrives in attempt to persuade Achilles to return to war, we find a clear example of the connection between song and glory. The scene is described this way:

Μυρμιδόνων δ’ ἐπὶ τε κλισίας καὶ νῆας ἰκεσθῆν,
τόν δ’ εὖρον φρένα τερπομένον φορμιγγὶ λιγείῃ
καλῇ δαίδαλεῃ, ἐπὶ δ’ ἀργυρεὸν ζυγὸν ἦεν,
τὴν ἀρετ’ ἐξ ἐναρῶν πόλιν Ἠετιωνῶ οὐλοσσας:
τῆ ο γέ θυμὸν ἑτέρπεν, αἰεὶ δ’ ἀρα κλέα ἀνδρῶν.

Now they came beside the shelters and ships of the Myrmidons
And they found Achilles delighting his heart in a lyre, clear-sounding,
Splendid and carefully wrought, with a bridge of silver upon it,
Which he had won out of the spoils when he ruined Eetion’s city.
With this he was pleasuring his heart, and *singing of men’s fame*.
(emphasis added) (*Il.* 9.185-189)

As he takes his ease beside his ship, Achilles sings, ironically enough, of the fame he is rejecting by not fighting. That is because Homeric songs are about fame, and any deeds heroes do are significant in as much as they become the subjects of song.

Just as the songs are viewed in Homeric society as the medium for recounting glorious deeds, the role of the poet is defined in terms of his ability to grant immortality. As a result of this power to glorify and immortalize, the bards portrayed by Homer are respected, even wealthy figures. The *Odyssey* especially helps to make this picture clear, with its portrayal of bards engaged in their trade. The best example is Demodocus, the blind bard at the Phaeacean court of Alcinous, who was so closely associated with the figure of Homer himself that a tradition arose that the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was himself sightless.¹¹

Odysseus encounters Demodocus at the Phaeacian court during a feast in his honor. After hearing the story of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite, and their snaring by the cuckolded Hephaestus, Odysseus is so impressed that when the time comes for feasting, he offers the bard as a gift a choice cut of meat, and choice words of respect. He says,

“Κηρυξ, τη δη, τουτο πορε κρεας, οφρα φαγησιν
 Δημοδοκω· και μιν προσπτυξομαι αχλυμενος περ·
 πασι γαρ ανθρωποισιν επιχθονιοισιν αιδοι
 τιμης εμποροι εισι και αιδους, ουνεκ’ αρα σφεας
 οιμας μουσ’ εδιδαξε, φιλησε δε φυλον αιιδων.”

“Here, herald, take this piece of meat to Demodocus so that
 He may eat and I, though a sorry man, embrace him.
 For with all peoples upon the earth singers are entitled
 To be cherished, and to their share of respect, since the Muse has taught them
 Her own way and since she loves all the company of singers.” (*Od.* 8.477-
 481)

¹¹ Nagy, 1979, 17 calls him “...an appropriate idealization of an artist by the art form of the epic.”

As was mentioned before, the Heroic Code defined all social interactions as reciprocal, offering good treatment for good treatment, and bad for bad. That Odysseus is willing to praise Demodocus so richly, and to offer him a material reward for his performance in the form of meat is a sign that he considered song to be a valuable commodity.¹²

The value of the bard is expressed even more explicitly by Phemius, the bard retained by the suitors to sing for their amusement. After the hero returns to his house and kills the interloping suitors, the bard begs Odysseus for mercy. Taking the traditional position of a suppliant, he pleads:

“Γουνπουμαι σ’, Οδυσευ· συ δε μ’ αιδεο και μ’ ελεησον·
 αυτω τοι μετοπισθ’ αχος εσσεται, ει κεν αιιδον
 πεφνης, ος τε θεοισι και ανθρωποισιν αιιδω.
 αυτοδιδακτος δ’ ειμι, θεος δε μοι εν φρεσιν οιμας
 παντοιας ενεφυσεν· εοικα δε τοι παραειδειν
 ως τε θεω...”

“I am at your knees, Odysseus. Respect me, have mercy.
 You will be sorry in time if you kill the singer
 Of songs. I sing to the gods and to human people, and I am
 Taught by myself, but the god has inspired in me the song-ways
 Of every kind. I am such a one as can sing before you
 As to a god.” (*Od.* 22.344-349)

The bard must be a person of some value: he argues (convincingly, for Odysseus does spare him) that it is the hero who will be sorry if he slays him. Just as he gave Demodocus praise and material reward for his songs, Odysseus gives Phemius the gift of his life. It is not mercy that moves him (several of the suitors also supplicated Odysseus and were still killed by him) but a strong sense that these bards are useful individuals.

¹² Finley, 48, points out that respect is always a relative term. Bards were not as respected or as wealthy as their patrons. Rather, they were part of a “privileged underclass,” along with skilled craftsman and even seers and physicians, who shared some of the comfort and respect of the heroic aristocracy, but were still inferior.

From the bards he portrayed, we move to Homer himself, and the role of the poet in history. As has been stated, the society depicted in the Homeric epics closely, though not perfectly, resembles the historical world as experienced by Homer. Thus, we can follow the example of the ancients, as summarized by Mary Lefkowitz. She wrote, “He emerges in the biographical tradition as a humble itinerant, like the bards Phemius and Demodocus in the *Odyssey*, dependent on others for support.”¹³ These historical “others” Lefkowitz mentions are the aristocrats and kings of Archaic Greece who were the “descendants” of the heroes of old. Like their putative predecessors, they shared a powerful desire for glory through song. Unlike the patrons portrayed by Homer in his works, however, the “Achilles” and “Odysseus” of later times did not receive glory directly by having their own deeds praised, but indirectly, by way of the praise of their heroic ancestors.

This traditional role for the bard, like the poetic tradition on which he drew, likely had roots in the Bronze Age. The earliest bards composed their songs about the real deeds of their warrior masters, and through repetition these songs became the stock material from which later songs were composed.¹⁴ This tradition, while a useful aid for memorization and performance in a society without writing, also limited the poet’s choice of language and subject matter. Thus, unlike the bards of his epics, Homer did not sing about the deeds of his own time, but those of the distant past.¹⁵ Their function was the same, however, for the aristocrats of the Dark Age, who viewed the stories of ancient times as a source of glory in the present, and in the words of Luce,

With the decline and fall of the Mycenaean world, the genealogies, panegyrics, and recitals of merit (*aristeiai*) became the precious heirlooms of refugees. The aristocratic

¹³ Lefkowitz, 12.

¹⁴ Luce, 174-175.

¹⁵ Finley, 48.

families lost their other possessions, but they and their retainers clung to the memory of their great past.¹⁶

Even if the oral tradition on which he draws prevents him from praising the deeds of the present, Homer is offering glory, albeit reflected glory, to the aristocrats to whom he sings.

The rigidity of the formulaic tradition is also responsible for one of the key characteristics of Homer's poetry: the dearth of first-person speech or other self-references. As Luce asserts, "Oral convention required that the singer's personality should merge unobtrusively into the stream of the song, so Homer himself remains elusive."¹⁷ Nagy argues that this is the direct result of the limited "vocabulary" of the oral tradition, and that the individuality of any poet, like the individuality of any performance, is swallowed by the greater whole of the tradition.¹⁸ It is only with the development of new genres of poetry, free from the constraints imposed by the oral tradition, that poets begin to assert their individual identities within their work.

The epinician ode is one such genre. These choral poems were written to commemorate athletic victories at the sacred games. Pindar, who lived in the 5th Century BC at the end of the Archaic Age, is considered by both ancient and modern readers to have been the greatest poet of this genre.¹⁹ The circumstances of the composition of these odes is described by Carne-Ross, who says

So and so has gained a victory at one of the four great games, Olympian, Pythian, Nemean, or Isthmian. His triumph will be celebrated on the evening of the games with a brief traditional or impromptu song, but

¹⁶ Luce, 175.

¹⁷ Luce, 177.

¹⁸ Nagy, 1990, 79.

¹⁹ Pindar was a prolific poet, whose work extended beyond the genre of the epinician ode. Nagy 1990, 111 reports that besides four books of victory odes, he was also the author of dithyrambs, hymns, paeans, laments, encomia, and three books of "songs for maidens." Because only fragments of these works survive, however, and because they are not relevant to a discussion of the poet as immortalizer, this paper will not consider them.

something more solid and more splendid is needed if the achievement is to be fittingly memorialized. So, the victor or his family commission a poet to compose a celebratory ode, which will be performed later on at home.²⁰

Carne-Ross points out an important parallel between the epinician ode and the poetry of Homer.

Both are operating as *memorials* of great deeds. This parallel can be seen in the language used in both poems to talk about poetry, as Nagy points out:

Another word used in Pindar's diction to designate his medium is *kleos*, which can be used to mean "glory" or "fame" – as conferred by song or poetry... From the epic of Homer we see that his medium, too, refers to itself as *kleos*.²¹

Both Homeric epic and Pindaric epinician serve the same function, to confer glory on a subject for their notable deeds, whether military, in the case of the Homeric heroes, or athletic, like Pindar's patrons.

The importance of glory, and its intimate connection with song, is visible throughout Pindar's work, as in Homer's. In his eleventh Olympian Ode, commemorating the victory of one Hagesidamos in the boys' boxing event, he says:

Εστιν ανθρωποις ανεμων οτε πλειστα
 χρησις, εστιν δ' ουρασιων υδατων,
 ομβριων παιδων νεφελας.
 ει δε συν πονω τισ ευ πρασσοι, μελιγαρυες υμνοι
 υστερων αρχα λογων
 τελλεται και πιστον ορκιον μεγαλαις αρεταις.

There is a time when men welcome the winds, and a time when they welcome the waters of heaven, the rain-laden daughters of the cloud. But, when anyone is victorious by aid and toil, then it is that honey-voiced odes are a foundation for future fame, even a faithful witness to noble exploits. (*Ol.* 11.1-6)²²

²⁰ Carne-Ross, 13.

²¹ Nagy 1990, 147.

²² The translations of Pindar are the *Loeb Classical Library*, and are by Sir John Sandys.

Song is as essential as wind or rain, precisely because of its power to glorify, and to lay that “foundation for future fame.” The poet goes on to say, “Far beyond envy is the praise that is thus stored up for victors at Olympia; and such praises my tongue would fain feed and foster...” (*Ol.* 11.7-9). This passage points to one of the key differences between the epic and the epinician ode: the freedom of the poet to speak directly, in the first person, about the glory he is granting.

The source of this freedom is occasionality. The language used within the poems to talk about poetry illustrates this concept well. As we noted before, both Homer and Pindar refer to their poems as *kleos*, “glory.” Unlike Homer, however, Pindar uses another word to describe his odes also: *ainos*. *Ainos*, meaning “speech,” connotes the restriction of poetry to a particular situation.²³ Nagy expounds on this, saying,

In the epic poetry of Homer just as in the praise poetry of Pindar, *kleos* denotes the act of praising, but in epic the praise takes place by the very process of narrating the deeds of heroes, predominantly in the third person. In praise poetry, the praise is more direct: here too *kleos* denotes the act of praising, but the praise in this case applies to the here and now, inviting narration in the second person. In the epinicians or victory odes of Pindar, for example, the praise applies to the victories of the athletes who competed in the great Panhellenic Games. The victory would be celebrated on the occasion of the victor’s return from the Games to his native polis. The praise poetry of Pindar, then, is occasional. Occasionality is the essence of *ainos*. The epic poetry of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on the other hand is distinctly not occasional: unlike the praise poem it does not praise anyone in the here and now of its own performance. The praise of Homeric poetry is restricted to the heroes of the distant past.²⁴

Pindar’s poetry, unlike the poetry of Homer, was able to speak about the present directly.

The freedom granted to Pindar and other epinician poets by the immediacy, the direct connection to occasion and the present, of their performance changed the way they talked about immortality. The poet was no longer simply important because of his valuable ability to grant

²³ Nagy, 1990, 148.

²⁴ Nagy, 1990, 150.

glory. Now he can claim that by acting in his role as immortalizer, he will become immortal himself. This is not only a result of the growth of occasionality in poetry. It also comes from the fact that poetry is seen as an integral part of the process of gaining *kleos*. Nagy asserts, “In sum, the choral lyric of speaking refers to its own social function in terms of a final stage in the ritual program of the four great Pan-Hellenic games.²⁵” This echoes the point made by Willcock, who states:

Furthermore, Pindar sees his own function as poet as complementary to that of his patron...And in the end it is he, with the generosity of his praise, who puts the final glory on the victor’s achievement. Thus, he freely compares himself to the victor.²⁶

The odes themselves offer ample evidence of this identification. The seventh Isthmian, for the *pankration* victory of one Strepsiades, is particularly telling, because it highlights the close identification between poet and hero. It says:

αιισομαι χαιταν στεφανοισιν αρμο-
σαις. ο δ’ αθανατων μη θρασσετω φθονος,
ο τι τερπνον εφामερον διωκων
εκαλος επειμι γηρας ες τε τον μορσιμον
αιωνα. θνασκομεν γαρ ομως απαντες·
δαιμων δ’ αισος· τα μακρα δ’ ει τις
παπτανει, βραχυς εξικεσθαι χαλκοπεδον θεων
εδραν· οτι πτεροεις ερριψε Παγασος
δεσποταν εθελοντ’ ες ουρανου σταθμους
ελθειν μεθ’ ομαγυριν Βελλεροφονταν
Ζηνος· το δε παρ δικαν
γλυκυ πικροτατα μενει τελευτα.
αμμι δ’, ω χρυσεα κομα θαλλων, πορε, Λοξια,
τεασιν αμιλλαισιν
ευανθεα και Πυθοι στεφανον.

I shall sing with my hair entwined with garlands, while I only pray that the envy of the immortals may not mar whatever pleasure I pursue, sufficient for my day, as I calmly pass onward to old age and to the destined bourne of life. For we die all alike, albeit our doom is diverse. But, if any man lifteth up his eyes to things afar, he is too short to attain unto the brass-paved floor of heaven; for the winged Pegasus threw Bellerophon his rider,

²⁵ Nagy, 1990, 142-143.

²⁶ Willcock, 11.

who would fain have flown to the homes of heaven and the goodly company of Zeus. Stolen sweets are awaited by an end most bitter. But grant to us, O Loxias, that art glorious with thy golden hair, a crown of fairest flowers even from thine own contests at Pytho. (*Ist.* 7.53-72)

After spending several lines describing the courageous fall of the elder Strepsiades, Pindar shifts without warning into the first person and discusses his own aging and progression towards death, before concluding with a prayer to Apollo for justly given glory, rather than stolen immortality. This request is in the first person also, and so is not for the victor, but the poet himself. This is a clear example of what Steiner was describing when she wrote, “Pindar also addresses his own role as poet. Through metaphor, he links the fate of the victor to that of his celebrant, describing how their preservation will be a mutual one.”²⁷ No longer simply the provider of glory like a Homeric bard, Pindar claims that his equality with his patrons also makes him the recipient of glory, and thus of immortality.

This same sharing of glory also appears in the first Olympian Ode, one of Pindar’s most famous. The victor in question is Hieron of Syracuse, who won the single horse race. While the main focus is on the patron, he is still clearly linked to the poet praising him:

συν αρματι θωω κλειξειν, επικουρον ευρων οδον λογων
 παρ’ ευδειελον ελθων Κρονιον. εμοι μεν ων
 Μοισα καρτερωτατον βελος αλκα τρεφει·
 επ’ αλλοισι δ’ αλλοι μεγαλοι. το δ’ εσχατον κορυφουται
 βασιλευσι. μηκετι παπταινε πορσιον.
 ειη σε τε τουτον υψου χροσσω πατειν, εμε τε τοσσαδε νικαφοροις
 ομιλειν προφαπτον σοφια καθ’ Ελλαπασ εοντα παντα.

Howsoever, for myself, the Muse is keeping a shaft most mighty in strength. Some men are great in one thing; others in another; but the crowning summit is for kings. Refrain from peering too far! Heaven grant that thou mayest plant thy feet on high, so long as thou livest, and that I may consort with the victors for all my days, and be foremost in the lore of song among the Hellenes in every land. (*Ol.* 1.110-116)

²⁷ Steiner, 135.

While making it clear that Hieron is an exalted figure, Pindar claims some glory for himself, and identifies the tyrant's own victories as the source for that glory. Also of note is Pindar's characterization of himself as "foremost," a turn of phrase that is normally used to describe the victors themselves. Finally, by placing self-praise at the end, he is emphasizing his own importance even more. The last thing the audience hears is the skill of Pindar, rather than of Hieron.

Thus Pindar, in contrast with Homer, claimed not only the power to immortalize, but also immortality itself as a result of his poetry. Like Homer, however, his claims on immortality were still limited by the conventions of his genre. The epinician poet gains immortality because of his association with his patrons. As Nagy says,

We have seen that the notion of the compensating the poet for the 'ordeal' of composing a poem is a part of the ritual chain of reciprocity, where the value of the compensation owed the poet, even if it takes the shape of material gifts, is still transcendent inasmuch as it is considered sacred.²⁸

The growth of occasionality has changed the way poets deal with their function as immortalizers, but that function is still rigidly controlled by the demands of genre. Before poets claim immortality for themselves as a pure result of their poetry, there must first be a shift in the social context of poetry, and of his patron, both of which are beginning in the time of Pindar, but will not reach their acme until the Hellenistic period, two hundred years later.

Starting in the fifth century BC, we see the proliferation of poetry competitions, usually as part of the games of a city or region.²⁹ While continuing the tradition of games as a source for glory analogous with the glory of the heroic past, these competitions removed athletes from the "ritual chain of reciprocity" mentioned by Nagy, and gave the poet an opportunity to earn

²⁸ Nagy, 1990, 188.

²⁹ Hardie, 17.

directly for the first time. This was only a first step, however, as this was glory still obtained in the traditional venue of competition, and served primarily as a stepping stone into the more traditional work of glorifying victorious athletes (a poet who had won a few victories had a much better chance of earning a commission).³⁰

The decisive change was the power of the patron in the social and political world independent of his attempts to gain glory. In the time of Pindar, the aristocracy, which had dominated most Greek *poleis* throughout the Dark Age and the Early Archaic Age, was being replaced in some places by tyranny. Individual tyrants (including Hieron, whom Pindar praises in *Olympian* 1) held cultural and political power that was previously in the hands of an entire class of people. This caused problems for the poet, who had been only able to claim glory through the social “machinery” of the Sacred Games.³¹ With the rise of tyrants, the system of reciprocity broke down, and poets had to change their tactics if they are to dispense, and thus acquire, glory.

Beginning in the time of Pindar, and again reaching its peak during the Hellenistic Period, we see a rise in what Hardie calls “unbidden poetry.” In contrast with “bidden poets” like Homer and Pindar, later poets must seek out their patrons and offer up poetry with no guarantee of recompense.³² In Theocritus’ *Idylls* 16, we find what Hardie himself termed, “...the most important expression of these comments.”³³ In it, Theocritus complains bitterly of having his request for monetary support rejected by the Syracusan tyrant Hieron II (namesake of Pindar’s great patron). Bemoaning the decline of his profession, he says:

τις εὖ εἰποντα φιλήσει;

³⁰ Hardie, 25.

³¹ Nagy, 1990, 188.

³² Hardie, 30.

³³ Hardie, 33.

οὐκ οἶδ'· οὐ γὰρ ἐτ' ἀνδρες ἐπ' ἐργασίῳ ὡς παρὸς ἐσθλοῖς
αἰνεῖσθαι σπευδόντι, νενικηνται δ' ὑπὸ κερδῶν·

So I ask, who is there who, in this age, will befriend a man
Who speaks his praises out? I know not.
Men no more
Are eager to be known for noble deeds. The law
Of profits rules them (*Id.* 16.13-15).³⁴

So powerful are the kings of this age that they can afford to be stingy in their treatment of the masters of immortality. In contrast with Pindar and Homer, who operated within a well-ordered system of reciprocity, Theocritus complains that there seems to be no more demand for poets any more. Their power appears to have diminished greatly.

The breakdown of traditional systems of reciprocity did not diminish the power of poetry, however. Instead, poets gained new freedom in claiming personal immortality as a result of their work. The Ptolemaic regime is of particular interest to the present discussion, because it was there where both Theocritus and Callimachus spent most of their professional careers. The reason for this can be summed up in one word: Museum. The Temple to the Muses, located in the Ptolemaic capital of Alexandria, along with its attached library, was the first great book repository and center for literary scholarship in the Greco-Roman world. It was built by the Ptolemies to raise the status of their newly founded capital, and it succeeded marvelously, attracting with the promise of patronage the scholars, poets, and priests who worked there, including both Theocritus and Callimachus. So influential were the scholars of the Museum and their patrons in guiding the direction of Mediterranean culture that for many years the entire

³⁴ Translations of Theocritus are drawn from Anne Rist.

period, from Alexander's conquests to the ascendancy of Rome, was called the Alexandrian Period, and its poets, including Callimachus and Theocritus, Alexandrian poets.³⁵

At the Museum and the Library, a large number of poets could benefit from the generosity of a single royal patron. As John Ferguson puts it:

The Museum was a convenient place to attach the writers whom the Ptolemies attracted to their court. It was in the urban environment that Theocritus developed the forms of pastoral poetry as a form of escape. Callimachus and Apollonius were certainly placed by their royal patron in the Museum.³⁶

Although the old system of reciprocal song and reward, which poets like Pindar exploited to claim glory for themselves, had broken down, it was still possible for poets to make a living, especially in Alexandria at the Museum.

The relationship between poet and patron in this new system was very different from its predecessor, and has often been misunderstood. For many years, it was taken for granted that poets like Theocritus and Callimachus, because of their dependence on the whims of their patron, were flatterers, who wrote only to please.³⁷ In actuality, Callimachus and Theocritus are both measured, and at times ironic, in praising their patrons. Callimachus wrote almost nothing about Ptolemy II himself, and comparisons of Ptolemy to Zeus or Apollo once thought to be praise are now seen as being wry.³⁸ Theocritus, as we have already seen, has no qualms about criticizing his patrons for rejecting his offers of poetry.

³⁵ Cameron points out that this title is incredibly misleading, since by no means all, nor even all the greatest of the "Alexandrian poets" were directly attached to the Museum, or lived in Alexandria at all. Instead, I have followed his example in calling the period and its poets "Hellenistic." See Cameron, 25.

³⁶ Ferguson, 18.

³⁷ Cameron, 12.

³⁸ Cameron, 13.

Given that Pindar's claims for glory and immortality rested upon his claims of equality with his victorious patrons, one might suppose that the more distant relationship between Hellenistic poets and patrons would bring such claims to an end. Instead, we find that the opposite occurs. Poetic claims to immortality live on, but far outside the boundaries of the normal praise hymn, and in an entirely different form. No longer claiming personal glory arising from the glory of the hero-object, the poets become heroes *themselves*, and as the objects of their own poetry, lay independent claim to the immortality they always granted. Such claims are far from explicit, but are easily discernible as a subtext in poems of both Theocritus and Callimachus.

Theocritus is primarily remembered for his bucolic poetry, poems set in and focused on the pastoral setting, having as characters shepherds, goatherds, and their gods of meadow and wood. In *Idyll* 1, we hear the story of the legendary Daphnis, who wastes away pining over love. What is of note is that the main narrative is presented within the context of a frame story, in which a wandering poet sings it for the pleasure of a goatherd, and for a prize. The goatherd sings:

αι δε κ' αεισης,
 ως οκα τον Λιβυαθε ποτι Χρομιν ασας ερισδων,
 αιγα τε τοι δωσω διδυματοκον ες τρις αμελξαι,
 α δυ' εξοισ' εριφως ποταμελγεται ες δυο πελλας
 και βαθυ κισσυβιον κεκλυσμενον αδει κηρω,
 αμφωες, νεοτευχες, ετι γλυφανοιο ποτοσδον.

If you sing as once,
 Competing with Chromis of Libya, I'll give you
 To milk three times a she-goat with twins;
 Although she has two kids, she fills up two pails.
 Plus an ivy-wood bowl, fragrant with wax,
 Two handled, new made: you can smell the chisel (*Id.* 1, 23-28).

Behind the rustic quality of both poem and prize, we can see the even older motif of the hero or athlete engaged in competition for a set prize. This harkens back to the growth of the poetic contest discussed by Hardie. Poets, once responsible for granting glory to such men and their deeds, have now become their own object, and made the writing of poems a heroic act.

In the works of Callimachus, this seizing of the heroic role becomes even easier to discern. His poems are unburdened by an elaborate, conventional setting, and perhaps more importantly are directed towards his living contemporaries, making them (perhaps) the more trustworthy source of information regarding the poet's own mindset. First, we find in his *Epigrams* a poem written as an epitaph for one of his fellow poets. It reads thus:

Εἶπε τις, Ηρακλείτε, τέον μορον, ἐς δὲ με δάκρυ
 ἠγάγεν, ἐμνησθὴν δ' ὀσσακίς ἀμφοτέροι
 ἠλίον ἐν λῆσχη κατέδυσάμεν· ἀλλὰ σὺ μὲν πού,
 ξείν' Ἀλικαρνήσευ, τετραπαλαί σποδίη·
 αἰ δὲ τῆαι ζῶουσιν ἀήδονες, ἦσιν ὁ πάντων
 ἀρπακτῆς Αἰδῆς οὐκ ἐπὶ χεῖρα βάλει.

Your death, a casual remark, moved me to tears,
 For I recalled Heraklitos, how often you and I
 Put the sun to bed with our talking. But all that's left
 Of you is ashes now, my friend in Halikarnesos.
 Your *Nightingales* are alive, though: Hades who rips
 All things away will never lay a hand on them.³⁹ (*Epigram 2*)

The *Nightingales* to which he refers are a book of poems, alive despite their master's death. We have here the claim that a poet, and not merely his patron or himself linked with his patron, survives death when his work survives. Freed from the rigid conventions of Homer and the reciprocal exchange of Pindar, those who once granted immortality have now granted it on themselves. Callimachus makes a similar claim in one of the most famous of his passages, the

³⁹ All translations of Callimachus are from Frank Nisetich.

response to the *Telchines* at the beginning of his *Aitia*. He shoots back at his critics, whom he says mock him for writing short poetry:

And so I sing for those who love the shrill cicada's cry, and hate
 The clamor of asses. Let someone else
 Loud as any long-eared brute, bray
 For their amusement. As for me,
 I would be small and winged—yes,
 Even so, to sing
 With dew upon my lips, the food
 Of morning culled from air divine, shedding
 The years that weigh on me
 Like Sicily on Enkelados (*Aitia* 1.36-46).

It is essential to focus on the mythological resonances of the image he uses. The cicada is not only a small, sweet voiced insect. To the Greeks, it was closely linked with the concept of immortality. Despite apparently dying, in a set number of years it arises, reborn, from the earth. Because he has chosen to sing like a cicada, he claims that he will gain the cicada's eternity, and that "with dew on his lips" (likely a reference to the song itself) he will draw on divine power to overcome old age, and presumably death itself.

Thus we see the change in the claims of immortality made by Greek poets. Homer, although valued and recompensed for the use of his immortalizing power, claims no immortality of his own. The strict conventions of oral epic do not allow for so distinct a poetic personality. It is Pindar, freed of the chains of the epic genre, who claims immortality as his own. This immortality, however, is not his alone, but is shared with the victorious athletes whom he immortalizes. Without them, he can claim no glory as his own. Finally, Callimachus and Theocritus make the bold claim that poets can be immortalized in their own right, without some particular patron on whom to confer glory. This is possible because of the unique loosening of the poet-patron relationship affected by the Ptolemies and the other Hellenistic successor kings.

Clearly, the link between immortality and poetry is strong, and it endures across many different genres and time periods. Many other works, including Roman lyric (which was heavily influenced by Hellenistic Greek models) and Greek Archaic poetry, could be fruitfully examined through the lens of glory. That, however, is a task for a future project.

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