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Pindar's Homer once again: reading Pindar's third and ninth Pythian odes

**Focus passages:**

Pythian 3.101ff. Isthm. 8.56 Od. 24.58-73

Pythian 3.100f. Pythian 6.21-27, Nemean 3.43-58

Pythian 3.1-5, 6-62, 63-76, 77f. Od. 1.253-271

**Pythian 3**

If it were proper for this commonplace prayer to be made by my tongue, I would want Cheiron the son of Philyra to be alive again, he who has departed, the wide-ruling son of Cronus son of Uranus; and I would want him to reign again in the glens of Pelion, the beast of the wilds [5] whose mind was friendly to men; just as he was when once he reared Asclepius, that gentle craftsman who drove pain from the limbs that he healed, that hero who cured all types of diseases. His mother, the daughter of Phlegyas with his fine horses, before she could bring him to term with the help of Eleithuia who attends on childbirth, was stricken by the golden [10] arrows of Artemis in her bedroom and descended to the house of Hades, by the skills of Apollo. The anger of the children of Zeus is not in vain. But she made light of Apollo, in the error of her mind, and consented to another marriage without her father's knowledge, although she had before lain with Phoebus of the unshorn hair, [15] and was bearing within her the pure seed of the god. She did not wait for the marriage-feast to come, nor for the full-voiced cry of the hymenaeal chorus, such things as unmarried girls her own age love to murmur in evening songs to their companion.<sup>1</sup> Instead, [20] she was in love with what was distant; many others have felt that passion. There is a worthless tribe among men which dishonors what is at home and looks far away, hunting down empty air with hopes that cannot be fulfilled. Such was the strong infatuation [25] that the spirit of lovely-robed Coronis had caught. For she lay in the bed of a stranger who came from Arcadia; but she did not elude the watcher. Even in Pytho where sheep are sacrificed, the king of the temple happened to perceive it, Loxias, persuading his thoughts with his unerring counsellor: his mind, which knows all things. He does not grasp falsehood, and he is deceived [30] by neither god nor man, neither in deeds nor in thoughts. Knowing even then of her sleeping with Ischys, son of Elatus, and of her lawless deceit, he sent his sister, raging with irresistible force, to Lacereia, since the girl lived by the banks of Lake Boebias. [35] A contrary fortune turned her to evil and overcame her. And many neighbors shared her fate and perished with her; fire leaps from a single spark on a mountain, and destroys a great forest. But when her kinsmen had placed the girl in the wooden walls of the pyre, and [40] the ravening flame of Hephaestus ran around it, then Apollo spoke: "I can no longer endure in my soul to destroy my own child by a most pitiful death, together with his mother's grievous suffering." So he spoke. In one step he reached the child and snatched it from the corpse; the burning fire divided its blaze for him, [45] and he bore the child away and gave him to the Magnesian Centaur to teach him to heal many painful diseases for men. And those who came to him afflicted with congenital sores, or with their limbs wounded by gray bronze or by a far-hurled stone, [50] or with their bodies wasting away from summer's fire or winter's cold, he released and delivered all of them from their different pains, tending some of them with gentle incantations, others with soothing potions, or by wrapping remedies all around

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their limbs, and others he set right with surgery. But even skill is enthralled by the love of gain. [55] Gold shining in his hand turned even that man, for a handsome price, to bring back from death a man who was already caught. And so the son of Cronus hurled his shaft with his hands through both of them, and swiftly tore the breath out of their chests; the burning thunderbolt brought death crashing down on them. We must seek from the gods what is appropriate for mortal minds, [60] knowing what lies before our feet, and what kind of destiny we have. Do not crave immortal life, my soul, but use to the full the resources of what is possible. But if wise Cheiron were still living in his cave, and if our honey-voiced odes [65] had cast a spell on his spirit, I would have persuaded him to send even now a healer to cure noble men of their feverish diseases, someone called a son of Apollo or of his father Zeus. And I would have gone on a ship, cleaving the Ionian waters, to the fountain of Arethusa and the presence of my Aetnaean host, [70] the king who rules Syracuse, gentle to his citizens, bearing no envious grudge against good men, a marvellous father to his guests. If I had reached his shores bringing a double blessing, golden health and a victory-song to add brilliance to his garlands from the Pythian games, which once Phereclus took when he was the best at Cirrha, [75] I say that I would have come across the deep sea to him as a light that shines farther than a star of the sky. But I, for my part, want to offer a prayer to the Mother, the revered goddess whose praises, with those of Pan, girls often sing at night beside my doorway. [80] Hieron, if you are skilled in understanding the true essence of words, you have learned and know the saying of former times: "The immortals dispense to men two pains for every blessing." Fools cannot bear their pain with grace, but noble men can, by turning the good side outwards. It is your lot to be attended by good fortune. [85] For great destiny watches over the leader of the people, the tyrant, if over any man. But a secure life was not granted either to Peleus son of Aeacus or to godlike Cadmus; yet they are said to have attained the highest prosperity of all mortal men, since [90] they heard the Muses of the golden headbands singing on the mountain and in seven-gated Thebes, when Cadmus married ox-eyed Harmonia, and Peleus married the famous daughter of wise Nereus. And the gods held feasts for both of them, and they saw the royal sons of Cronus on their golden seats, and they received [95] wedding gifts. By the grace of Zeus, they set their hearts right again from their former troubles. But in time Cadmus' three daughters, by their bitter suffering, took from him his share of joy; even though father Zeus had visited the desirable bed of white-armed Thyone. [100] And Peleus' son, the only child whom immortal Thetis bore in Phthia, had his life taken in battle by the bow, and roused the wailing of the Danaans while his body was burning on the pyre. But if any mortal has the path of truth in his mind, he must fare well at the hands of the gods as he has the opportunity. But the winds are changeable [105] that blow on high. The prosperity of men does not stay secure for long, when it follows weighing upon them in abundance. I will be small when my fortunes are small, great when they are great. I will honor in my mind the fortune that attends me from day to day, tending it to the best of my ability. [110] But if a god were to give me luxurious wealth, I hope that I would find lofty fame in the future. We know of Nestor and Lycian Sarpedon, whom men speak of, from melodious words which skilled craftsmen join together. Through renowned songs excellence [115] gains a long life. But few find that easy to accomplish.

### Pythian 9

With the help of the deep-waisted Graces I want to shout aloud proclaiming the Pythian victory with the bronze shield of Telesicrates, a prosperous man, the crowning glory of chariot-driving Cyrene; [5] the long-haired son of Leto once snatched her from the wind-echoing glens of Mt. Pelion, and carried the girl of the wilds in his golden chariot to a place where he made her mistress of a land rich in flocks and most rich in fruits, to live and flourish on the root of the third continent. Silver-footed Aphrodite welcomed [10] the Delian guest from his chariot, touching him with a light hand, and she cast lovely modesty on their sweet union, joining together in a common bond of marriage the god and the daughter of wide-ruling Hypseus. He was at that time king of the proud Lapiths, a hero of the second generation from Oceanus; [15] in the renowned glens of Mt. Pindus a Naiad bore him, Creusa the daughter of Gaia, delighting in the bed of the river-god Peneius. And Hypseus raised his lovely-armed daughter Cyrene. She did not care for pacing back and forth at the loom, nor for the delights of luncheons with her stay-at-home companions; [20] instead, fighting with bronze javelins and with a sword, she killed wild beasts, providing great restful peace for her father's cattle; but as for her sweet bed-fellow, sleep, [25] she spent only a little of it on her eyelids as it fell on them towards dawn. Once the god of the broad quiver, Apollo who works from afar, came upon her wrestling alone and without spears with a terrible lion. Immediately he called Cheiron from out of his halls and spoke to him: [30] "Leave your sacred cave, son of Philyra, and marvel at the spirit and great strength of this woman; look at what a struggle she is engaged in, with a fearless head, this young girl with a heart more than equal to any toil; her mind is not shaken with the cold wind of fear. From what mortal was she born? From what stock has this cutting been taken, that she should be living in the hollows of the shady mountains [35] and putting to the test her boundless valor? Is it lawful to lay my renowned hand on her? And to cut the honey-sweet grass of her bed?" And the powerful Centaur, laughing softly with a gentle brow, right away gave his wise advice in reply: "Hidden are skilled Persuasion's keys to holy love, [40] Phoebus, and both gods and men blush to take the pleasure of a bed for the first time openly. For even in your case, for whom it is unlawful to touch on falsehood, a gentle impulse has swayed you to dissemble your words. You ask me from what race the girl comes, lord Apollo? You who know the appointed end of all things, [45] and all the paths that lead to them? And how many leaves the earth puts forth in spring, and how many grains of sand in the sea and in rivers are dashed by the waves and the gusting winds; and that which will be, and from where it will come, all this you clearly see. [50] But if I must match myself even against one who is wise, I will speak. You came to this glen to be her husband, and you will bear her over the sea to the choicest garden of Zeus, where you will make her the ruler of a city, when you have gathered the island-people [55] to the hill encircled by plains. And now queen Libya of the broad meadows will gladly welcome your glorious bride in her golden halls. There she will right away give her a portion of land to flourish with her as her lawful possession, not without tribute of all kinds of fruit, nor unfamiliar with wild animals. There she will bear a child, whom famous Hermes [60] will take from beneath his own dear mother and carry to the Seasons on their lovely thrones and to Gaia. They will admire<sup>2</sup> the baby on their knees and

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drop nectar and ambrosia on his lips, and they will make him immortal, to be called Zeus and holy Apollo, a delight to men he loves, an ever-present guardian of flocks, [65] Agreus and Nomius, and others will call him Aristaeus." Having spoken thus, Cheiron urged the god to fulfill the delightful consummation of his marriage. Accomplishment is swift when the gods are already hurrying, and the roads are short. That very day decided the matter. They lay together in the bedchamber of Libya, rich in gold, where she possesses a most beautiful city [70] which is renowned for victories in contests. And now in very holy Pytho, where by his victory he had Cyrene proclaimed, the son of Carneiades brought lovely, flourishing good fortune to her; she will welcome him graciously, when he brings back home to the land of beautiful women [75] desirable fame from Delphi. Great excellence can always inspire many stories; but to embroider a short account from a lengthy theme is what wise men love to hear. Right proportion in the same way contains the gist of the whole; as seven-gated Thebes once knew well, [80] Telesicrates was not dishonored by Iolaus; when he had cut off the head of Eurystheus with the edge of his sword, he was buried below the earth by the tomb of the charioteer Amphitryon, his father's father, where he lay as the guest of the Sown Men, having come to dwell in the streets of the Cadmeans, who ride on white horses. Wise Alcmena lay with Amphitryon and with Zeus, and bore [85] in a single birth twin sons, strong and victorious in battle. Only a mute man does not have Heracles' name on his lips, and does not always remember the waters of Dirce, which reared him and Iphicles. To them I will sing a victory-song for the fulfillment of my prayer; [90] may the pure light of the clear-voiced Graces not desert me. For I say that I have praised this city three times, in Aegina and on the hill of Nisus, truly escaping silent helplessness. Therefore, whether a man is friendly or hostile among the citizens, let him not obscure a thing that is done well for the common good and so dishonor the precept of the old man of the sea, [95] who said to praise with all your spirit, and with justice, even an enemy when he accomplishes fine deeds. The women saw your many victories at the seasonal rites of Pallas, and each silently prayed that you could be her dear husband, [100] Telesicrates, or her son; and in the Attic Olympia too, and in the contests of deep-bosomed Mother Earth, and in all your local games. But while I am quenching my thirst for song, someone exacts an unpaid debt from me, to awake again [105] the ancient glory of his ancestors as well: for the sake of a Libyan woman they went to the city of Irasa, as suitors of the very famous daughter of Antaeus with the beautiful hair. Many excellent kinsmen sought her, and many strangers too, since her beauty was marvellous. They wanted [110] to pluck the flowering fruit of golden-crowned Youth. But her father, cultivating for his daughter a more renowned marriage, heard how Danaus once in Argos had found for his forty-eight daughters, before noon overtook them, a very swift marriage. For right away he stood the whole band of suitors at the end of a course, [115] and told them to decide with a footrace which of the heroes, who came to be bridegrooms, would take which bride. The Libyan too made such an offer in joining his daughter with a husband. He placed her at the goal, when he had arrayed her as the crowning prize, and in their midst he announced that that man should lead her to his home, whoever was the first to leap forward [120] and touch her robes. There Alexidamus, when he had sped to the front of the swift race, took the noble girl's hand in his hand and led her through the crowd

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of Nomad horsemen. They cast on that man many leaves and garlands, [125] and before he had received many wings for his victories.