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The Gorgons' Lament in Pindar's Pythian 12

By Douglas E. Gerber, London, Canada

In P. 12,6–8, the beginning of the myth, Pindar asks that Acragas welcome the victorious aulete Midas, νικάσαντα τέχνα, τάν ποτε / Παλλὰς ἐφεῦρε ψρασεῖαν <Γοργόνων> / οὐλιον ψρῆνον διαπλέξαισ' Αὐλάν. The passage presents no problems except for the precise meaning of οὐλιον, the most recent explanation of which is given by Köhnken as follows¹:

“O. Schroeder versteht οὐλιος ψρῆνος (8) passivisch und meint: «Ähnlich vielleicht unser ‘Todesschrei’ als eines Getöteten oder über ... den Tod eines anderen zu Tode Erschrockenen: keineswegs bezeichnet es, aktivisch, eine Wirkung des Threnos selbst auf den Hörer». Gegen diese Auffassung sprechen jedoch die Parallelen bei Pindar: O. 9,76 ‘im verderblichen Krieg’ (οὐλίῳ ... ἐν Ἀρεὶ) und O. 13,23 ‘verderbenbringende Lanzen’ (Ἀρης ἀνθεῖ νέων οὐλίαις αἰχμαῖσιν ἀνδρῶν). Das Adjektiv ist also wohl auch P. 12,8 aktivisch aufzufassen (‘verderblich’, ‘schrecklich’): in seiner Wirkung auf Perseus gleicht der Threnos der Gorgonen einem furchteinflößenden und verderbenbringenden Kriegsgeschrei. Dafür spricht auch, dass Pindar die furchtbare Erscheinung der Schwestern so sehr hervorhebt (7 ψρασεῖαι Γοργόνες; 9 ἀπλάτοι ὄφιων κεφαλαί; vgl. 13 ψεσπέσιον Φόρκοιο ... γένος).”

For reasons that will soon become apparent, I do not think that this is a valid interpretation. To consider Köhnken's arguments first, there is no doubt that in the two other passages in Pindar where οὐλιος occurs, it has the meaning given by Köhnken. No Greek poet, however, is obliged to give a word the same meaning every time he uses it, and this is especially true of a lyric poet. The translation ‘verderblich’ may also seem appropriate in light of the surrounding words ψρασεῖαν and ἀπλάτοις, but when one considers the end of the myth a different translation suggests itself².

As the myth comes to its close, the τέχνα, τάν ποτε Παλλὰς ἐφεῦρε is picked up in vv. 19–22 in the following manner:

παριθένος αὐλῶν τεῦχε πάμφωνον μέλος,
ὅφρα τὸν Εύρυάλας ἐκ καρπαλιμᾶν γενύων
χριμφύνεντα σὺν ἔντεσι μιμήσαιτ' ἐρικλάγκταν γόον.
εὔρεν ψεός.

1 A. Köhnken, *Die Funktion des Mythos bei Pindar* (Berlin 1971) 136.

2 It should also be pointed out that Perseus has not yet been introduced, so that Köhnken's “in seiner Wirkung auf Perseus” would be possible only in retrospect. This is not, however, a major objection, since parallels could no doubt be found for such an anticipatory use elsewhere in Pindar.

Clearly γόον repeats ωρῆνον³, but none of the adjectives in the passage bears any relationship to οὐλιον in the sense of ‘verderblich’. The μέλος which Athena fashioned from Euryale’s lament is described as containing ‘all kinds of sounds’ (πάμφωνον), the lament proceeds from the ‘swiftly-moving’ (καρπαλιμᾶν) jaws of Euryale, and it is ‘loud’ (έρικλάγκταν).

It is time now to consider the various meanings οὐλιος may have and a possible model for Pindar’s use of οὐλιον here. The most detailed treatment of the word in recent years is by J. A. C. Greppin⁴. As one of its meanings he defends, convincingly in my opinion, the argument made by McKenzie⁵ that in some passages οὐλος means ‘thick, frequent’, virtually a synonym of πυκνός. Both Greppin and McKenzie assign this meaning to the phrase οὐλον κεκλήγοντες in Il. 17,756 and 759⁶, and one is immediately struck by the possibility that Pindar had this phrase in mind when he composed vv. 8 and 21. As was mentioned earlier, γόον in v. 21 repeats ωρῆνον in v. 8, and this repetition, combined with the repetition of ἐφεῦρε and εὗρεν, seems to me to make it plausible that Pindar intended us to see some connection between the adjectives that modify the two nouns. This connection becomes apparent if we take οὐλιον and έρικλάγκταν to be a reference to οὐλον κεκλήγοντες. If this is so, and if Greppin and McKenzie are right in their explanation of οὐλον in the Homeric passage, then the likelihood becomes strong that οὐλιον here means ‘oft-repeated’. Such a meaning ties in well with πάμφωνον (v. 19) and especially with καρπαλιμᾶν γενύων (v. 20), since ‘swiftly-moving jaws’ imply frequent repetition of what is uttered.

Finally, a reference to repetition is especially appropriate in connection with a threnody⁷. The unceasing nature of lamentation is often stressed in

3 M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 1974) 11, finds “some differentiation” in the Homeric use of these two words, but admits that in classical authors there is “little distinction of meaning”. They are sometimes combined, as in Eur. *Andr.* 92 and *Medea* 1211.

4 *Oulos, ‘Baneful’*, TAPhA 106 (1976) 177–186.

5 *Etymologies*, CQ 19 (1925) 208–210. McKenzie does not mention our passage and Greppin assigns the meaning ‘destructive’ to all three occurrences of the word in Pindar.

6 A scholiast on the passage gives the explanation ὀξὺ βοῶντες καὶ πυκνόν. McKenzie argues that πυκνόν is right, but not ὀξύ, and he gives as a translation ‘uttering oft-repeated cries’. Could the scholiast have been misled by ὀξέα κεκληγώς in Il. 17,88 or by the use of ὀξύς elsewhere of birds, as in ὀξύ λεληκώς (Il. 22,141)? – F. Bornmann, *Callimachi Hymnus in Dianam* (Firenze 1968) 120–121, has a lengthy note on οὐλα in vv. 246–247, οἱ δὲ πόδεσσιν / οὐλα κατεκροτάλιζον, in which, without citing McKenzie, he concludes that Callimachus “identifichi οὐλα con πυκνά nel senso omerico di ‘fitto, frequente’, un significato che si adatta molto bene ai movimenti dei piedi nella danza”. It seems to me that the same identification with πυκνός is possible for the other occurrences of οὐλος in Callimachus (*Hymn to Zeus* 52; fr. 228,41; *Epigr.* 5,5 Pf.), in all of which it is associated with a verb of motion.

7 On the repetitive nature of Greek threnodies, including the frequent use of refrains, see Alexiou (above, n. 2) 135ff.

Greek poetry and ψρῆνος or γόος are qualified by words such as ἀδινός⁸ (e.g., Il. 24,747), ἀεί (e.g., Soph. El. 530, Eur. IA 1176), ἀκορέστατος (Aesch. Pers. 545), ἀλίαστος (Il. 24,760), ἀνάριθμος (Soph. El. 232), παμμήκης (Soph. OC 1609), πολύς (e.g., Soph. El. 88.255), πολύφαμος (Pind. I. 8,58)⁹, etc. In contrast, there does not seem to be any example of a threnody that is 'verderblich'¹⁰.

⁸ Cf. Chantraine, *Dict. étym. de la langue gr.* s.v. ἄδην, who explains the phrase as a 'plainte pressée, répétée'.

⁹ More probably 'vielsagend' (Thummer) than 'of many voices' (Slater).

¹⁰ There is, however, some support for a threnody of the type postulated by Schroeder in the quotation from Köhnken cited at the beginning of this article. Cf. Il. 23,10 and 98 ὁλοοῖο ... γόοιο (lamentation for the dead Patroclus), Aesch. *Agam.* 1445 μέλψασα ψανάσιμον γόον (of Cassandra), and possibly *Septem* 917 δαικτήρ γόος, where Hutchinson in his commentary says δαικτήρ may mean 'concerned with those who slew, or, with slaying'. But in view of the preponderance of parallels for the repetitive nature of threnodies and in view of the structure of the myth in *P.* 12, with the obvious ring-composition present in its beginning and end, it seems much likelier that the adjective means 'oft-repeated'.