PINDAR'S FOURTEENTH OLYMPIAN ODE
A Commentary*

BY
W. J. VERDENIUS

Χάρις and the Charites

In the Homeric epics Aphrodite is not surrounded by Erotes, but by Charites. They have made her robe (E 338), they wash, anoint and dress her (θ 364), and receive her into their dance (σ 194). They bestow beauty on girls (ζ 18) and apparently excel in this quality themselves. Hera bribes Hypnos by offering him one of the Charites to become his wife (Ξ 267 ff.). They are not, however, a mere personification of beauty: their specific gift is to make beauty attractive, especially in an erotic sense. Thus Hypnos says that he has always wanted the girl promised by Hera (Ξ 276) 1). Hesiod explicates the erotic aspect by declaring that from the eyes of the Charites flows the passion of love (Th. 910). They enhance the charm of Pandora by putting golden necklaces upon her (Opf. 73-4). This passage shows that the activity of the Charites is not confined to erotics but also relates to arts and crafts. The latter aspect appears already in the Iliad, where Charis is the wife of Hephaestus (Σ 382): she personifies the charm of his metalwork. Similarly, much χάρις is said to radiate from Hera’s ear-drops (Ξ 183), a formula applied by Hesiod (Th. 583) to the diadem made by Hephaestus for Pandora. On this point, too, Hesiod is more explicit than Homer: he mentions the youngest of the Charites, Aglaia (‘Splendour’) as the wife of Hephaestus (Th. 945-6), which implies a more emphatic reference to the radiant charm which may emanate from a work of art 2).

*) Editions of the text, commentaries and translations will be quoted by author’s name only. See further the list of abbreviations at the end of the article.

1) Gianotti (68) is obviously wrong in calling this girl (and Charis, wife of Hephaestus) “la ‘Riconoscenza’ personificata”.


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Hesiod gives the Charites one more function: they are living on mount Olympus near the Muses (Th. 64). This obviously means that they lend the appropriate charm to song and dance 3). The connection between the Charites and the Muses is represented in a more concrete form in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo 189 ff., where the Charites are said to dance and the Muses to sing at the cithern-playing by Apollo. The same scene is found on the François vase, and according to Pausanias (IX 35, 3) there was a sixth-century statue of Apollo at Delos, bearing three Charites on his hand 4). In the same period Theognis (15-7) has the Muses and the Charites sing together: 'Only beautiful things are beloved'. Sappho (103 and 129) invokes the Muses and the Charites in conjunction, and Stesichorus (212) calls his poems 'publications of the Charites'.

Pindar adopted this tradition and gave the idea a more articulated expression. He twice mentions the Charites together with Aphrodite (P. 6, 1, Pae. 6, 4), but he is interested in their aesthetic rather than in their erotic aspects 5). To Pindar, χάρις in the first place means the charm which issues from poetry, and he considers this charm to be a divine power. He feels inspired by the Muses, who as daughters of Mnemosyne determine the factual contents of a poem (cf. Pae. 6, 51-2), and the Charites, who determine the effect on the audience 6). Pindar emphatically embraces the old

3) This idea is foreshadowed in the Odyssey: cf. Θ 175 χάρις ἄμφιπερι-στέφεται ἔπεος, ω 197-8 δολὴν χαρίσσαν.

4) Wilamowitz (Glaube d. Hell., I, 193 n. 4) doubts the authenticity of the statue, because it is said that the Charites were holding musical instruments (Apollod. fr. 98, 13 Jac., Plut. Mus. 14), whereas in early literature the Charites are only singing and dancing. But the artists may have simply projected the human practice of women playing musical instruments into the three goddesses. Cf. also Callim. fr. 114, discussed by R. Pfeiffer, Ausgewählte Schriften (München 1960), 55-71. Duchemin (80) is certainly wrong in suggesting 'que les Charites représentées à Délos avec Apollon soient associées aux puissances de guérison de ce dieu'.


6) Cf. Duchemin, 57-8, 93 and Anastase, 213-4, 219-20, who refers to N. 9, 53-5. There is a close connection between the Muses and the Charites, as is pointed out by Gianotti, 69 ff., who compares P. 5, 45 σὲ δ’ ἥκομοι φλέγοντι Χάριτες with O. 7, 23 φλέγεται δ’ ἴσιλόκουσι Μοίσαις, and O. 9, 26 Χαρίτων νέμομαι κάποιοι and P. 6, 1-2 ἄρουραν Χαρίτων ἀναπολίζομεν with