Between Pindar and Sappho: Horace *Odes* 4.2.9-12

Horace’s description of Pindar’s poetry in *Odes* 4.2 is one of antiquity’s most celebrated literary characterizations. Numerous critics have explored the dynamics of the *recusatio*, and Llewelyn Morgan has recently offered a detailed examination of Horace’s use of metre in relation to his description of Pindar’s metrical practice. He notes the strong contrast between the simple, non-choral sapphics employed by Horace and the metres used by Pindar in his dithyrambs (and epinicians), which are of much greater structural complexity. The use of sapphics is an important part of the way Horace contrasts his relatively humble verse with Pindar’s grandeur. The contrast between Sapphic form and Pindaric subject matter also creates local effects: the use of a simple, repetitive metre emphasises the way in which 10-24 contain and delimit the entire Pindaric corpus, an effect balanced by the evocation of Pindaric style in the sweeping construction of the period and the repetition of *siue/seu/-ue*. The Horace/Pindar antithesis is furthered by the speaker’s characterization of himself as *apis Matinae* (26) in contrast to Pindar’s swan (*multa Dircaeum leuat aura cycnum*, 25), while his status as *paruus* (31) and his construction of *operosa...carmina* (30-31) associate him with small-scale Callimacheanism. Similarly, the *tener uitulus* which Horace promises to offer

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4 Cf. Morgan 2010, 231: sapphics are “the wrong place for the expression of Pindar’s massive poetic achievements”. Cf. D’Angour 2012, 65 on the reasons of ‘social propriety’ underlying Horace’s rejection of Pindaric identity in 4.2.
5 Syndikus 1972-1973, ii; Morgan 2010, 228-230. Cf. e.g. the latter’s point about the synaphea between lines 22 and 23, *moresqua* / *aureos*, and 23 and 24, *nigroqua* / *inuidet*, which creates the effects that “the Pindaric material, like a river in spate, is bursting out of the restrictions which Horace...is attempting to place upon it” (p. 230).
6 Cf. Davis 1991, 133-143; Morgan 2010, 233-235. The image of the *apis* has a Pindaric antecedent at *P.* 10.53-54, where epinician song is compared to the activity of a bee: ἐγκωμίων γὰρ ἄωτος ὑμάς / ἐπ’ ἄλλοτ’ ἄλλον ἵλλον ὡτε μέλισσα ὑψεῖ λόγον: cf. Putnam 1986, 56, n. 7. The *Dircaeum...cycnum* (25) is similarly polyvalent: Harrison 1995, 114-115 notes that Horace also characterizes himself as a swan at C. 2.20.9-12. Harrison ibid. argues that Horace’s conceit of not being able to imitate Pindar is a pretence designed to highlight Iullus Antonius’ poetic skill.
as a sacrifice (54) also has a Callimachean resonance when set against the many offerings given by Iullus (53), and Morgan sees the delicate, precise details of the final stanza as meshing together with the Sapphic form, creating “a sense of metrical propriety” after the previous disjunction of metre and subject matter. For Morgan, the sapphics of 4.2 are a site of engagement with Pindar as well as a means of reinforcing the strategies of the *recusatio*.

I want to bring out another element of the interaction with Pindar by reexamining 4.2.9-12; I shall then use these observations as the basis for thinking briefly about how the metrical effects of 4.2 are mediated by the employment of sapphics elsewhere in the Horatian corpus. After comparing Pindar to a mountain river bursting its banks, Horace describes his poetic style (9-12):

\[
\text{laurea donandus Apollinari} \\
\text{seu per audacis noua dithyrambos} \\
\text{uerba deuoluit numerisque fertur} \\
\text{lege solutis}
\]

...worthy of receiving Apollo’s laurel, whether he rolls out new words in bold dithyrambs, and is borne along by rhythms freed from rule...

Traditionally the interpretation of these lines, reflected in my translation, has revolved around seeing *noua...uerba* as referring to lexical innovations such as the formation of new compounds, and *numerisque...lege solutis* as referring to the general metrical license of the dithyramb. Both lines of interpretation are compatible with a hyperbolizing logic by means of which Horace constructs an (exaggerated) opposition between Pindar as the poet of unruly inspiration and himself as the poet of painstaking craft; Morgan’s reading of the poem follows this generalizing interpretation of the lines, seeing them in combination with the use of sapphics as a “rejection of Pindar’s metrical adventurousness”. But the details of this comparison are problematic. Pindar’s poetry as a whole is not especially replete with coinages, and nor are his extant dithyrambs; Pickard-Cambridge notes that “[t]he fragments of Pindaric dithyramb do not give us many bold compounds, but this may be an accident”.

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7 Cf. Davis 1991, 142; Morgan 2010, 233.

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