

SARPEDON AND NESTOR IN PINDAR, *PYTHIAN 3*

Νέστορα καὶ Λύκιον Σαρπηδόν', ἀνθρώπων φάτις,
ἔξ ἐπέων κελαιδεννῶν, τέκτονες οἶα σοφοὶ
ἄρμους, γινώσκομεν. (P. 3.112–4)

Were these lines but a fragment, the point would still be clear: poets may bestow on men a form of immortality. Since in fact the lines come at the end of a complete poem, we can say more specifically that they help to sum up an ode which seeks to console a seriously sick Hieron with the thought that, although we must all learn to accept the fact of our mortality, some very few special people will achieve a measure of immortality through the power of poetry. Hieron, unlike Coronis who yearned for the unattainable, should pay heed to song (cf. vv. 16–19). The only question raised by this passage is that of the choice of Sarpedon and Nestor to illustrate this point. In the most extensive and perhaps most sensitive treatment of this poem, D. C. Young suggests, in an aside printed in parenthesis, that they are “perhaps deliberately random heroic names”¹). Since, however, randomness is not a quality one normally associates with Pindar, it is probably more pertinent to say that “one shining light is taken out of each camp”²); or that Nestor and Sarpedon represent “le Sage et le Vaillant”³). These, however, are general truths; it is clearly more relevant to the theme of *Pythian 3* to suggest that these two warriors are chosen because they are among the very few in the *Iliad* who explicitly state the theme of *non omnis moriar*. Achilles of course is the prime example (cf. esp. 9.410–413), and he has in fact just been mentioned in the preceding strophe, perhaps for this very reason. (It is the prominence given Achilles that gives us leave to limit our search to the *Iliad*.) Helen too has this awareness (6.354–8), but she is hardly an appropriate model for Hieron.

1) Three Odes of Pindar (Leiden 1968), p. 62. So also L. R. Farnell, *Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar* (London 1932) II 143. If Pindar were to choose two names at random, he would probably avoid such a sibilant pair as Nestor and Sarpedon; cf. D. L. Clayman, *Sigmatism in Greek poetry*, *TAPA* 117 (1987) 69–79, whose researches show that Pindar is less sigmatic than all but one in a group of 14 authors and (more significantly) less sigmatic than the lyrics of the three tragedians (but for initial sigma he ranks higher than Homer and the Hymns). She aptly cites fr. 70b Snell-Maehler for Pindar’s expressed view toward sigma. I am grateful to Prof. Clayman for allowing me to refer to her work in advance of publication.

2) B. L. Gildersleeve, *The Olympian and Pythian Odes* (New York 1890; rp. Amsterdam 1965) 277.

3) J. Duchemin, *Pindare. Pythiques* (III, IX, IV, V) (Paris 1967) 56; implicitly similar is W. H. Race, *Pindar* (Boston 1986) 61.

Sarpedon, however, before going into what may be their last battle, can say to Glaukos in Book 12 that despite their mortality men *already* look upon the two of them as gods (310–28)⁴). And Nestor, toward the end of his long life can say that, as a result of his heroic actions (11.761): πάντες δ' εὐχετόωντο θεῶν Διὶ Νέστορι τ' ἀνδρῶν, a view that is reaffirmed by Telemachus at Od. 3.246; cf. Nestor's acceding to old age at Il. 23.627 ff.

Hieron, that is, should put himself in the place, not merely of any hero who, thanks to a poet, has achieved the immortality that only this craft can bestow, but even more particularly he should liken himself to those few heroes who are aware that their great deeds have already guaranteed them such status and who, furthermore, derive consolation from this fact.

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4) For further implications of this, cf. G. Nagy, On the death of Sarpedon, in C. A. Rubino and C. W. Shelmerdine (edd.), *Approaches to Homer* (Austin 1983) 189–217.