i. Introduction

The lyric poetry of Pindar is undoubtedly one of the fullest and most interesting sources for the Heracles myths. Pindar frequently describes the deeds of Heracles in some detail, and numerous brief references to the hero occur, often in poems where Heracles is barely relevant. As will be seen later (in Section iii), Pindar is almost obsessively eager to justify all the actions of Heracles in terms of high moral standards; thus, Pindar's Heracles tends to be less of the primitive 'Superman' that he so often is elsewhere and more of the aristocratic champion, resplendent in the performance of his duty to Zeus and Mankind, and in his noble and selfless valour.

Nonetheless, the elemental dynamism of the hero frequently bursts forth in Pindar's verse with considerable vigour; and one of the essential facts about the Superman—Heracles — that most of his adult life was spent in killing — escapes into the light despite Pindar's vigilance. Admittedly, as Pindar constantly shows, most of Heracles' victims were either savage monsters or abominable human beings, eminently worthy of death. (Those that were neither monstrous nor abominable are ignored by the poet.) Few Greek heroes, however, were as thoroughly steeped in gore (human and non-human) as Heracles, and even Pindar cannot entirely disguise that fact.

In this paper, Pindar's poetry will be examined with a view to discovering to what extent it portrays Heracles' brute strength and daring, and the lethal nature of many of his exploits, on the one hand; and on the other, to what extent Pindar's poetry focuses on the ethically acceptable or even impressive features of the hero's character and career.

ii. The 'Superman'

Pindar makes much of the belief that Heracles was the founder of the Olympic Games (Olympians — henceforth Ol. — 2.3–4, 3.11–40, 6.67–9, 10.25–6, 45–62). This particular emphasis was no doubt partly dictated by the fact that, in the Olympian Odes at least, Pindar was naturally concentrating on myths connected with Olympia. Nonetheless, his great interest in Heracles' supposed part in the institution of the Games is clearly revealed by the frequency of his references to it and the detail he tends to bestow on it.
The precise origins of this particular myth will probably never be certain, and ingenious but highly speculative theories, such as that Heracles was a Minoan vegetation-god inhabiting the wild-olive, are probably unnecessary. Surely, Heracles was the obvious choice as founder: he was the strongest and bravest of all the heroes; he was a son of Zeus, and Πίεσα μὲν Διός (Ol. 2.3); he married Hebe, Goddess of Youth, an obviously appropriate match for a ‘Super-athlete’ like Heracles; he laboured for victory, as athletes must (and the apparently standard term used by Homer and others for the Labours — ἀθλοι — is akin to ἀθλα (‘contests’ or ‘prizes’) as applied to the Games: e.g. in Ol. 3.16,22); and he is the glorious conqueror (καλλίνικος).

Thus, his reputation in myth for strength and courage, his association with Zeus and Hebe, and his connections with ἀθλα and Victory all make him the ideal founder of the Games.

His founding of the Games is described in Ol. 3.11-40 with particular emphasis on his importation of the wild olive to Olympia from the land of the Hyperboreans. In this passage, Pindar goes out of his way to ‘civilise’ Heracles in various ways (see below, Section iii); but his description of the journey well reveals the courage and endurance of the hero. Hyperborea is located at the sources of the Danube (14) and later behind the North wind (πυταγις Ὑπερβοη/ Ὑγρόθυ: 33-4); thus it can be reached only by a long and hazardous journey to the far North. In the same passage (27-32) Pindar describes Heracles’ pursuit of the Hind of Ceryneia. Whatever the origins of this curious creature, only a hero of outstanding stature would have the boldness to pursue a fleet-footed and apparently sacred animal so far beyond the normal boundaries of the Mediterranean world.

The whole passage points to another facet of the ‘Superman’ which is emphasised by Pindar, and that is that Heracles was a great explorer and ‘trailblazer’. Apart from his Hyperborean expedition, the ‘Pillars of Heracles’, set up by the hero, are also mentioned (Ol. 3.46; Isthmian — henceforth Isthm. — 4.12). Pindar regards these not only as the limits of the known world, but also as symbolic of the boundaries of prowess: τὸ πόρεον δ’ ἐστὶ σοφοῖς ἀβατον/ κόσμοτος (Ol. 3.47-8). Likewise, Pindar relates in more general terms of how Heracles

δόματος δὲ θηρας ἐν πελάγει
ὑπερόχους, ἴδια τ’ ἐγείνας τεναγέων
φροις, ὧν πόλεμου κοτῆβαινε νόστου τέλοις,
καὶ γὰν φρίδωσε.

(Nem. 3.22–5)

In Ol. 10.27–44 the poet relates an epic tale of deception and slaughter, in which Heracles slays the two Moliones (27–35) and later King Augeas, uncle of the Moliones and king of the Epeians (35b–44). Pindar, as usual, takes pains to portray Heracles’ victims as deplorable characters: the Moliones are ὑπερφίλαοι (35), while Augeas is both ὑπέρβιος (36: here presumably with its pejorative meaning, ‘overweening’) and ἤμαται (35b). Nonetheless, the story is firmly rooted in bloodshed, and Heracles appears as a grim and vengeful figure. It is
stated that he slew the Moliones in an ambush (λόχωσι δὲ δοκεύσας, 31) and completely destroyed Augeas' kingdom, which sank into ruin ὑπὸ στερεψῳ πυρ/πλαγίς τε σιδάρου (37–8). Furthermore, according to a later but widespread tradition,4 the Moliones were at this time acting as ambassadors of the Epeians and were on their way to the Isthmian Games when Heracles killed them. They were thus (supposedly) inviolate, and their death did not reflect at all well on their slayer. Pausanias concludes in general that Τῷ δὲ Ἡρακλὲι πρὸς τὸν Αὐγέαν πολεμοῦντι οὐδὲν ὑπῆρχεν ἀποδείκνυσθαι λαμπρόν — which is quite the reverse of Pindar's judgement.

The whole tale (both in Pindar and the later sources) is so circumstantial as to suggest some actual historical clash; and Heracles, therefore, appears here more as a military hero than as a lone Strongman.

The military Heracles appears again in Pindar in the poet's accounts of Heracles' expedition against Troy, in company with Telamon (Nem. 4.25–6, Isthm. 6.26–9). In the course of this expedition the hero and his comrades also overcame the Meropes and the giant Alcyoneus (Nem. 4.26–30, Isthm. 6.29–33).

More interesting than this, however, is the passage in Ol. 9 (31–8) which describes how Heracles fought against three gods (Poseidon, Apollo and Hades) at Pylos. Pindar is here almost certainly conflating three different stories,6 and it is clear that there were probably very old stories of Heracles' clashes with gods.7 Pindar, being Pindar, rejects such tales with deep horror at their impiety (Ol. 9.38–42); but this does not mean that the stories were not old, nor that they were not popular (quite the reverse). Such confrontations are very striking, mainly because Heracles, unlike most other defiers of the gods, never suffers for his presumption. Unfortunate figures like Tityus, Tantalus and Sisyphus incur terrible punishments for their crimes against the gods,8 but not Heracles. He is of course a son of Zeus, and therefore highly favoured; but he is also immensely bold and strong, and in popular myths at least would probably be regarded with real admiration for his great insolence. Whatever the origin of such tales, they make for good fireside entertainment.

Another very interesting poem of Pindar's is that beginning with the famous and controversial Νόμος passage and going on to describe (briefly) Heracles' 'theft' of the cattle of Geryon and (in great detail) his conquest of the Thracian king Diomedes with his man-eating horses (see below Section iii). There again, Pindar stresses the abominable nature of Heracles' adversaries (particularly Diomedes, whose carnivorous horses are shown in action with sickening vividness), so that Heracles can be seen as a violent hero but one whose violence is entirely justified. Nonetheless, the hero who has to deal with such savage foes must be something of a savage himself, and it is presumably that fact that Pindar is struggling so valiantly to rationalise.

Finally, the curious passage should be noted in which Pindar describes Heracles as 'short in stature, but unbending in spirit' (μορφὰν βραχὺς/ ψυχὰν δ' ἀκμήτος: Isthm. 4.53–4). Although nearly all Greeks were agreed on the toughness of Heracles' spirit, it is unusual to see this mighty hero described as a
physically unimpressive figure. Admittedly, this concept of the small but indisputably formidable hero was not confined to Pindar, but the main reason for the poet’s use of the concept here is most probably his eagerness to encourage the particular champion in the Games — Melissos — for whom the ode is written.

In Pindar, then, the Superman—Heracles does appear frequently, in all his strength, vitality and bravery — but always suitably bathed, tidied-up and inescapably ‘on the right side’ from an ethical point of view.

iii. The Respectable Superman

Although Pindar regarded Heracles as the greatest of the sons of Zeus and as the hero most suited for emulation by athletes in the various Games, the poet inevitably encountered in the Heracles myths a number of tales which he as a man with apparently strong ethical beliefs found great difficulty in accepting. One of these was the story of Heracles’ conflict with the gods at Pylos (Ol. 9.31–8). Pindar’s solution to his problem was to reject the story as untrue, on the grounds that since ‘men became ἰγναθοὶ and wise according to divine influence (κατὰ δήμων’), it is inconceivable that an ἰγναθός like Heracles (in fact, the ἄρωτος) could have fought against divine beings. Pindar is here adopting the easiest attitude which a respectable aristocratic poet could adopt towards the dangerous Superman, and that is to deny the truth of unpalatable parts of the myth — for to a man of Pindar’s background and beliefs the old Strongman in his totality was no longer acceptable; or even if Pindar himself secretly enjoyed such tales (an intriguing possibility), he presumably felt that they did not accord well with the moral tone of the sort of poetry he was writing.

Elsewhere, he is a little more subtle in his purging of the Heracles myths: for example, in discussing the cult of the children of Megara by Heracles at the Electron Gates of Thebes (Isthm. 4.6ff.), he speaks of the death of the children dispassionately as the death of the eight ‘bronze-clad’ (Χαλκοκράτος) sons whom Megara bore to Heracles (63–64). These lines are interesting for two reasons: firstly, the circumstances surrounding the death of the sons are completely ignored: and secondly, the fact that the sons are called ‘bronze-clad’ suggests that they were adult warriors at the time of their death. However, all the other extant accounts of the death of Heracles’ children relate that the children were murdered by their own father in a fit of insanity sent upon him by Hera (a story which brings little credit on Pindar’s favourite hero and even less on the great goddess Hera); moreover (to add to the horror), that the children were still in their infancy, or at least very young, at the time. All these details, which must have been known to Pindar, are intentionally omitted in an attempt to gloss over the most shocking incident in the hero’s career.

In the two passages discussed above, Pindar’s approach to the dark side of Heracles was to shut his eyes to the darkness. The only alternative would have been to face all the facts and attempt to reconcile in some way the horrors with the
undoubted glory and greatness of Heracles; and this, it appears, is what Pindar was trying to do in the revealing passage preserved in the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus No. 2450, frg. 1.18

In this fragment, Pindar begins by stating a general principle, and then continues by adducing illustrations to support the principle. The principle is as follows:

\[
\nu\omicron\nu\omicron\varsigma \delta \pi\acute{a}ntov \beta\acute{a}ssile\upsilon\varsigma \\
\theta\eta\gamma\alpha\tau\alpha\nu \tau\epsilon \kappa\alphaι \delta\theta\epsilon\eta\nu\acute{a}to\nu \\
\digamma \delta\iota\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron \tau\omicron \delta \beta\acute{a}\omega\omicron\acute{a}t\alpha\tau\omicron \\
\upsilon\pi\epsilon\nu\tau\alpha\tau\alpha \chi\epsilon\iota\iota.
\]

(Lines 1–4)

The exact meaning of this statement (often referred to in antiquity)19 obviously depends on the exact meanings of the words \nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma and \delta\iota\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron (see below). Pindar then says: \tau\acute{e}κ\mu\alpha\iota\rho\omicron\omicron\omicron\acute{a}ι/\epsilon\rho\gamma\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron \iota \text{Hr}α\omega\omicron\acute{a}\acute{e}\omicron\omicron\omicron (4–5); and the two Heraclean deeds which he discusses (in the surviving parts of the papyrus) are Heracles’ capture of the cattle of Geryon, and his capture of the horses of Diomedes. These two illustrations are presumably meant to prove the principle stated in lines 1–4. Unfortunately, although the illustrations survive in the papyrus, Pindar’s actual use of them to prove his point does not. However, the point he makes is clear enough — if \nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma and \delta\iota\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron can be correctly translated.

The following possibilities should be considered:

(a) \delta\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron has two possible meanings. Most modern commentators have taken it to mean ‘justifying’ or ‘rendering just’.20 If that is correct, then Pindar is saying ‘\nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma justifies the most violent act’ — i.e. \nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma provides the justification even for the undeniable violence (\tau\omicron \beta\alpha\omega\omicron\acute{a}t\alpha\tau\omicron) of Heracles’ dealings with Geryon and Diomedes (incidents in which Heracles was, technically, the aggressor). If this translation of \delta\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron is the right one, then Pindar is here deliberately facing up to the brute violence which characterised so many of Heracles’ actions, and is trying to reconcile that violence with his own great admiration for Heracles, \nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma providing the means of reconciliation. However, \delta\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron could also mean ‘chastising’ or ‘bringing to justice’;21 and in that case Pindar is presumably saying, ‘\nu\omicron\omicron\omicron\varsigma brings to justice (through the agency of heroes like Heracles) the grim crimes of violence committed by monstrous characters like Geryon and Diomedes’. This latter interpretation would mean that Pindar is not directly trying to justify Heracles’ acts of violence, but is doing so by implication — i.e. by saying that the violence of Geryon and Diomedes can be brought to justice, which implies that Heracles (the hero who does in fact deal with the two ‘criminals’ in question) is therefore an instrument of justice (\Delta\acute{i}κ\nu). On balance, the first translation of \delta\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron is probably the more valid here. As will be seen below, Pindar to some extent shows sympathy for Geryon and Diomedes and portrays Heracles’ dealings with them in a not entirely favourable light; and for those reasons \tau\omicron \beta\alpha\omega\omicron\acute{a}t\alpha\tau\omicron should probably be taken to refer to Heracles’ actions, and \delta\kappa\alpha\omicron\omega\omicron to mean ‘justifying’. However, further clarification
may be provided by an examination of the crucial word ύμος.

(b) One possible interpretation of the word is that it refers to a subjective phenomenon, namely, ‘the attitude traditionally or conventionally taken to a norm by those to whom it applies’, and does not refer to the norm itself. Pindar, then (according to this view), is saying that the fact that men (and gods) traditionally accept as justifiable acts of violence committed by heroes like Heracles is the (only?) thing that can justify such acts. The conventional acceptance of such acts as just makes them so, for all practical purposes (whether they ‘really’ are — according to some absolute standard — or not). This interpretation (arrived at after a detailed examination of the many uses of ύμος in antiquity) seems reasonable enough — although it appears to attribute to Pindar a most startlingly arrogant attitude: namely, that while all other men and gods slavishly accept Heracles’ violent crimes as just, because it is traditional to do so, he, Pindar, alone knows that such deeds are not just. This, however, seems a little uncharacteristic of Pindar, and it is perhaps unfair to see such an implication in a poem of which possibly the most important part (the conclusion) is missing.

The only other possible meaning of ύμος which may be useful here is as follows: the word refers to an objective phenomenon, namely the normal and inevitable way in which any given class of creatures (mortal and immortal) naturally behaves. According to this view, Pindar is here saying that the acts of violence committed by Heracles are just and justifiable because Heracles, being what he is, can do no other. The fact that it is his ύμος — the mode of behaviour forced on him by his nature as a Superman — that makes him act violently renders such acts just. A corollary to this is that there is one ύμος for men (which presumably demands that they shall not act violently), one for gods (which allows them to do what they like?), and one for demi-gods like Heracles (which allows them to do more or less what they like?). However, the main point is that ύμος is ‘king of all’; wherefore, any act committed by a person is just — so long as it falls within the limits imposed by the ύμος of the class to which that person belongs. With regard to Pindar and Heracles, this means that Pindar, whatever he may feel personally about some of Heracles’ actions, must accept that they are just because omnipotent ύμος makes them so.

Both of the above interpretations seem to have some merit, the first in its recognition of the tremendous weight of tradition, and the second in its realistic acceptance of certain facts of life applicable to Strongmen like Heracles, whose violent crimes are ‘just’ in the sense of being part of the world-order. It is, moreover, possible that Pindar had both meanings of ύμος in mind when he composed his poem. At any rate, his main intention seems to have been the reconciliation of his admiration for Heracles with his abhorrence for some of Heracles’ traditionally accepted ‘crimes’, and to vindicate as far as possible his favourite hero.

However, his curious interpretation of the two Labours in question deserves
attention: his treatment of both Geryon and Diomedes as the innocent and courageous victims of a vicious robber (Heracles) is probably unique in Greek literature. Pindar relates that Heracles drove off Geryon’s cattle ἄπρωτας τε καὶ ἄπρωτας (8). The hero, then, committed a crime of blatant theft. Secondly, Pindar describes how Heracles slunk into Diomedes’ castle by night — βίας δόν/ χειμών ἐδρα (19–20) — and flung one of Diomedes’ henchmen to the man-eating horses. There follows then a hideous description of crunching bones and dismemberment (24–32), the purpose of which is not certain. It is either meant to elicit sympathy for Diomedes and his men, or to show how monstrous the king must be who keeps such unnatural creatures. It is then stated that Diomedes resisted Heracles οὐ κόρεα ἄλλ’ ἄρετά (15), and that κρέσσον γὰρ ἄρτια ὀμένων τεθνάμεν/ πρὸ χρημάτων ἢ κακόν ἐμεναι (16–17). Pindar’s admiration for Diomedes’ courage appears to be considerable. Here, then, is an extraordinary situation in which Pindar, in attempting to justify his hero’s actions, has turned two of the traditional tales upside down. Outside of Pindar, Geryon and Diomedes are always villains and Heracles the bold hero who confronts them more or less against his will, under orders from King Eurystheus. It might be argued that Geryon, herding his cattle on his distant island in the West, was posing no threat to Mankind (in spite of his three torsoes and his two-headed watchdog) and could have been left in peace; but he was still technically a monster; and Diomedes and his vicious mares were a pest, fitting victims for the purifying Heracles.

In this fragment at least, then, Pindar’s attempts to ‘white-wash’ Heracles involved him in some striking departures from tradition; but myths were always open to re-interpretation, and Pindar quite reasonably took advantage of this flexibility.

NOTES

3. E.g. Hom. Il.8, 363; 15, 639; 19, 133; Od.11, 622; Hes. Theog. 951.
4. As in the Olympian triumph-chant (Ἱκάλλα Καλλάνω) attributed to Archilochus (see L.R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*, Oxford 1921, 147).
5. On which see further Eur. Heracles 375–8; Callim. Hymns 3, 98–109; Apollodorus 2,5,3.
6. E.g. Diod. Sic. 4, 33; 3; Apollodorus 2, 7, 2; Paus. 5, 2, 1.
8. Apart from Pindar’s version, somewhat similar incidents appear in Hom. Il. 5, 392–7; Hes. ? *Shield of Heracles* 357–67 and 458–62. The gods involved in each case were: (in Homer) Aphrodite, Hera and Hades; (in Pindar) Poseidon, Apollo and Hades; and (in the *Shield*) Ares.
9. The appearance of the incident in the *Iliad* (where Hera tells the injured Aphrodite, in effect, ‘It’s all happened before!’) suggests that the story was older than the *Iliad*, at least.
12. Note the comments in L.R. Farnell, *Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar*, London 1932, 354: Farnell suggests that Pindar may have been thinking of the dwarfish ‘Dactylic’ Heracles of
Cretan lore — but the poet does this in no other extant poem. A less aggressively 'anthropological' explanation is given by C.M. Bowra, Pindar, Oxford 1964, 47, who points out that the athlete in question here — Melissos — is described by Pindar as 'poor to look at' (*Isthm. 4, 36).

13. *Ist. 9, 30–31. For this translation of κατὰ διατομήν' see the long note in Farnell, *Critical Commentary to the Works of Pindar*, 68–9.

14. The formulaic ἄρχοντας δυνάμεων (with minor variations) — 'the man with the most power' — is applied to Heracles a number of times in Greek literature: e.g. Homeric Hymn E 127 HPAKAΣΑΕΑ ΛΕΟΝΤΟΣΥΜΟΝ, 1–2 [see Hesiod: *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica* (trans. by E.H.G. Evelyn-White), Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge (Mass.) 1936, 438]; Aristoph. *Clouds* 1050; *Eur. Heracles* 193; *Soph. Teuchiriae* 195 and 31.

15. This is Farnell's translation (*Critical Commentary* etc., 355); C. Kerényi [The *Heroes of the Greeks*, London 1959 (trans. by H.J. Rose), 186] translates differently: 'those upon whom a curse of bronze fell'. This latter translation is ingenuous, though linguistically no more valid than Farnell's. However, even if Kerényi is correct here, the fact remains that Pindar alludes to the death of the children (if at all) only very briefly and obscurely.

16. See in particular *Eur. Heracles* 89–2, 1127, 1191, 1303–7, 1311–12. The other sources (apart from Pindar) are all rather late: Moschus 4, 13f.; Diod. Sic. 4, 11, 16; Tzetzes *Schol. on Lycophron* 38; Niclaus Damascenus *Frag. 20*, Hyginus *Fab.* 32.

17. See Farnell, *Loc. cit.*

18. For the full text and translation, and detailed discussion, see M. Ostwald, *Pindar, Nomos*, and *Heracles*, *HSCT* 69 (1965) 109–38. (All references to the text will hereafter refer to Ostwald's text, unless otherwise stated.)

19. For the references, see A. Turyn's edition of *Pindari Carmina Cum Fragmentis*, Oxford 1952, 350–2; at least 22 references have been found dating to the period between Hermonotus and Hesychius.


24. Bowra, *Op. cit.* 75–6; cp. with E.R. Dodds' edition of Plato's *Gorgias*, Oxford 1959, 270–1: Dodds suggests that Nomos means 'the law of Fate', which is for Pindar identical with the will of Zeus; but, as Bowra points out, '... Fate is not named, and we may doubt whether Pindar would ascribe such power to it' (75).

25. A similar view of *Nomos* is taken by Galinsky and Lloyd-Jones. Galinsky (The *Herakles Theme*, 35) takes it to mean 'a general, universal “order” or “law” which both Geryon and Diomedes have flouted by their own violence (το βουλωτας); thus, they have to be punished for transgressing the *Nomos*. Lloyd-Jones (The *Justice of Zeus*, 51) argues that 'Geryones and Diomedes have placed themselves by their enormities beyond the pale, and every man’s hand is against them' — and so Heracles’ violence against them is justified, since he is in effect restoring the order which Nomos requires.

26. Ostwald (Op. *cit.* 126) realistically points out that when Pindar used the word Nomos, 'he cannot have wanted to stress only one of its many nuances to the exclusion of all others'.

27. Cp. this reading with that of Turyn's text (*Op. cit.* 350), who has διατομήν for Ostwald's διατομήν. From the present point of view, the difference is immaterial: the fact remains that Heracles made off with someone else’s live-stock without the owner's permission.

28. It is difficult to know whether διατομή should be taken literally or metaphorically: Galinsky (*Op. cit.* 39, Note 14) assumes that it must refer literally to a passage or path leading to the mangers, in which case the violence of ἄρχοντας δυνάμεων refers to Diomedes. Alternatively, it is Heracles who 'discovered (or followed) the path of manual violence' — an interpretation which would accord better with Pindar's general portrayal of Heracles in this poem.

29. It must be remembered here that ἄρχοντας does not necessarily imply moral stature, but rather physical courage and strength; and Diomedes, like any other vicious creature, might easily excel in such qualities. Nonetheless, Pindar does appear to be doing his best to give Diomedes credit where due — partly, no doubt, in order to emphasize his disapproval of Heracles in contrast to Diomedes, but also (as suggested by Galinsky, *Op. cit.* 34) in order to provide Heracles with a worthy opponent. A cowardly Diomedes would hardly have offered much of a challenge to the hero.
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