Apollo travels from Pytho to Olympus, and the other gods greet his arrival (186–93):

ἔνθεν δὲ πρὸς Ὀλυμπὸν ἀπὸ χθόνος ὃς τε νόημα εἰς Δίως πρὸς δόμαι θεὸν μεθ᾽ ὀμήγηριν ἀλλων-αὐτίκα δ᾽ ἀθανάτοις μέλει κιθαρικά καὶ ὠοιδή.

Μοῦσαι μὲν θ' ἁμά πάσαι ἀμετίμομαι ὡς καλῇ ὑμετέρων μα θεῶν δόρ' ἀμβροτα ἡδ' ἀνθρώπων τὴν ἡμοῦνα, δ' ἔχοντες ὑπ' ἀθανάτοις θεοῖς ξύσους ἀφράδες καὶ ἀμήχανοι, οὐδὲ δύνανται εὑρέμεναι θεαντοῖ τ' ἁκος καὶ γήρασι ἀλκάρ.

From there he goes quick as a thought from the earth to Olympus, to the house of Zeus, in order to join the gathering of the other gods. Immediately the immortals concern themselves with lyre music and song. All the Muses together, responding with their beautiful voice, hymn the divine gifts of the gods and the endurance of men, all that they have from the immortal gods and yet live ignorant and helpless, unable to find a remedy for death and a defence against old age.

Lines 189–93 describe a song of the Muses that expresses a divine view on the human condition. Scholars uniformly hold that the Olympians rejoice in hearing about how they themselves inflict pain on mankind. Thus Förstel, for example, writes that this passage presents the gods as, in a certain general sense, the source of human sorrows and finds here ‘a unique testimony to Greek pessimism’.1 But such an interpretation depends on a number of debatable philological premises. This article advocates a new reading which better accords with usage, syntax and thematic context. I first treat interrelated semantic and grammatical difficulties in lines 189–93 and then situate the Muses’ song within the Homeric Hymn to Apollo as a whole. At stake here is nothing less than the theological outlook of the poem.2

Most scholars have understood θεῶν δόρ’ ἀμβροτα (190) to mean the privileges that the gods themselves enjoy, in particular immortality;3 some recent scholars instead

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1 K. Förstel, Untersuchungen zum Homerischen Apollonhymnos (Bochum, 1979): ‘ein einzigartiges Zeugnis des griechischen Pessimismus’ (228); ‘in einem gewissen allgemeinen Sinn … Urheber dieser Leiden’ (230). Throughout I refer to the Homeric Hymn to Apollo as we have it. My arguments would be compatible with a range of theories about the genesis of this text.


understand this to mean the gifts which the gods give to mortals. The latter sense is preferable. In early Greek epic, ‘the gifts of the gods’ _uel sim._ often describes gifts which the gods give to men, and never describes gifts which the gods themselves receive. If θεόν δῶρ’ (190) had that unparalleled sense here, then one would be faced with an awkward question: from whom did the gods receive these gifts? Personified Fate, one might be tempted to reply, but the question itself is strange. Finally, if θεόν δῶρ’ ὀμβροτα (190) is included within the larger category of ὄς’ ἔχωντες ὑπ’ ὀδοντότις θεοί (191), as I will argue that it is, then these must certainly be gifts which men receive from the gods.

If θεόν δῶρ’ ὀμβροτα (190) describes gifts that gods give to men, are these gifts good or bad or a mixture of both good and bad? In early Greek epic, the gifts of the gods can be good or bad or a mixture of both good and bad. Context is decisive in each case. The gifts of our passage have been interpreted as bad or as a mixture of both good and bad. But these gifts are qualified with the significant adjective ὀμβροτα (190). In early Greek epic, this is standardly an honorific word applied to things associated with the gods. In the numerous instances when it describes things given from the gods to mortals, these are invariably desirable things. The gifts of the gods are probably desirable here too.

Scholars have long translated τήμωςώνας (191) along the lines of ‘sufferings’, but Heitsch makes a powerful case for instead taking it to mean ‘endurance’. Nowhere

_Hymnes_ (Paris, 1936), 87; F. Cássola, _Inni omerici_ (Milan, 1975), 123, 498–9; Förstel (n. 1), 228; A. Miller, _From Delos to Delphi: A Literary Study of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo_ (Leiden, 1986), 69.


8 Heitsch (n. 4), 263.

9 Richardson (n. 4), 112.


13 Heitsch (n. 4). Cf. P. Smith and L.T. Pearcy, _The Homeric Hymn to Apollo_ (Bryn Mawr, 1981), 15; De Martino (n. 4), 42; Thalmann (n. 4), 80; Richardson (n. 4), 112.
else in extant ancient Greek literature does the noun mean ‘suffering’.\(^\text{14}\) The forthcoming Cambridge Greek Lexicon s.v. recognizes ‘endurance’ as the sole attested meaning of the noun, and with good reason. We expect ἁρμοζόνη (at Hom. Hymn 3.191 and not in the Iliad or the Odyssey) to relate to τλήμον (at Il. 5.670 and elsewhere) much as φρονιμοζόνη (at Hom. Hymn 3.99 and not in the Iliad or the Odyssey) relates to φρέδομον (at Il. 16.638) or much as ξηλοζόνη (at Hom. Hymn. 3.100 and not in the Iliad or the Odyssey) relates to ξηλήμον (at Od. 5.118).\(^\text{15}\) Before the fifth century, τλήμον and related words convey an idea of endurance or daring rather than suffering, although this last sense comes to predominate in later texts.\(^\text{16}\) Wilson writes that ‘only in Bacchylides [5.153] does τλήμον first collapse into the sense of “wretched”, “miserable”’.\(^\text{17}\) We should hesitate to attribute to τλμοζόνας (Hom. Hymn 3.191) a meaning which is certainly not attested anywhere else and which would probably be anachronistic for our passage.\(^\text{18}\)

Δ’ (191) does not agree with τλμοζόνας (191), although it is often translated as if it did.\(^\text{19}\) It will not do to take Δ’ (191) as the equivalent of Δ. The passages which Heitsch adduces as ‘distant analogies’ are not convincing.\(^\text{20}\) One might instead understand an omitted genitive: ‘endurance [of all those things], as many as men have …’.\(^\text{21}\) The grammatical phenomenon is common enough,\(^\text{22}\) but it would be harsh here. Words from the τλμ— stem do not take a genitive of the thing endured, and so it would be difficult for ancient audiences to supply a missing genitive in our passage.

Two simpler solutions also deserve consideration. First, the antecedent of the neuter plural Δ’ (191) may be the neuter plural δ’ (190; cf. Il. 3.65–6). On this reading, the genitives θ’ον (190) and ἀνθρώπον (190) mark a polar contrast reflecting the two separate topics of the Muses’ song:\(^\text{23}\) gifts that come from the gods and acts of endurance that belong exclusively to men. The plural τλμοζόνας (191) makes the abstract noun concrete and refers to specific instances of endurance.\(^\text{24}\) The Muses here, like the Deliades earlier in the poem (158–61) or the Muses in Hesiod’s Theogony (36–52), sing first of the gods and then of men.\(^\text{25}\) The bipartite subject of their song is reflected

\(^{14}\) A search of the TLG may now corroborate the arguments of Heitsch (n. 4).

\(^{15}\) Cf. O. Zambach, Neuerungen in der Sprache der Homerischen Hymnen (Winterthur, 1955), 8.


\(^{17}\) J.R. Wilson, ‘TOAMA and the meaning of ΤΑΛΑΣ’, AJPh 92 (1971), 292–300, at 293.

\(^{18}\) W. Porzig, Die Namen für Satzinhalte im griechischen und im indogermanischen (Berlin, 1942), 223–4 observes that Archilochus’ τλμοζόνη (13.6 W²; discussed below) means what we would expect it to mean (‘regelrecht’) but writes of our passage that ‘es liegt also schon die jüngere Bedeutung von τλμοζόνη zugrunde, der wir erst in der Tragödie begegnen’. This formulation calls suspicion upon itself.


\(^{21}\) Heitsch (n. 4), 263; cf. Thalmann (n. 4), 80.


\(^{23}\) Cf. E. Kemmer, Die polare Ausdrucksweise in der griechischen Literatur (Würzburg, 1903), 77–90.

\(^{24}\) So Heitsch (n. 4), 263; cf. the works cited in note 27 below and B.L. Gildersleeve, Syntax of Classical Greek from Homer to Demosthenes, 2 vols. (New York, 1900–10), 1.22: ‘pluralizing abstract nouns makes them concrete’.

in the bipartite structure of the following relative clause: ὥς’ ἔχοντες ὡς’ ἀθανάτοις θεοῖς (191) looks back to the gifts of the gods, while the ensuing description of mortal weakness (from ζῴους’, 192, to the end of the sentence) looks back to what men must endure.

Despite the merits of this reading, I prefer to construe somewhat differently. The inherently inclusive ὥς’ (191) (‘all that, as many as’) may be most naturally taken to include as its antecedent both the feminine plural τλημοϲύναϲ (191) and the neuter plural δῶρ’ (190).26 On this reading, τλημοϲύναϲ (191) is a different part of what men have from the gods. Thematic parallels support this interpretation. In Archilochus, the gods granted men the same noun in the singular: ἀλλὰ θεοὶ γὰρ ἀνήκετοι κακοῖν | ὥς φιλ’ ἐπὶ κρατερῆν τλημοϲύνην ἑθεκαν | φάρμακαν … τλήτε (13.5–10 W8), ‘but since, my friend, the gods have established mighty endurance as a palliative for incurable ills … endure’. In Iliad Book 24 the Fates, according to Apollo, gave men an enduring heart (τλῆττον γὰρ Μοῖραι θημόν θέκον ἀνθρώποις, 49). In our passage, too, human endurance is a gift from on high. τλημοϲύναϲ (191) would either be a ‘distributive’ plural, reflecting the fact that the gods give endurance to many men,27 or the plural would be more or less equivalent to the singular.28

On the interpretation advocated here, δῶρ’ ὄμβροσα (190) describes positive gifts, while τλημοϲύναϲ (191) describes a positive capacity for enduring negative things, which are not said to be bestowed by the gods. If either of these instead referred to bad things, then one would expect the rest of the sentence, which describes human suffering, to depict these divinely apportioned evils as the source of that suffering.29 But this is not what we get. Men are ‘ignorant’ (ἁρρόδεεϲ, 192) not because of what the gods give to them but just because of how human beings are.30 Death and old age (193) are not gifts from the gods; human mortality, like divine immortality, is not a gift from anyone but simply a given.31

Since lines 190–1 refer to two sorts of good things, we should follow West in taking the participle ἔχοντες (191) as concessive: ‘all that they have from the immortal gods and yet live witless and helpless’ (my emphasis).32 Here men are ‘helpless’ (192) not because of, but rather despite, all that they have from the gods.33 Rather than stressing

26 As a variation on this interpretation, one could also, perhaps less naturally, understand ὥς’ (191) as part of a ‘lilies of the field’ construction (also commonly known as prolepsis: K–G 2.577–9) in apposition; cf. λῆν γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον Ἀρχαίων ὁτον ἄειδεϲ, | ὥς’ ἔρξαν τ’ ἐπιθόν τε καὶ ὥς’ ἐμόγυϲαϲ Αἳϲαοϲ (Od. 8.489–90); μυνέϲόϲ λεοντοϲ ἐνήϕεϲ, ὅϲα παθόντεϲ (Hes. Theog. 651).
30 See Richardson (n. 5), 243–4 (on Hom. Hymn 2.256–8).
31 Cf. e.g. ll. 16.441–2; Od. 3.236–8. Greek literature in general, and Homeric poetry in particular, is notably uninterested in aetiological explanations of why human beings die: M. Davies, ‘The ancient Greeks on why mankind does not live forever’, MH 44 (1987), 65–75.
32 West (n. 12), 84.
33 R.P. Martin, Healing, Sacrifice and Battle: Amechania and Related Concepts in Early Greek Poetry (Innsbruck, 1983), 26 observes that here ἀμήϲαϲοϲ (192) ‘is glossed by’ οὖϲ ὁμοϲ | εὔρεϲαϲ ςαντάϲ Τ’ ἄκοϲ καὶ γῆϲαϲ ἄλϲαρ (192–3). As δε often has the force of γὰρ, so
the extent of the evils that the gods give to men, ὅς (191) stresses the extent of their aid. Here the Olympians are presented as ‘the givers of good things’ (δωρητὴς ἔδωκ, Od. 8.325). It is not necessarily that, in the world of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, the gods are never responsible for giving anything bad to mortals, but rather that the Muses’ song of celebration, like the framing hymn itself, focusses on divine benefactions rather than malefactions. Here encomiastic rhetoric is as important as cosmology.

On the usual reading of our passage, the gods enjoy hearing about the sufferings which they themselves inflict on men. This might strike us as grotesque, but it is easy to imagine how, with some historicizing, our modern sentiment might turn out to be an argument for, rather than against, this reading. Yet, it is not easy to provide such historicizing arguments. The disconcerting thing about the standard interpretation of our passage is not that the gods give bad things to men, but rather that they blithely rejoice in recounting how they do so (cf. παίζοντας’, 201; παίζοντας, 206). One would want a convincing parallel not for the gods taking pleasure in inflicting suffering on some particular mortal(s) for some particular reason(s), however capricious those reasons might be, but rather for the gods taking pleasure in perpetually inflicting suffering on mankind for no particular reason at all. The closest thing to such a parallel would seem to be the embittered words of Achilles in Iliad Book 24: ὃς γὰρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖς βροτοῖς, | ζῷειν ἐξωμένους· αὐτοὶ δὲ τ’ ἀκριβέσ εἰς, ‘for thus the gods spun the thread of fate for wretched mortals, to live in grief, they themselves are without sorrow’ (525–6). It is questionable whether such a bleak world-view is appropriate to the hymnic genre in general and to this hymn in particular. We expect hymns not only to please divine addressees but also to present deities who are not highly unsympathetic to their mortal worshippers. Certainly the rest of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo does so.

The unusual and difficult language of the Muses’ song in lines 189–93, I suggest, expresses the same theological vision that is expressed more clearly and at greater length throughout the rest of the hymn. We need not necessarily assume that the theology of the Muses’ song is consistent with that of the framing poem, but the structure of the text encourages one to look for congruity. The Muses’ performance on Olympus,
as scholars have not failed to observe, has obvious connections with the performance of the Deliades (156–64) and also with the performance of the bard of this very hymn (165–78). Like the Muses’ singing in Hesiod’s Theogony (11–21, 36–52, 65–79) or in Pindar (Nem. 5.22–5, Isthm. 8.56a–60, fr. 31) or in Theognis (15–18) or like other divine performances elsewhere in the Homeric Hymns (4.418–33, 19.27–31, 27.16–20), here too the Muses’ song serves as an inset parallel for the framing song (cf. ὑμνεύειν, 190, of the Muses; ὑμνήσκω, 158, of the Deliades; ὑμνήσκω, 19; ὑμνέων, 178; ὑμνήσκω, 207, all of the hymnic speaker).

Like the Muses, the blind bard of Chios sings about the relationship between men and gods. Like the Muses, the blind bard of Chios focusses on divine benefactions. Leto gave birth to Apollo as ‘a delight to mortals’ (χάρμα βροτοίς, 25), and this description proves to be programmatic. In this poem Apollo features as a lover—quite literally—of mortals, and a serial one at that (ἐνι μνήστησιν … φιλότητι, 208). The god, ‘a delight to mortals’ (25), also slays an inhuman monster who was ‘an evil bane to living mortals’ (ζωοίτι κακῶν δήλημα βροτοίν, 364; cf. πίμα βροτοίν, 306) and ‘did many evils to men on the earth’ (κακά πολλά | ἀνθρώποι ἑρεθεκεν ἔπι χθονί, 302–3; cf. 355). The deity of this hymn is not an avatar of love for mankind or their savour from suffering, but benefactions to mankind repeatedly feature in his own explicitly stated and honour-driven motivations (ἀνθρώποιν, 248; πάσι, 253; ἀνθρώποις, 288; πάσι, 293; βροτοίσι, 364). Both the Delian and the Pythian sections of this hymn emphasize, in different ways, how the divine gifts of Apollo benefit mankind.

Apollo’s birth transforms the uninhabited Delos into a scene of collective human joy (146–55). There mortals who cannot ‘find a remedy for death and a defence against old age’ (οὐδὲ δύνανται | εὑρήμεναι θανάτοι τ’ ἀκος καὶ γήραος ἀλκαρ, 192–3) transiently approach the intransient state of the gods through their worship of him: φαίνη κ’ ἀθανάτους καὶ ἀγήρας ἐμμεναι αἰεί | ὅ τ’ ἐπαντήσαε’ ὁτ’ Ἰσώνες ἄθροι εἶν, ‘one who encountered the Ionians then, when they are gathered together, would say that they are immortal and ageless forever’ (151–2). Apollo is not responsible for human mortality, but he is responsible for an enduring cultic institution through which that human frailty is nearly, if only for a moment (τὸτ’ … ὁτ’, 152), transcended.

Apollo also establishes an oracle in Delphi through which he discloses the will of Zeus to men (132, 252–3, 292–3; cf. 393–6, 484). He thus alleviates, if only partially, the inherent ignorance of mankind (ἄφραδές, 192). Apollo is not responsible for human ignorance, but he is responsible for an enduring cultic institution through which men attain knowledge otherwise unavailable to them. In this hymn, the gifts of the gods are good and work to mitigate, not exacerbate, mortal frailties.

41 Common language for the gods, especially in the context of their birth: cf. χάρμα βροτοίς, II. 14.325 (Dionysius); ἀθανάτοις θνητοῖς ἀνέκαρ καὶ χάρμα, Hom. Hymn 2.269 (Demeter); χάρμα μεγ’ ἄνθρώποισι, Hom. Hymn 16.4 (Asclepius); ἀνάρθρος χάρμα φιλοῖς, Pind. Pyth. 9.64 (Aristaeus); further examples are collected in K. Keyssner, Gottesvorstellung und Lebensausfassung im griechischen Hymnus (Stuttgart, 1932), 121–3.
43 Cf. Förstel (n. 1), 233; Clay (n. 12), 55–6; Richardson (n. 4), 113.
When asked by the Cretans how they will live off the infertile land of Delphi, Apollo, with a smile (ἐπιμεξοδήμας, 531), addresses them with language that recalls the Muses’ song: νῦντοι ἄνθρωποι, δυστλήμονες, οἱ μελεδόνας | βούλεσθ’ ἄργαλέους τε πόνους καὶ στέινεα θημῶ, ‘ignorant mortals of misplaced endurance, you who want anxieties, hard labours and difficulties for the heart’ (532–3). As their unfounded concerns for their livelihood show, the Cretans share in the ignorance common to mankind (νῦντοι, 532; cf. ἄφραδέςς, 192). The god cures this common ignorance by disclosing the uncommonly blessed future which they will enjoy through their service to him (535–43).

As νῦντοι (532) looks back to ἄφραδέςς (192), so δυστλήμονες (532) recalls τλημοϲύναϲ (191). Scholars generally translate δυστλήμονες (532) along the lines of ‘suffering hard things’ (LSJ3 s.v.), but this interpretation is questionable. The –τλήμονεϲ stem is, before the fifth century, unlikely to convey the idea of suffering by itself (see pages 2–3 above). Perhaps the δυ– prefix here adds the notion of suffering (‘enduring bad things’), but it seems more probable that the following relative clause helps to explain this rare word. The Cretans are δυστλήμονες (532) not because of what they suffer—they are not suffering anything at the moment—but rather because, as Apollo ironically alleges, they act as if they want (βούλεσθ’), 533) to endure ‘anxieties, hard labours and difficulties for the heart’ (532–3). Their ritual office entails that they will not have to undertake the common human hardships of making a living off the land (528–30, 535–7). δυστλήμονες (532) may thus be translated as ‘of misplaced endurance’.

Apollo does not inflict suffering on his Cretan officiants or act with malicious intent towards them (οὗ τι κακά φρονέον, 482); he makes them honoured and prosperous (478–85, 521–2, 536–9). If they some day fall under the power of others (542–3), then this will be because they disregard the god’s prophetic warning and succumb to vices inherent to mankind: they will have other men as their masters if ‘there will be any rash word or deed or hybris, as is the way of mortal men’ (ἡ τι τηύσιν ἔσσεται ἢ τι ἔργον, ἢ θεμίς ἐστὶ καταθνητῶν ἄνθρώπων, 540–1). These particular mortal men will suffer not because of, but rather despite, all that they have from the gods.

Among the gifts of the gods is song (δόρα θεάων, Hes. Theog. 103; cf. 93), the realm of the Muses and of Apollo himself (cf. Hom. Hymn 3.131, Hom. Hymn 25). The Homeric Hymn to Apollo hints self-reflexively at how this gift too may palliate


45 C. Brügger, Homer’s Iliad: The Basel Commentary. Book XXIV (transl. B.W. Millis and S. Strack) (Berlin, 2017), 179 (on ll. 24.479): ‘explanatory relative clauses are used inter alia with rare words that apparently require explanation … or they serve to amplify/clarify the significance of a word in context’.

human suffering. The blind bard imagines a visitor to Delos conversing with the Deliades (166–70): 47

Remember me in the future, whenever some mortal man, a stranger who has endured trials, comes here and asks, ‘o maidens, which singer who visits here is most pleasing to you, and whom do you most enjoy?’

Someone who has endured trials (ταλαπείριος, 168) seeks a beautiful song that will draw his mind away from his cares. 48 The faceless portrait of this stranger invites audiences to reflect on the nature of their own pleasure in the hymn of the blind bard from Chios. Like Apollo’s Delian festival and his Delphic oracle, this song in celebration of the god may also help to alleviate, but not erase, human pain.

In this hymn the gods too take pleasure in song but not as a relief from pain. On the usual reading of lines 189–93, the Olympians rejoice in hearing about how they themselves make human beings miserable. On the interpretation of the Muses’ song advanced here, the nature of their pleasure is less malevolent and more complex. The Olympians celebrate their own power to give good things to men, but the Muses’ song also includes humans bearing those pains which none the less define mortal existence. As the Phaeacians enjoy poetry about war in Odyssey Book 8, so for the gods human pain, transmuted through poetry, becomes a source of pleasure. 49 As in Pindar’s Isthmian 4 Ajax’s deadly serious exploits in battle and suicide become, through Homer, a theme for later men to ‘play with’ (λοιπὸ ἀθύρειν, 39), 50 so for the gods of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo a song about mortal suffering becomes a source of sport (παίζουϲ, 201; παίζοντα, 206). So far from feeling that human sorrow is cheapened by providing entertainment for the gods, one might feel that it is instead dignified by becoming the object of their attention. 51 The immortals on Olympus, in a scene of supreme happiness, are not wholly absorbed in their own magnificence but turn their minds to mortal hardships on earth.


50 See H.L. Spelman, Pindar and the Poetics of Permanence (Oxford, 2018), 56–7, who notes the ‘ludic connotations’ (at 56) of the infinitive.

This passage may indeed deserve a special place among the evidence for ‘Greek pessimism’, but the pessimism at issue pertains to human beings, not to the gods. The Muses’ song combines a view of divine benefactions that is profoundly optimistic with a view of the human condition that is profoundly pessimistic—or, we might prefer to say, realistic. Within their performance, the spectacle of human pain serves to enhance, by contrast, the beatitude of the immortals.53 Within the Homeric Hymn to Apollo as a whole, this dark view of human life provides a foil that brings out the brilliance of Apollo and his ‘divine gifts’ (190) to wretched mortals. The Muses’ song about the relationship between men and gods expresses a different perspective on the same world that is depicted throughout the rest of this hymn. By allowing its audiences to glimpse the world as the gods see it, the Homeric Hymn to Apollo may help some mortals to understand a little bit better their own very different place within that shared world.

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52 Förstel (n. 1), 228.
53 Clay (n. 12), 55; ‘the gods’ celebration … is enhanced or at least remains incomplete without a reminder of the afflictions of mankind’.