

How 'real' is the relationship between gods and humans in short forms of Greek poetry?

In the ancient Greek world, the presence of gods was everywhere, from daily life experiences to political and religious occasions within the society, and piety was considered an important virtue. The significance of gods in people's lives is evident in the number of literary pieces they are directly or indirectly mentioned in as well as in myths, inscriptions and works of art, such as statues or other visual representations. People walk past statues of the gods or temples on a daily basis, they attend festivals and celebratory events organised to honour them, they are being taught myths as they grow, and they see and participate in sacrifices for the gods in their community. Gods are also very present in their major decisions in life as they consult them by receiving oracles and signs, as well as make offerings to them and praying for the things they wish to acquire, such as wealth, health and good fortune.

When undertaking the task to discuss the genuineness of the relationship between gods and humans in short forms of Greek poetry, one has to start at the myths which laid the foundation for the Ancient Greek religion and the origins of the deities they worshipped. Since a complete coherent book or written inscription of divinity is non-existent, people relied on orally circulated myths in order to explain the different aspects of life and the divine creatures that governed their fate. Thus, myths were used to explain the origins of the gods and their individual relations with humans.¹ Humans on their side, composed all sorts of literary pieces to address the gods and attempt to establish a connection with them. Just like ritual sacrifice and offering, hymns are themselves offerings and they are the kind of gift that might survive time as it is often inscribed on a dedicatory item or papyrus.

Those literary pieces were hymns or prayers and the entire strategy behind their composition and performance was to attract the attention of the divinity addressed in a favourable way; ritual and choral worship combined to charm and persuade a single god or a group of gods that the worshipper was deserving sympathy and aid.² Furley agrees that hymn-singing combined with ritual sacrifice was the means -refined and developed over centuries- thought to give the gods pleasure and therefore have the best chance of securing benefits for humans.³ This suggests that in order to receive the favour of the gods, a hymn was the best means available, as well as to prevent negative events or divine punishment from taking place. So, by continuously working on improving and maintaining their relationships with the gods and by trying to please them and worship them it becomes evident that humans are the ones who put in most of the effort in the relationship.

Hence, the purpose of a hymn is to create a relationship of offering and receiving among the human and the gods. The composer of the hymn is writing their piece and offers it as a gift to deities to engage them to their religious rituals and please them. Greek hymns were composed first and foremost for the gods as audience.⁴ According to Budelmann, a typical hymn or prayer structure consists of three parts; an invocation to a deity, a praise of their power and authority or recollection of past interactions and finally a request for assistance.⁵ Although this might be a motif it is not always followed through by the different authors of poetic forms, each of whom has a different agenda when it comes to composing hymns or prayers. Just as kings like to hear tales about other kings (which are cleverly

¹ Hemingway, (2003).

² Furley (1995), p. 32.

³ Furley (1995), p. 45.

⁴ Petrovic (2016) p. 166.

⁵ Budelmann (2009) p. 115.

tailored so as both to please the sovereign and project his own ideal of monarchy) so divine myths in hymns are sung to please the deity addressed and suggest suitable ways for him/her to act.⁶

People, however, often seem to have an unclear relationship with gods as they are not always presented positively in short poetic forms and hymns. Often, gods act with cruelty, are unjust towards humans and harm them to display their power and authority over them. Nonetheless, they are a constant presence in human's lives to remind them that there are powers greater than them, which can benefit or destroy them. This is especially evident in one of the earliest known literary works of the Greek world, the *Iliad*, where gods often meddled with human lives, punished or destroyed humans, while other times helped them and stood by their side as allies. The *Iliad* is a great example of divine justice, and it includes many instances where the gods acted on their will, held grudges and changed their minds, as if they were human themselves. According to Allan, there is a coherence between divine and human values in the *Iliad*, as values such as justice and honour are socially constituted both in the divine and the mortal realms and a system of social norms and punishments is in existence in gods too.⁷ This leads to the conclusion that human life must have been greatly affected by gods both on a spiritual and a physical manner and maybe that divine justice along with the knowledge of myths and tales was enough incentive for them to worship and fear the gods.

Callimachus, in his *Hymn to Athena*, differs from the typical hymn motif. He describes Athena as a feminine presence, bathing in the forest. This is a rather unusual image which comes in contrast with the description of Athena in the hymn's first verses, which depict Athena as a warrior, caring for her horses and tending to them after battle. Thus, while reading the hymn, there are two different aspects of the goddess, the one of warrior-Athena fresh from the battle and the one of virgin Pallas, bathing in the forest with her favourite nymph. What ruins this bucolic forest scenery is the accidental presence of young Tiresias, who looks upon the goddess by mistake and immediately loses his sight. This is an example of the effect gods can have on human lives and how easy they can destroy them in mere seconds. In this myth, Tiresias is not given the chance to apologise or explain that he looked at Athena unwillingly, but he is immediately punished. The same stands for Anchises who looks at Artemis and ends up eaten by his own dogs. Callimachus' poem highlights and exacerbates the paradoxes of the archaic text by praising the hymned goddess through an evidently discomforting myth and depicting her both in contact with humans and awesomely detached from their fears and grief.⁸ These examples can lead to the realisation that for Callimachus the relationship with the gods is not a relationship between two equal parties and gods are often indifferent to human life, as they do not hesitate to punish humans without room for mediation or consideration.

To add to that, one can consider Callimachus' *Hymn to Athena* as a combination of mimesis and hymn. The language in the hymn is quite literary and the metric details and narrative inconsistencies lead to the conclusion that the hymn was not composed to be performed, but rather to be read, or perhaps be performed in a sympotic occurrence to honour a Ptolemaic ruler and then acquiring a non-performative setting in a book.⁹ Therefore, it is a mimetic hymn which is not composed for oral performance. This creates the question of what the relationship of Callimachus with divinity is and what purpose does the composition actually serve. Callimachus is a part of the Ptolemaic court, and it only makes sense that this mimetic hymn could be composed as a praise to the Ptolemaic dynasty and would be an attempt to deify certain kings and queens of the era as well as lifting the veil that separated mortality and divinity. In the bath of Pallas, Callimachus, is telling a myth about uneven

⁶ Furley (1995), p. 43.

⁷ Allan (2006) p. 32.

⁸ Hadjittofi (2008) p. 33.

⁹ Petrovic (2016) p. 167.

relationships among humans and gods, which might parallel to the uneven relationship between the Ptolemaic kings and their subjects, as well as political aspects of court life. In the *Hymn to Athena*, the friendship between Athena and Chariclo and the interaction of Athena and Tiresias, show an unequal relationship among humans and gods, where gods have all the power and can manipulate and hurt humans as they wish, which could parallel the relationship that the Ptolemaic kings and queens shared with their own subjects.

At the same time, being aware that Callimachus is using a mimetic framework to compose his hymn, makes the modern reader suspicious as to the relationship the author shares with the gods. Even though he is describing an unjust relationship, he is too, composing a myth which will not be performed to please the goddess, while at the same time painting a picture of her as cruel and ruthless. So, this could be an indication that the relationship between humans and gods in the Hellenistic times is not quite 'real', but rather constructed or manipulated by authors to convey messages of power and authority and draw parallels with the reality they live and operate in. Hence, one could conclude that in the poetry of Callimachus, gods are often reinvented as literary creatures, while also being very real and present and being very close to them is still considered quite a dangerous activity for humans.

This stands also for the epigrams of Callimachus, who also create many unanswered questions for the reader, who cannot comprehend whether those epigrams are in fact inscribed on a dedicatory item or simply constructed to praise and honour the deity or the commissioner. This statement is problematic as an epigram which is not actually inscribed on an item which could be left at the temple is not by definition a dedicatory short poem towards a god. As mentioned above, Callimachus is a member of the Ptolemaic court which is a powerful and influential dynasty of the time. Consequently, many of his epigrams are composed in order to enhance the opinion that the Ptolemaic dynasty were related to the gods, and they were in a way gods themselves. In *Epigram 52*, Callimachus mentions how the Charites are no longer three, but four, since Berenice, the Ptolemaic queen has joined them. This is a very interesting depiction of Berenice as a deity, because it shows how the boundaries between humans and gods are being blurred for the queen to be deified. This is an indication that the relationship between the Ptolemaic queen and the Charites is a very close one, in order for her to be joining them as the fourth Charis, an immortal and beautiful deity. Thus, Callimachus identifies his poetry with the immortality of the gods and demonstrates how close they are with the gods in order to be considered of the same kin and alike.

In the poetry of Sappho, the main deity that appears most often is Aphrodite, as her poetry usually has an erotic sense and Aphrodite is known to be the goddess of love. Sappho's *Fragment 1* is structured as a prayer to the goddess, asking her to relieve her from the agony of love. Her relationship with the goddess seems to be a love/hatred one, as the goddess is the one who is causing her pain and torture, but at the same time she is the one Sappho turns to in order to deal with issues related to desire and love. Thus, through prayer she is attempting to establish a relationship with the goddess to win her favour and have her help her once again. This is an indication that this prayer is a recurring one and that Sappho might not be as devoted to Aphrodite as she seems. She mentions the goddess' qualities and powers, which can be useful for the realisation of the favour she asks while at the same time posing as an individual who is at their mercy.

However, in *Sappho 1*, the words used to describe Aphrodite are *weaver of schemes* and someone who bestows sorrows upon Sappho. These words have a negative meaning and do not present the most flattering image of Aphrodite. Additionally, in the poem Sappho does not mention any rituals performed by her to praise Aphrodite or any actions to win her favour, which shows that their relationship is a little confusing. Sappho does not seem to worship the goddess or be devoted to her,

even though she asks for her help. At the same time, though, she seems to feel very close to the goddess and having a good relationship with her. In the poem, it is evident that the goddess plays a dual part in the poet's life; she can assist her and offer her what she wants and at the same time she can cause her pain and agony. Kulshrestha suggests that Sappho depicts the relationship between humans and gods as that of a loving parent, willing to grant assistance when necessary.¹⁰ This is actually evident in *Fragment 1*, as Aphrodite is pictured smiling and gently mocking Sappho for repeatedly asking her to assist her in her romantic troubles again.¹¹ Since Aphrodite does seem willing to help Sappho and become her aid it is safe to assume that she does adopt a maternal role by granting Sappho her wish, much like a parent would do for their child. This however does not cancel out the fact that Aphrodite can inflict pain if she wishes but having a soft spot for Sappho, she chooses to help her and act as her ally.

This paternal bond between Sappho and Aphrodite is proven by the fact that even though humans demand and ask for the divine presence in hymns and prayers, Aphrodite not only comes through to Sappho's aid in *Fragment 1*, but she also speaks to her in person. Thus, this is an important aspect of understanding how Sappho views Aphrodite and how close to her she feels. Cameron argues that the poem lacks a deeper religious emotion conveyed in its lines, as Sappho addresses Aphrodite in a conventional religious language, but the playfulness of the goddess' tone indicates that she does not have a high regard for the poet and her love troubles.¹² In fact, the irony in the words of Aphrodite and the fact that she has inflicted sorrow in Sappho in the past does suggest that their relationship might be both paternal and unequal as the goddess is a very powerful entity.

Sappho also depicts this maternal nature in the 2nd *fragment*, where Sappho calls Aphrodite to an idyllic place in order to celebrate a happy occasion because of the nature of their relationship—had Aphrodite not been so supportive and willing to assist, Sappho would probably be more reluctant to include Aphrodite in her celebration.¹³ This leads to the conclusion that for Sappho her relationship with Aphrodite resembles a mother-daughter one, but she still understands and knows that Aphrodite is a very powerful goddess with the power to destroy her or cause her sorrow, and thus she is trying not to anguish the goddess through her poetry but at the same time she is quite ambiguous in her characterisations of her.

Anacreon in *Fragment 348* addresses Artemis and asks her to look over the city of Magnesia and act like a shepherd who is protecting their flock. What is interesting about the poet's relationship with the goddess is that he does not ask of her to come forth and show herself but to oversee from above, thus keeping a distance from humans, while still helping them. This is another indication of how closeness with gods is not a safe activity for humans and due to the immense powers of the deities a distance is necessary between them.

Another very interesting clue as for the relationship between gods and humans in short poetic forms is Bacchylides' *Ode 17*. In the poem, many gods are mentioned and are included, and the ode ends with a prayer to Apollo of Delos. What is interesting about the ode is that Bacchylides attempts to construct a kinship between Perseus and Poseidon, and thus places him in the mythical culture as the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea. Athens is one of the most powerful cities in Greece, well known for its naval dominance of the Aegean Sea. So, by manipulating the myth, Bacchylides links Athens to Poseidon and offers an explanation for the Athenian naval strength, as well as the imperialistic desires

¹⁰ Kulshrestha (2011).

¹¹ Kulshrestha (2011).

¹² Cameron (1939) p. 16.

¹³ Kulshrestha (2011).

it possesses. In this case the poetic composition shows a relationship among a deity and a human whose aim is to convey political messages and reinvent the foundational myth of Athens. Simultaneously, Bacchylides emphasises the closeness between gods and humans as Theseus of Athens is the son of a major god. In *Bacchylides 17*, a relationship with gods is constructed although Theseus does not come in direct contact with Poseidon or Zeus, even if he seems to be in their good graces. This further enhances the essential distance between humans and the mighty gods.

Considering how humans utilise myths in order to establish some connections among gods and themselves one can assume that the proximity between gods and humans is a close one and one that has to be preserved and tended to. It is interesting how it is one-sided as gods never actually show up or respond to the human prayers and demands. There are epiphanies attested in some literary works, but this is not an often occurrence and when it does happen it creates a variety of feelings in the human souls. Furthermore, deities do seem to have a somewhat closer relationship with poets or artists and consider them different than the rest of their kind, like Sappho for example whose relationship with Aphrodite seems to be a particularly close one, even though, she does also seem to be aware of the powers the goddess possesses and the caution she needs to show when in her presence or when she addresses her.

To sum up, the relationship between humans and gods as depicted in short forms of poetry is a very complex one and simultaneously it is one that can be manipulated by authors to communicate other meanings and present deeper connections than in reality. Humans seem to feel close enough to gods to ask for their assistance or *charis*, while at the same time being aware that gods are creatures who are not always fair and who do not abide by human laws and rules. On the other hand, gods are often described as being indifferent to humans, and they enjoy hurting them as humans mean so little to them. Gods and humans are very different when it comes to displaying emotions and experiencing pain or loss, as they are depicted being far away above the aether and detached from the human things that take place on earth.

Mimesis is also a concept that enhances the complexity of this relationship as mimetic poetry is not actually praising divinity, but it involves using the gods in order for poets or their rich and powerful patrons to achieve their own ambitions. Thus, even if humans definitely feel admiration, respect and awe towards the gods, they often feel fear towards them too, as they are unpredictable creatures whose emotions cannot be controlled by human actions. Short forms of poetry are a useful means to express those feelings creatively and often conveyed and they are also a testimony of a relationship that can cause them both positive feelings and physical and emotional pain. Finally, when trying to establish the genuineness of the relationship between gods and humans one should bear in mind the fact that short poetic forms are single sided literary pieces of composition, which are ambiguous as for their intentions and can be easily manipulated to suggest a kinship and piety greater than it might have been in reality.

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