The relationship between gods and humans in short forms of Greek Poetry

Gods are a major part of life in antiquity and their significance in people's lives is evident in the number of literary pieces they are directly or indirectly mentioned in. People, however, often seem to have an unclear relationship with gods as they are not always praised 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.

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. Much like prayers, hymns were traditionally constructed to ask for the help of a god or receive their favour and assistance.

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. 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 distant from 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. 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 why is the hymn really composed.

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. In the bath of Pallas, Callimachus, is telling a myth about uneven 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.

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 relation the author has 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 manipulated by authors to convey other messages regarding power.

In the poetry of Sappho, the main deity that appears most often is Aphrodite, as her poetry is usually erotic. Sappho 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/hate 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 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. 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 tortures 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 author's life; she can assist her and offer her what she wants and at the same time she can cause her pain and agony.

Sappho 2, on the other hand, is describing an idyllic scenery, where all senses are stimulated by the scents, the sounds and the visuals of the poem, which is a hymn to Aphrodite. The poem is characterised by the unusual aspect of mentioning the goddess' name at the end, while giving hints as to who she might be in the poem. This poem praises Aphrodite, and she asks her to come and join in the celebration and pour nectar into their cups. This image of Aphrodite serving humans wine is a bit unusual as it is humans who traditionally engage in pouring wine in altars in rituals for the gods. Therefore, one can assume that in this poem, Sappho is both praising Aphrodite and not respecting her at the same time.

To sum up, the relationship between humans and gods is a complex one and one that can be manipulated by authors to communicate other meanings. Humans seem to feel close enough to gods to ask for their assistance, while at the same time they are aware that gods are creatures who are not always fair. On the other hand, gods are described as indifferent to humans, and they enjoy hurting them as humans mean so little to them. Mimesis is also a concept that enhances the complexity of this relationship as mimetic poetry is not really praising divinity but rather using gods to achieve their own ambitions. Thus, even if humans feel fear and maybe love towards the gods, they often feel disregard towards them too and short forms of poetry are a means to express those feelings creatively and often conveyed.