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# GILGAMESH

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STEPHEN MITCHELL

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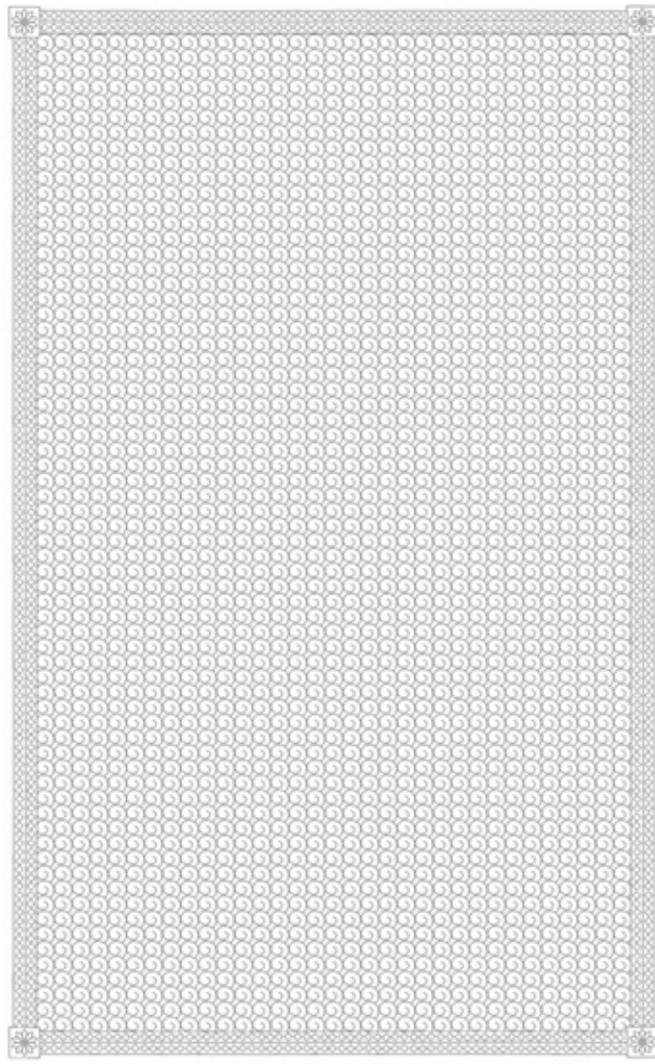
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*To Katie*

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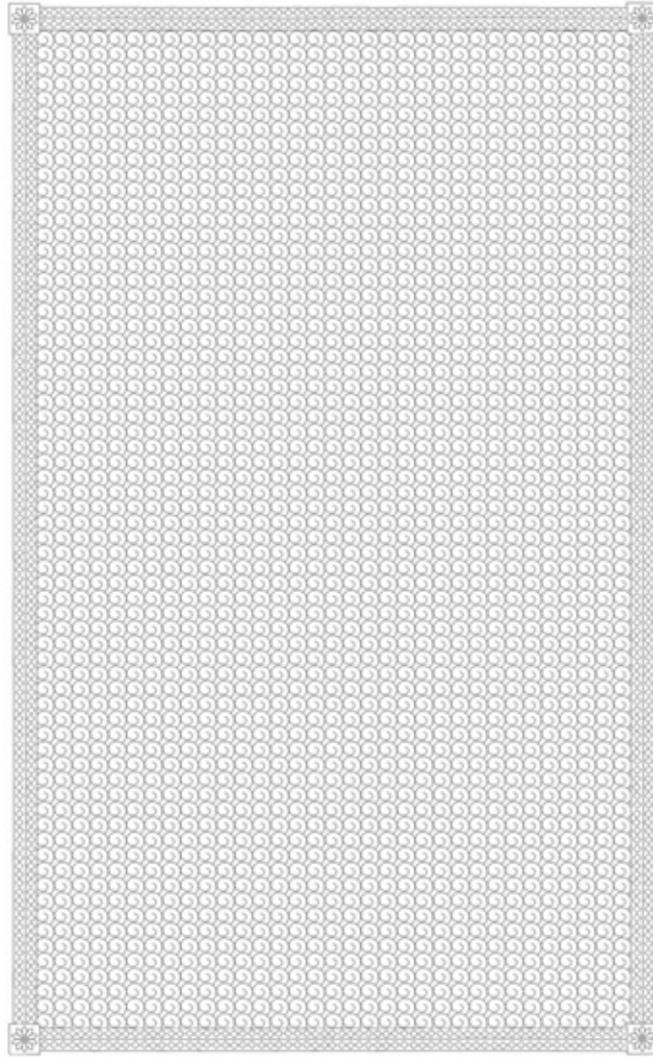
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# INTRODUCTION

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## THE OLDEST STORY IN THE WORLD

In Iraq, when the dust blows, stopping men and tanks, it brings with it memories of an ancient world, much older than Islam or Christianity. Western civilization originated from that place between the Tigris and the Euphrates, where Hammurabi created his legal code and where *Gilgamesh* was written, the oldest story in the world, a thousand years older than the *Iliad* or the Bible. Its hero was a historical king who reigned in the Mesopotamian city of Uruk in about 2750 BCE. In the epic, he has an intimate friend, Enkidu, a naked wild man who has been civilized through the erotic arts of a temple priestess. With him Gilgamesh battles monsters, and when Enkidu dies, he is inconsolable. He sets out on a desperate journey to find the one man who can tell him how to escape death.

Part of the fascination of *Gilgamesh* is that, like any great work of literature, it has much to tell us about ourselves. In giving voice to grief and the fear of death, perhaps more powerfully than any book written after it, in portraying love and vulnerability and the quest for wisdom, it has become a personal testimony for millions of readers in dozens of languages. But it also has a particular relevance in today's world, with its polarized fundamentalisms, each side fervently believing in its own righteousness, each on a crusade, or jihad, against what it perceives as an evil enemy. The hero of this epic is an antihero, a superman (a superpower, one might say) who doesn't know the difference

between strength and arrogance. By preemptively attacking a monster, he brings on himself a disaster that can only be overcome by an agonizing journey, a quest that results in wisdom by proving its own futility. The epic has an extraordinarily sophisticated moral intelligence. In its emphasis on balance and in its refusal to side with either hero or monster, it leads us to question our dangerous certainties about good and evil.

I began this version of *Gilgamesh* because I had never been convinced by the language of any translation of it that I'd read. I wanted to find a genuine voice for the poem: words that were lithe and muscular enough to match the power of the story. If I have succeeded, readers will discover that, rather than standing before an antiquity in a glass case, they have entered a literary masterpiece that is as startlingly alive today as it was three and a half millennia ago.

## ORIGINS

*Gilgamesh* is a work that in the intensity of its imagination stands beside the great stories of Homer and the Bible. Yet for two thousand years, all traces of it were lost. The baked clay tablets on which it was inscribed in cuneiform characters lay buried in the rubble of cities across the ancient Near East, waiting for people from another world to read them. It wasn't until 1850 that the first fragments were discovered among the ruins of Nineveh, and the text wasn't deciphered and translated for several decades afterward. The great poet Rainer Maria Rilke may have been the first reader discerning enough to recognize its true literary stature. "*Gilgamesh* is stupendous!" he wrote at the end of 1916. "I ... consider it to be among the greatest things that can happen to a person." "I have immersed myself in [it], and in these truly gigantic fragments I have experienced measures and forms that belong with the supreme works that the conjuring Word has ever produced." In Rilke's consciousness, *Gilgamesh*, like a magnificent Aladdin's palace that has instantly materialized out of nowhere, makes its first appearance as a masterpiece of world literature.

The story of its discovery and decipherment is itself as fabulous as a tale from *The Thousand and One Nights*. A young English traveler named Austen Henry Layard, who was passing through the Middle East on his way to Ceylon, heard that there were antiquities buried in the mounds of what is now the city of Mosul, halted his journey, and began excavations in 1844. These mounds turned out to contain the ruined palaces of Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria, including what was left of the library of the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE). "In amazement" Layard and his assistant Hormuzd Rassam "found room after room lined with carved stone bas-reliefs of demons and deities, scenes of battle, royal hunts and ceremonies; doorways flanked by enormous winged bulls and lions; and, inside some of the chambers, tens of thousands of clay tablets inscribed with the curious, and then undeciphered, cuneiform ('wedge-shaped') script." Over twenty-five thousand of these tablets were shipped back to the British Museum.

When cuneiform was officially deciphered in 1857, scholars discovered that the tablets were written in Akkadian, an ancient Semitic language cognate with Hebrew and Arabic. Fifteen years went by before anyone noticed the tablets on which *Gilgamesh* was inscribed. Then, in 1872, a young British Museum curator named George Smith realized that one of the fragments told the story of a Babylonian Noah, who survived a great flood sent by the gods. "On looking down the third column," Smith wrote, "my eye caught the statement that the ship rested on the mountains of Nizir, followed by the account of the sending forth of the dove, and its finding no resting-place and returning. I saw at once that I had here discovered a portion at least of the Chaldean account of the Deluge." To a

Victorian this was a spectacular discovery, because it seemed to be independent corroboration of the historicity of the biblical Flood (Victorians believed that the Genesis story was much older than it is). When Smith saw these lines, according to a later account, he said, “‘I am the first man to read that after more than two thousand years of oblivion!’ Setting the tablet on the table,” the account continues, “he jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself.” We aren’t told if he took off just his coat or if he continued to strip down further. I like to imagine him in his euphoria going all the way and running stark naked, like Enkidu, among the astonished black-clad Victorian scholars.

Smith’s announcement, made on December 3, 1872 to the newly formed Society of Biblical Archaeology, that he had discovered an account of the Flood on one of the Assyrian tablets caused a major stir, and soon more fragments of *Gilgamesh* were unearthed at Nineveh and in the ruins of other ancient cities. His translation of the fragments that had been discovered up to then was published in 1876. Though to a modern reader it seems quaint and almost surrealistic in its many mistaken guesses and is often fragmentary to the point of incoherence, it was an important pioneering effort.

Today, more than a century and a quarter later, many more fragments have surfaced, the language is much better understood, and scholars can trace the history of the text with some degree of confidence. Briefly, here is the consensus.

Legends about Gilgamesh probably began to arise shortly after the death of the historical king. The earliest texts that have survived, which date from about 2100 BCE, are five separate and independent poems in Sumerian, entitled “Gilgamesh and Aga,” “Gilgamesh and Huwawa,” “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven,” “Gilgamesh and the Underworld,” and “The Death of Gilgamesh.” (Sumerian is a non-Semitic language unrelated to any other that we know, and is as distant from Akkadian as Chinese is from English. It became the learned language of ancient Mesopotamia and was part of the scribal curriculum.) These five poems-written in a leisurely, repetitive, hieratic style, much less condensed and vivid than the Akkadian epic-would have been familiar to later poets and editors.

The direct ancestor of the eleven clay tablets dug up at Nineveh is called the Old Babylonian version. It was written in Akkadian (of which Babylonian is a dialect) and dates from about 1700 BCE; eleven fragments have survived, including three tablets that are almost complete. This version, though it paraphrases a few episodes in the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* texts, is an original poem, the first *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In its themes and its form, it is essentially the same poem as its Ninevite descendent: a story about friendship, the death of the beloved, and the quest for immortality.

Some five hundred years after the Old Babylonian version was written, a scholar-priest named Sîn-lēqi-unninni revised and elaborated on it. His epic, which scholars call the Standard Version, is the basis for all modern translations. As of now, with seventy-three fragments discovered, slightly fewer than two thousand of the three thousand lines of the original text exist in readable, continuous form; the rest is damaged or missing, and there are many gaps in the sections that have survived.

We don’t know exactly what Sîn-lēqi-unninni’s contribution to the Standard Version was, since so few fragments of the Old Babylonian version have survived for comparison. From what we can see, he is often a conservative editor, following the older version line for line, with few if any changes in vocabulary and word order. Sometimes, though, he expands or contracts, drops passages or adds them and functions not as an editor but as an original poet. The two major passages that we know he added—the Prologue and the priestess Shamhat’s speech inviting Enkidu to Uruk, have the vividness and density of great art.

The *Gilgamesh* that you are about to read is a sometimes free, sometimes close adaptation into English verse of Sîn-lēqi-unninni's Standard Version.\* Even scholars making literal translations don't simply translate the Standard Version; they fill in some of the textual gaps with passages from other versions, the Old Babylonian being the most important. I have taken this practice further: occasionally, when the Standard Version is particularly fragmentary, I have supplemented it with passages from the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* poems. I have also added lines or short passages to bridge the gaps or to clarify the story. My intention throughout has been to re-create the ancient epic, as a contemporary poem, in the parallel universe of the English language.

## CIVILIZING THE WILD MAN

*Gilgamesh* is the story of a hero's journey; one might say that it is the mother of all heroes' journeys with its huge uninhibited mythic presences moving through a landscape of dream. It is also the story of how a man becomes civilized, how he learns to rule himself and therefore his people, and to act with temperance, wisdom, and piety. The poem begins with the city and ends with it.

In the first lines of his Prologue, Sîn-lēqi-unninni states the breadth and depth of what his hero had endured: "He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions." The next seven lines tell us the essential details, not even bothering to mention the hero's name. Gilgamesh had traveled to the edge of the world and been granted knowledge of the primeval days of humanity; he had survived the journey and returned to restore the great temple of Ishtar and Uruk's then famous six-mile-long wall.

And now, after this summary, something fascinating happens. Sîn-lēqi-unninni turns to his readers and invites them to survey the great city for themselves:

See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun.

Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares.

It is a very strange and touching moment. The poet is ostensibly addressing an audience of ancient Babylonians in 1200 BCE, directing them to admire a city that was built in time immemorial. But the readers, as it turns out, are you and I. We are the ones who are being invited, more than three thousand years later, to walk on the wall of Uruk and observe the splendor and bustling life of the great city. The invitation is touching not because the city is in ruins and the civilization has been destroyed—this is not an ironic "Ozymandias" moment—but because in our imagination we *can* climb the ancient stone staircase and observe the lush gardens and orchards, the palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares, and share the poet's amazement and pride in his city.

Then Sîn-lēqi-unninni's invitation becomes more intimate.

"Find the cornerstone," he tells us,

and under it the copper box that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read how Gilgamesh suffered all and accomplished all.

I doubt whether even in 1200 BCE this was meant to be taken literally. Even to an ancient Babylonian

reader, the lines would have been vivid enough to make the physical act unnecessary. As we read the instructions, ~~we can see ourselves finding the cornerstone, taking out the copper box, unlocking it, opening its lid, and taking out the priceless tablet of lapis lazuli, which turns out, in the end, to be the very poem we are about to read.~~ We are looking beneath the surface of things, into the hidden places, the locked repositories of human experience. The trials that Gilgamesh himself is supposed to have written down long ago are now being revealed to us in words that, whether “carved on stone tablets” printed on paper, create their own sense of authenticity. They issue directly from the source: if not from the historical Gilgamesh, then from a poet who has imagined that hero’s experience intensely enough for it to be true.

The Old Babylonian poem that Sîn-lēqi-unninni inherited begins with the phrase “Surpassing all kings.” It describes Gilgamesh as a gigantic and manic young man (his name may mean “The Old Man is a Young Man”), a warrior, and, after his return, as a good king and benefactor to his people: a combination of Goliath and David. But to begin with he is a tyrant. When we first enter the poem, there is an essential imbalance in the city; something has gone drastically wrong. The man of unsurpassable courage and inexhaustible energy has become a monster of selfishness; the shepherd has become a wolf. He oppresses the young men, perhaps with forced labor, and oppresses the young women, perhaps with his ravenous sexual appetite. Because he is an absolute monarch (and two-thirds divine into the bargain), no one dares to criticize him. The people call out to heaven, like the Israelite slaves in Exodus, and their cry is heard. But Anu, father of the gods, doesn’t intervene directly. He sends help in a deliciously roundabout way. He asks the great mother goddess, Aruru, to reenact her first creation of human beings:

“Now go and create a double for Gilgamesh, his second self, a man who equals his strength and courage, a man who equals his stormy heart. Create a new hero, let them balance each other perfectly so that Uruk has peace.”

Like the Lord God in Genesis, Aruru forms a man from the dust of the ground, and he becomes a living being, the original man himself: natural, innocent, solitary. This second Adam will find “a helpmeet for him” not in a woman but in the man for whose sake he was created. Thus begins—a thousand years before Achilles and Patroclus, or David and Jonathan—the first great friendship in literature.

Enkidu is indeed Gilgamesh’s double, so huge and powerful that when people see him they are struck with awe. But he is also Gilgamesh’s opposite and mirror image: two-thirds animal to Gilgamesh’s two-thirds divine. These animal qualities are actually much more attractive than the divine ones. Where Gilgamesh is arrogant, Enkidu is childlike; where Gilgamesh is violent, Enkidu is peaceful, a naked herbivore among the herds. He lives and wanders with them from pasture to pasture, and (as we learn later in the poem) he drives away marauding predators, thus acting as both sheep and shepherd. With his natural altruism, he is also the original animal activist, setting his friends free from human pits and traps.

When the trapper discovers Enkidu drinking with the animals at a waterhole, he is filled with dread, as if he has seen a bigfoot or abominable snowman. What makes his face go white and his legs shake is not the fear of being harmed by a powerful savage (after all, he doesn’t have to get any closer): it is the fear of being face to face with primordial humanity, the thing itself. He goes to his father for advice, and the father sends him on to Gilgamesh, who “will know what to do.”

Gilgamesh may be a tyrant, but he is an insightful one. He does know what to do about the wild man, and he tells it to the trapper without a moment’s hesitation. “Go to the temple of Ishtar,” he says,

“ask them there for a woman named Shamhat, one of the priestesses who give their bodies to any man in honor of the goddess. Take her into the wilderness. When the animals are drinking at the waterhole, tell her to strip off her robe and lie there naked, ready, with her legs apart. The wild man will approach. Let her use her love-arts. Nature will take its course, and then the animals who knew him in the wilderness will be bewildered, and will leave him forever.”

It is a startling recommendation, especially coming from a man whose *modus operandi* is force. We might have expected him to send out a battalion to hunt down and capture Enkidu. Instead, he commissions a single woman. Somehow he knows that Enkidu needs to be tamed rather than captured, and that the only way to civilize him is through the power of eros. He doesn't seem to suspect, however, that the wild man has been sent by the gods to civilize *him*.

The poem says nothing about Gilgamesh's relationship to Shamhat. Does he know how skilled she is because he has made love with her himself at the temple? Is he a regular client? Or has he just heard of her prowess? All we are told is that he knows she is the right woman for the job.

Shamhat is one of the most fascinating characters in *Gilgamesh*. If we want to appreciate her role as an ancient Babylonian cultic prostitute, our imagination needs to bypass any filters of romantic love, Judeo-Christian morality, male lubricity, or female indignation. Actually, we have no word in English for what Shamhat is. The Akkadian words *Ēarīmtu* and *ĪamĒātu* certainly do not mean “prostitute” in our sense of the term, a woman who sells herself for personal gain. She is a priestess of Ishtar, the goddess of love, and, as a kind of reverse nun, has dedicated her life to what the Babylonians considered the sacred mystery of sexual union. In opening to the anonymous man who appears before her in the temple, young or old, handsome or ugly, she is opening to Everyman—that is, to God. She has become an incarnation of the goddess, and with her own body reenacts the cosmic marriage. As a pure servant of eros, she is a vessel for the force that moves the stars, the force that through the green fuse drives the flower.

In a passage about the attractions of Uruk that was added in the Standard Version, *Sîn-lēqi-unninni* mentions Ishtar's priestesses with enormous pride:

“Come,” said Shamhat, “let us go to Uruk, I will lead you to Gilgamesh the mighty king. You will see the great city with its massive wall, you will see the young men dressed in their splendor, in the finest linen and embroidered wool, brilliantly colored, with fringed shawls and wide belts. Every day is a festival in Uruk, with people singing and dancing in the streets, musicians playing their lyres and drums, the lovely priestesses standing before the temple of Ishtar, chatting and laughing, flushed with sexual joy, and ready to serve men's pleasure, in honor of the goddess, so that even old men are aroused from their beds.”

How the poet loves his city! The great wall, the colors, the finery, the music and dancing—they all form the texture of the continuous celebration of life that makes this passage so alive. Part of the enjoyment he conveys is that in Uruk male sexual desire is so abundantly gratified. But it is the lovely, joyful priestesses, themselves gratified in the act of gratification, who light up his portrait of the city. Their laughter and sexual glow is for him one of the principal glories of civilization.

The trapper finds Shamhat and tells her of the king's command. Shamhat has been trained in the art of surrender, and I imagine her as giving her full consent to the mission, dangerous though it might be. The creature she will be offering herself to is, after all, an unknown. He may be ferocious, he may be more beast than man, he may even tear her to shreds, for all she knows (and she probably knows that the very sight of him filled the trapper with dread). But she agrees to go—calmly, as I imagine her,

trusting in her art and in the power of eros.

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The waterhole is a three days' hike through the wilderness, and the poet could easily have inserted dialogues here between the young priestess of Ishtar and the trapper. What was she feeling on the long and perhaps physically taxing walk? Was she afraid? What did she ask him about his life, about Enkidu? Was he dazzled by her sexual presence? Was he tempted? Did they make love, or was that forbidden? What did he ask her, and what did she answer, about the life of the city, about her experiences in the temple, about Gilgamesh the king? The poet compresses all the dramatic possibilities of these three days into two lines:

For three days they walked. On the third day they reached the waterhole. There they waited.

The economy of his art is exquisite.

For another two days Shamhat and the trapper wait at the waterhole. When Enkidu appears, Shamhat follows directions (not that a skilled priestess of Ishtar would have needed directions), and events unfold just as Gilgamesh predicted they would. It is a deeply moving episode, especially if we have in the back of our minds the Genesis myth of the loss of human innocence. Here Shamhat plays the role of Eve, but she is a benign seductress, leading Enkidu not into the knowledge of a polarized good and evil, but into the glories of sexuality, the intimate understanding of what a woman is, and self-awareness as a human being. There is no serpent in this garden, no anxious deity announcing prohibitions and punishments. Again, the poet's economy is superb. The seven days of lovemaking are described in the simplest of terms; compressed into seven lines is a whole epic of sexual initiation. Enkidu, in his innocence and trust, follows where his penis points, and discovers in himself an elemental potency, a state of perpetual erection. For Shamhat's part, however frightened she may be as the enormous hairy creature approaches, she takes him in lovingly, and keeps taking him in for seven days—a feat that is at least equal to any of the showier male heroics later in the poem.

She used her love-arts, she took his breath with her kisses, held nothing back, and showed him what a woman is. For seven days he stayed erect and made love with her.

There are no traces of puritan consciousness in the culture of this poem: sex is seen as a civilizing event rather than as something dangerous to the social order. One would be interested to know precisely what the love-arts of a Babylonian priestess were, but this also the poet leaves to the imagination. Whatever the graphic details, Shamhat obviously does her job well. Adept and lavishly generous, she totally justifies Gilgamesh's confidence in her.

At the end of seven days, when he has had enough of the nonstop lovemaking, Enkidu tries to rejoin his animals, but they dart away at full speed, like the fawn that emerges with Alice from the wood where things have no names. Enkidu no longer has the unconscious mind of an animal or the vital force he had as a child of the wilderness. Something has been lost, but it is not paradise. In fact, Enkidu is about to enter another kind of paradise: civilization, the city where every day is a festival. Walking back to Shamhat, he realizes that although he can no longer run like an animal, he has gained something that more than makes up for his lost powers. In knowing Shamhat sexually, his mind has been enlarged: he has begun to know himself. He sits down at her feet, and as he listens he discovers that he can understand human language. He also discovers for himself what the Lord God realizes for Adam in Genesis, that "it is not good that the man should be alone." In this longing for a true friend, he intuits what he was created for.

Shamhat not only initiates Enkidu into self-awareness between her civilizing thighs; she invites him to Uruk, gives him human clothing, and teaches him to eat human food in the hut of some shepherds who

live conveniently nearby. She acts as a patient, loving mother as she guides him through this rite of passage. ~~The scene at the shepherds' table is both hilarious and touching, with its shame-free~~ awareness that initiation into humanity means knowing what it is to be sexual, intoxicated, and clean.

They led him to their table, they put bread and beer in front of him. Enkidu sat and stared, he had never seen human food, he didn't know what to do. Then Shamhat said, "Go ahead, Enkidu. This is food, we humans eat and drink this." Warily he tasted the bread. Then he ate a piece, he ate a whole loaf, then ate another, he ate until he was full, drank seven pitchers of the beer, his heart grew light, his face glowed, and he sang out with joy. He had his hair cut, he washed, he rubbed sweet oil into his skin, and became fully human.

We get three further glimpses of Shamhat: as she and Enkidu make love yet again, as she humbly carries out a request of his, and finally, as she accompanies him to Uruk. Then, having completed her mission, she is gone.

## THE CHALLENGE

Great-walled Uruk, city of gardens and temples and public squares, is the paradise of Shamhat's description, but it is also a place of suffering, where the people cry out because of Gilgamesh's tyranny. The two realities coexist; they appear according to one's perception, the way light is either particle or wave; it all depends on how one approaches the city. When she invites Enkidu to Uruk, Shamhat suggests that he approach with the eyes of appreciation, that he stand before Gilgamesh and "gaze with wonder" at his magnificence. But Enkidu isn't ready for this. He needs to approach him as a tyrant and an adversary.

Shamhat did in fact introduce Gilgamesh as a tyrant the first time she mentioned him, without a hint of the panegyric that is to follow:

"Let me take you to great-walled Uruk, to the temple of Ishtar, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king, who in his arrogance oppresses the people, trampling upon them like a wild bull."

Enkidu's response is surprising. He doesn't bristle or become white with anger, as he does later when he hears of Gilgamesh's apparent right to sleep with any about-to-be-married virgin. He intuits something in Gilgamesh beyond his brute strength and callousness. His longing is a recognition that floats up toward the surface of his consciousness, a recognition, before the fact, that however unjust Gilgamesh may be, they are meant for each other.

Deep in his heart he felt something stir, a longing he had never known before, the longing for a true friend.

But immediately he shifts from this poignant, introspective silence to an aggressive stance that matches Gilgamesh in arrogance. "I will challenge him," Enkidu says.

"I will shout to his face: '*I am the mightiest! I am the man who can make the world tremble! I am supreme!*'"

If a strong young gorilla had the power of speech, this is what he might cry out to the alpha male with his harem of wives. The challenge is touching in its primitiveness. There is no Homeric subtlety or eloquence here, just testosterone speaking. *Another hero? I will fight him!* Enkidu needs to test himself, to enter civilization with a chip on his shoulder the size of a cedar trunk. Shamhat, speaking

as his teacher, suggests that he approach Gilgamesh from a different perspective:

“I will show you Gilgamesh the mighty king, the hero destined for both joy and grief. You will stand before him and gaze with wonder, you will see how handsome, how virile he is, how his body pulses with erotic power. He is even taller and stronger than you—so full of life-force that he needs no sleep. Enkidu, put aside your aggression.”

But Enkidu is having none of it. Nothing can bring him out of his male challenge mode.

The specific impetus for the trip to Uruk comes from the mouth of a young man who passes Enkidu and Shamhat, as they are making love again, on his way to Uruk for a wedding that he has catered. Enkidu’s curiosity is aroused more highly than his passion; he interrupts the coitus and sends Shamhat over to make inquiries. The young man describes what will happen at the end of the ceremony:

“The priest will bless the young couple, the guests will rejoice, the bridegroom will step aside, and the virgin will wait in the marriage bed for Gilgamesh, king of great-walled Uruk. It is he who mates first with the lawful wife. After he is done, the bridegroom follows. This is the order that the gods have decreed. From the moment the king’s birth-cord was cut, every girl’s hymen has belonged to him.”

“As he listened,” we are told, “Enkidu’s face went pale / with anger,” but we aren’t told why he is angry. Is this the indiscriminate fury of a young challenger? Is he feeling moral outrage at Gilgamesh’s *ius primae noctis*? If so, hasn’t he understood that this is a ritual act sanctioned by the gods? Is the act sanctioned by the gods, as the young man says, or is this statement propaganda issued from a sexually predatory tyrant? (We know that the gods have sent Enkidu to balance Gilgamesh’s oppression, but we don’t know the precise nature of that oppression. It is entirely possible that Gilgamesh, as the embodiment of the divine male principle, does have the right to sleep with every bride on her wedding night, but that he is appropriating other young women as well. It is also possible, as some scholars think, that the oppression has nothing sexual about it, that Gilgamesh, as a gigantic superjock, has been exhausting the men in athletic contests, and the women are worn out from taking care of them.) Finally, if the young man’s report is accurate and if Enkidu has understood it correctly, is he rebelling against the divine order? Or, alternatively, does he accept the divine order and simply want to replace Gilgamesh as the stud planting his seed in the virgins of Uruk? We simply don’t know.

This not-knowing is an interesting position to be in as a reader. (It will become even more interesting in the monster-slaying episode of Books III-V.) One thing it means is that we don’t take sides. Yes, Gilgamesh is a tyrant, but he is also magnificent. Yes, he mates with the lawful wife, but this apparent sexual predation may be in the divine order of things, and to oppose it is not necessarily virtuous. Every negative about him is balanced by a positive. Of course, from another perspective, it is clear that the whole world of Uruk is out of balance because of Gilgamesh’s manic excesses and that Enkidu has been created to restore that balance. It is equally clear that the confrontation between the two heroes is not going to be a struggle between good and evil. There are too many ambiguities here for the mind to settle in a position of moral certainty. This leaves us with the raw emotion of Enkidu’s anger, which, unexplained and uninterpretable, serves to move him from the shepherds’ huts to the great city.

As Enkidu enters Uruk, he is mobbed like a celebrity. He may be gigantic, he may have a savage past, but he is fully human now, and, recognizing his innocence, people are not too frightened to approach him, as the trapper was. The crowds treat him with a mixture of awe and tenderness, marveling at his enormous body and kissing his enormous feet as if they were doting mothers kissing the most luscious morsels of infant flesh. Enkidu finds his way to the marriage house and plants himself in front of the

door, immovable.

When Gilgamesh arrives, the two heroes seize each other, butting heads like wild bulls, careening through the streets, crashing into walls, and making the houses tremble. The confrontation could hardly be more primal, stripped down to the element of male pride. Enkidu's anger is beside the point. There are no principles to be upheld, no justifications and counterjustifications. The battle is as silly as a schoolyard fight, yet there is something beautiful about its energy. There is also a deeply erotic element in it. This is not a fight to the death, as in the *Iliad* or *Beowulf*. It is a fight at the end of which each man will be able to say to his opponent, "Now I know you," or even (as Jacob said to his angel), "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." It is an entrance into intimacy, and as close to lovemaking as to violence.

The poem comes just short of stating that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is homosexual (in Tablet XII, a separate poem appended to the epic, the genital sexuality is explicit). But it's clear that the homoerotic element in their bond is very strong. Even before he meets Enkidu in combat, Gilgamesh dreams of him in an image of great physical tenderness. A boulder representing Enkidu falls from the sky; at first it is too heavy to budge, then it becomes the beloved in his arms, stone turning to warm flesh through the power of the metaphor. Gilgamesh's mother, in interpreting the dream, says that that is indeed how it will be, that the boulder

"stands for a dear friend, a mighty hero. You will take him in your arms, embrace and caress him the way a man caresses his wife."

Both men come to feel their friendship as a kind of marriage, and each one could say, as David says of Jonathan, "Thy love to me [is] wonderful, passing the love of women."

After the fight, Enkidu doesn't slink off or proffer his neck like an animal defeated by the alpha male. In a speech of the loveliest, most dignified humility, he acknowledges Gilgamesh as the superior fighter, the superior human being. In fact, he sees him with the eyes of appreciation, gazing at him in wonder as Shamhat had advised him to.

"Gilgamesh, you are unique among humans. Your mother, the goddess Ninsun, made you stronger and braver than any mortal, and rightly has Enlil\* granted you the kingship, since you are destined to rule over men."

Gilgamesh, as victor, doesn't feel the need to reciprocate with any appreciation of Enkidu. But he knows that what he dreamed at the end of Book I has come true. The dear friend and mighty hero has appeared, the longed-for companion of his heart, the man who will stand at his side through the greatest dangers. The fight is over without any residue of anger, resentment, or competitiveness. They know each other through and through. Like David and Jonathan, each loves the other as his own soul.

## A MONSTER IN THE HOUSE

So Gilgamesh and Enkidu become true friends. Now, because the two heroes "balance each other perfectly," Uruk can have peace. Now the son can return to his father, the girl can return to her mother, and the life of the great city can continue in all its vibrancy, with no shadow of oppression to make the people cry out. The two realities can collapse into Shamhat's enamored vision of a truly civilized, festive society of bright colors and finery and music and laughing courtesan-priestesses and gratified desire. The gods are in their heaven and, for the time being, all's right with the world.

The transition to the next episode—the journey to the Cedar Forest and the killing of the monster Humbaba—is fragmentary and obscure. We aren't told how long Gilgamesh and Enkidu stayed in Uruk deepening their friendship; we don't know what they did during those weeks or months. How do vigorous young giants spend their free time? This is not one of the poem's interests, but it's easy to imagine an ongoing revel of feasting and beer drinking, wrestling matches, swimming, polo, bullfighting perhaps, Gilgamesh delightedly teaching his friend all the new dances and songs, daily visits to the Eanna temple to make love with the most beautiful of the young priestesses (Shamhat included), and—because ancient Babylonian kings prided themselves on being scholars as well as warriors and athletes—daily visits to the royal library, where Enkidu can take lessons in elementary cuneiform.

At a certain point, though, out of the blue, Gilgamesh announces that it is time to leave Uruk and begin the fatal adventure that provides the shape for the rest of the epic: an ascent to an ambiguous victory, followed by a plunge into death, unassuageable grief, and the futile search for immortality. “Now we must travel to the Cedar Forest,” Gilgamesh says,

“where the fierce monster Humbaba lives. We must kill him and drive out evil from the world.”

Living in the year 2004, one can't help hearing this statement of an ancient Mesopotamian king in eerie counterpoint to the recent American invasion of Iraq. From this perspective, Gilgamesh's action is the original preemptive attack. Ancient readers, like many contemporary Americans, would have considered it to be unquestionably heroic. But the poem is wiser than the culture from which it arose. It wonderfully complicates the ostensible moral certainties, and once again, when we look closely, the mind finds no solid ground to stand on.

What impels Gilgamesh to go on this adventure? Why should he kill the monster? At first, all we hear is the sudden announcement itself. As listeners to a great adventure story, we don't need any more motivation than this. After all, that's what heroes do: they slay monsters. The motivation in this sense is literary rather than psychological. Story, not character, is fate.

But a bit further on, the poet does provide a motivation for the decision to leave for the Cedar Forest. What Gilgamesh wants is fame, as he explains in a passionate speech to Enkidu:

“We are not gods, we cannot ascend to heaven. No, we are mortal men. Only the gods live forever. *Our days are few in number, and whatever we achieve is a puff of wind. Why be afraid then, since sooner or later death must come? ... I will cut down the tree, I will kill Humbaba, I will make a lasting name for myself, I will stamp my fame on men's minds forever.*”

It is obvious that Gilgamesh considers himself fully human and that, for him, “two-thirds divine” is just a polite compliment or a rhetorical flourish. His mother may be a goddess, but he is as mortal as any other human. The only way for him to transcend death, he thinks, is to make an everlasting name for himself.

The desire for fame is at the heart of the ancient heroic traditions, Babylonian, Greek, and Germanic. It is one of the nobler delusions, and it can produce great art—in addition, as we know, to great havoc. There is something very human and even endearing about all this posturing; human nature hasn't changed much from Gilgamesh—or Enkidu, with his “*I am the mightiest!*”—to Cassius Clay. But heroic? It's hard to take the boasts and the derring-do seriously in 28 comparison with the actions of what we would all consider true heroes: those who risk harm or death for the sake of others. The anonymous, everyday heroism of fire fighters and police officers makes the desire for “a lasting name” seem far less admirable to us than it has seemed to other cultures. In any event, the poet makes

it clear from the outset that however morally Gilgamesh thinks he is acting, he wants to kill Humbaba “and drive out evil from the world,” not for the sake of the people, or to alleviate suffering, or to help anyone but himself.

As the story proceeds, we hear another possible motivation: that Shamash, the sun god, god of justice and Gilgamesh’s special protector, has put this decision into his head. At least, that is the theory of Gilgamesh’s mother, the goddess Ninsun (neither Gilgamesh nor Shamash ever acknowledges it). According to her, the whole adventure is Shamash’s idea, and Gilgamesh is only an instrument in his hand, a warrior in the battle of good against evil. “Lord of heaven,” Ninsun says in her prayer to the sun god,

“you have granted my son beauty and strength and courage—why have you burdened him with a restless heart? Now you have stirred him up to attack the monster Humbaba, to make a long journey from which he may not return. Since he has resolved to go, protect him until he arrives at the Cedar Forest, until he kills the monster Humbaba and drives from the world the evil that you hate.”

Here Ninsun, “the wise, the all-knowing,” is portrayed as a purely human figure, neither more nor less wise than any worried mother of flesh and blood. She knows her son well, and when she mentions his “restless heart,” she is pointing to what drives Gilgamesh throughout the epic, both before and after Enkidu’s death. Whatever Shamash’s part in the process may be, we can understand how Gilgamesh’s restless heart has stirred him up, as powerfully as his desire for fame. Psychologically, this restlessness can’t be inspired by the god of justice; it is the opposite of inspiration; it is ultimately desperation. One might even say that the attack on Humbaba stems from what Pascal called the cause of all human misery: the inability to sit contentedly alone in a room.

Is Ninsun correct in her theory that this is a battle of good against evil? Everything in the poem argues against it. As a matter of fact, the only evil we are informed of is the suffering Gilgamesh has inflicted on his own people; the only monster is Gilgamesh himself.\* If he has a real enemy, it is the selfishness that arises from his own restless heart. Uruk may be at peace now, but Gilgamesh isn’t. The moral imbalance still exists; he is, as far as we are told, unable to acknowledge what he has done, unable to apologize or make amends to the young men and women he has been terrorizing.

Whatever Gilgamesh’s mother may say, the poet makes it impossible to see Humbaba as a threat to the security of Uruk or as part of any “axis of evil.” Unlike Grendel in *Beowulf*, he is not seen as the enemy of God; there is no devil or negative metaphysical force in the poet’s cosmology for him to be an instrument of. He hasn’t harmed a single living being, as far as we know. If anything, our sympathies are with him. He may be ugly and terrifying, with his fire-spewing breath, thunderous voice, and nightmare faces, but to be terrifying is his job. He just stays where he is, minding his business and doing his duty, which is to take care of the Cedar Forest and keep humans out. “If anyone knows the rules of my forest,” he says later to Enkidu,

“it is you. You know that this is my place and that I am the forest’s guardian. Enlil put me here to terrify men, and I guard the forest as Enlil ordains.”

Like the precivilized Enkidu, Humbaba is a figure of balance and a defender of the ecosystem. (Having a monster or two around to guard our national forests from corporate and other predators wouldn’t be such a bad thing.)

I love how the poet has morally situated his poem so that as soon as we are tempted to take a position about good and evil, we realize that there is an opposite and equally valid position. This world, like ours, is not black and white; there is ultimately nowhere to stand, no side we can ultimately take and

not cut ourselves off from the truth. Yes, Humbaba is a monster; perhaps he is evil, as Ninsun says; conceivably he is even a threat to the city, though we are never told how. But it is at least as true that Humbaba has his appointed place in the divine order of things. He has specifically been commissioned to be monstrous by one of the great gods, because humans are not supposed to penetrate into the Cedar Forest and chop down its trees.

If there must be a monster in the house (to paraphrase Wallace Stevens), let him be one who is just doing his job, without malice. The problem with believing in evil monsters and an evil-hating god (or God) is that it splits the universe down the middle, separates us from at least half of creation, and eventually leads to the claustrophobic and doom-haunted world of the Germanic hero sagas, however idealistic we may be. “The struggle between good and evil / is the primal disease of the mind,” wrote the sixth-century Zen master Seng-ts’an, who knew what he was talking about. It is all too easy to see ourselves as fighting on God’s side, to identify our ideology with what is best for the world and use it to justify crusades, pogroms, or preemptive attacks. Projecting evil onto the world makes me unassailably right—a position as dangerous in politics as in marriage.

Much of Book III is in debate form: between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, then between Gilgamesh and the elders of Uruk. It is a debate between bravery (or foolhardiness) and prudence. Gilgamesh’s position is that he must go on this journey in order to win everlasting fame. Enkidu first points out that the Cedar Forest is forbidden to humans and that Humbaba has been put there by Enlil himself, to terrify men. Then, echoed by the elders, he says that in any case the journey is too dangerous and Humbaba too powerful. The arguments are not sophisticated and don’t vary. Gilgamesh wins the debate by walking away. He is the king, after all, and can do whatever he wants; what he wants now is to order new weapons at the forge. By the end of the episode, Enkidu and the whole city support him. The elders offer their cautious, geriatric advice. The young men cheer. The heroes depart.

They walk east, in three-day marches, at the pace of more than three hundred miles a day (not a huge effort for someone like Gilgamesh, whose legs, according to one fragmentary passage, are nine feet long). Each march is described in exactly the same way; the repetition creates a sense of extended time, a shift from the ordinary time of the city into mythological time. Each culminates in the dream ritual, which is described in the same few crisply visualized lines. Gilgamesh’s dreams vary in their details, but they are all essentially the same dream of disaster or near disaster. Enkidu, by the method known as “reversal of values,” interprets them as omens that promise victory. And though his interpretation is correct for the actual battle with Humbaba, there is another sense in which the dreams are begging to be taken at their face value, unreversed, as the other dreams in the epic are. A disaster does indeed loom ahead, though with a time delay. Ironically, it involves the death of the dream interpreter, a death that is the direct, divinely ordained consequence of killing Humbaba. A more literal interpreter might advise Gilgamesh to turn back, however aggressively Shamash urges him to attack.

Inside the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are alternately seized by terror, and each in turn encourages the other. For a Babylonian hero, unlike the imperviously brave men of Germanic legend like Beowulf and Siegfried, it was no disgrace to feel fear. Gilgamesh can not only be afraid at the sight of the monster, but can say he is. He does not run like the great Hector fleeing in terror from Achilles outside the wall of Troy, but he is frozen in his tracks. Enkidu, who previously was so reluctant to proceed, now urges Gilgamesh not to retreat, and they walk on to the monster’s den.

The battle is over quickly. Humbaba is about to overwhelm the two heroes when Shamash sends mighty winds that pin him down and paralyze him. This divine intervention may strike us as rather

unfair, but a world in which the gods take sides is not a meritocracy.

With Gilgamesh on top of him, holding a knife to his throat, Humbaba begs both heroes for mercy. These passages are at once comic and poignant: comic in the disproportion between the monster's previous threats and his present abasement, and poignant in the humility and reasonableness of his request. It is an extraordinary moment—think how impossible it would be in *Beowulf* for a monster to refer to the concept of mercy or for the hero even to consider it. One can't help feeling a surge of sympathy for the doomed Humbaba.

Gilgamesh hesitates. We are not told why, but it is probable that, like his predecessor in the Sumerian poem "Gilgamesh and Huwawa," "Gilgamesh's noble heart took pity on" the monster. Enkidu, though, has no doubts. Three separate times he urges his friend to kill the guardian of the Cedar Forest, even though he is aware that killing him will enrage not only Enlil but their own protector Shamash as well. (Thus, as it turns out, Ninsun, "the wise, the all-knowing," was mistaken in her opinion that Humbaba is an evil thing that Shamash wants to have destroyed. Defeated, yes; destroyed, no.)

"Dear friend, quickly, before another moment goes by, kill Humbaba, don't listen to his words, don't hesitate, slaughter him, slit his throat, before the great god Enlil can stop us, before the great gods can get enraged, Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in Larsa. Establish your fame, so that forever men will speak of brave Gilgamesh, who killed Humbaba in the Cedar Forest."

Enkidu, it seems, has by now completely taken on Gilgamesh's warrior ethos, the desire for fame superseding every other consideration. True, it is his friend's fame, not his own, that he wants to establish. But generous as it may be, this love is still an *égoïsme à deux*; it has simply replaced *I am the mightiest!* with *You are the mightiest!* And in its disregard for mercy, prudence, and cosmic hierarchy, it creates disaster.

The principle that every action has an effect is not something that Gilgamesh or Enkidu can be expected to know (as heroes, they need to be strong and brave, not insightful). But the poet, as we will see, is aware of it; he is too intelligent not to know that monster-slaying expeditions, even the most well-intentioned ones, have unforeseen and potentially disastrous consequences. Enkidu is morally responsible for persuading his friend not to spare the monster's life; therefore his own life becomes forfeit. When Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, the poet says, a gentle rain falls onto the mountains, as if the heavens themselves are weeping for the consequences of that act.

## HUMILIATING THE GODDESS

Almost all the female characters in *Gilgamesh-Shamhat*, Ninsun, Shiduri, and Utnapishtim's wife-are portrayed as admirable: intelligent, generous, compassionate. The one exception is Ishtar, goddess of love and patron deity of Uruk. In the very peculiar and invigorating Book VI, she is rejected, insulted, threatened, and humiliated by both Gilgamesh and Enkidu. This is surprising in a poem that mentions her temple with reverence and makes one of her priestesses a central character in the initial drama. It is even more surprising in light of the goddess's millennia-old position in Mesopotamian culture: she was known to the Sumerians as Inanna, the Queen of Heaven, and "played a greater role in myth, epic, and hymn than any other deity, male or female." Anyone who has first read the beautiful, tender, marvelously erotic song cycle called "The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi" is likely to feel flabbergasted at the shabby treatment Ishtar receives at the hand of the *Gilgamesh* poet.

But there is another side to the beloved goddess who brought culture and fertility to her people in

Sumer. She is also the goddess of war, and she can be selfish, arbitrary, and brutal. In the Sumerian poem “The Descent of Inanna,” she “fastens the eye of death” on her husband, Dumuzi (Tammuz), and orders him to be dragged down to hell by two persistent demons. In a lesser-known poem called “Inanna and Ebih,” which begins with an invocation to the “goddess of the dreadful powers, clad in terror, drenched in blood,” she destroys an entire mountain range because it doesn’t show her enough respect. Sumerian literature furnishes other examples of her ruthlessness.

Why the *Gilgamesh* poet chose to focus so exclusively on Ishtar’s dark side in Book VI and to portray his heroes as so vituperative is a mystery. No scholar has provided an adequate explanation of whatever cultural forces were at work behind the episode. Is it symptomatic of a religious movement among first the Sumerians and later the Babylonians to displace her with a male deity? Then why are her priestesses treated with such respect? And how can we explain the poet’s irreverence to the gods in general, who are later compared to dogs and flies? We just don’t know. All we can do is enjoy the episode and see how it fits into the poem as a whole.

Things begin calmly enough. Gilgamesh, having returned from the Cedar Forest, washes himself and gets dressed in his magnificent royal robes. He is looking mighty fine. Ishtar sees him and falls in love, or lust. In a speech that seems forward or straightforward, depending on one’s cultural bias, she propositions him, offering him an array of fabulous gifts if only he will be her lover.

Gilgamesh’s rejection is at first polite, even tactful. But it soon changes into a series of metaphorical insults, all of which accuse Ishtar of damaging the very person whom she should have been caring for. Next, he cites six famous love affairs of Ishtar’s—with Tammuz, then with the roller bird, the lion, the stallion, the shepherd, and the gardener Ishullanu (her taste in lovers is species-transcendent, omniseual)—all of them black-widow affairs in which she turned against her lover and harmed him. Gilgamesh concludes by saying that if he were to accept her offer, she would treat him as cruelly as she treated them.

It is a remarkably vivid speech, the longest in the poem except for Utnapishtim’s account of the Flood. Reading it, we are caught up in the pure energy of the insults. It is like a tribal dance in which lines of young men and young women advance in turn and fling ritual taunts at each other. The speech’s climax, the catalogue of lovers, is a miniature *Metamorphoses* that casts Ishtar as Circe and moves from disaster to disaster, not only with the satisfaction of a lawyer proving his case, but also with the delight of a storyteller. Aside from the affair with Tammuz, we are ignorant of the myths the poet is referring to (they haven’t survived in Sumerian or Akkadian literature); for modern readers this gives the passage a certain piquancy, as if we were overhearing intimate stories about people we don’t know.

Is Gilgamesh’s response inappropriate? Is it a frightened male reaction to a woman who takes the sexual initiative? Perhaps, though that would be odd in a poem that celebrates a character like Shamhat. But from the above-mentioned “Descent of Inanna,” we can be sure that in at least one of her six examples, Gilgamesh is giving us accurate information. Sleeping with Ishtar can be dangerous to your health. And when we witness her violent response to his rejection, we tend to think that he has been entirely reasonable in just saying no.

The next scene is a portrait of Ishtar as a murderous spoiled brat. She explodes with tears of rage and frustration, goes to Anu, father of the gods, and throws a tantrum until he lends her the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh and destroy his palace. As a woman scorned, Ishtar is not only petulant and vengeful; she is a real monster, willing to sacrifice hundreds of people for the sake of her revenge.

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