

Death and Taxes in Strong-walled Uruk

Exchanging Life for Livelihood in the Gilgamesh Epic

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Introduction

<i>šul diŋir-ŋu₁₀ usu-ŋu₁₀^dlammař-[ŋu₁₀]</i>	27	(I was) a youth, (but now) my personal god, my strength, my protective deity,
<i>nam-ŋuruš-ŋu₁₀ anše kar-ra-gen₇ haš₄-ŋa₂ ba-e-dib₂</i>	28	and my manhood has left my loins like a fleeing donkey!

The old man and the young girl, lines 27-28

Thus a Sumerian proverb raises the issue of male ageing,¹ an inevitable experience in which constructs of masculine identity eventually betray the men who had previously adhered to and upheld them. Exclusionary and self-serving, the purpose of gender constructs are fundamentally more concerned with the longevity and social-standing of the hegemonic participants – for they perpetuate the construct itself – than those who fall short of its criteria.² Because constructs of masculinity are inherently hierarchal, we would expect the aged to become a “subclass” against which younger participants validate their own masculinity and increase their standing.³ Thus, in the introduction of her ground-breaking book *Being a Man: Negotiating Ancient Constructs of Masculinity*, published in 2017, I would have to agree with I. Zsolany’s statement: “to enact a version of masculinity considered less than a societal ideal cannot only be undesirable, but humiliating.”⁴ However, against my own presumptions, Mesopotamian art and literature reveals a gerontocratic society which favoured the aged over the young, one where the dominant social construct was monopolised by a group who were unable to adhere to its values and norms, and thus struggled meet its expectations. In this thesis we will investigate this paradox, using the Standard Babylonian (abbreviated as “SB” throughout the essay) Gilgamesh epic to explore the ways in which older men navigated the obstacles of ageing whilst paying particular attention to how they validated their own masculinity based on that of younger men.

Historically, perhaps due to western prejudices of “oriental-effeminacy” or a general reluctance to delve into what can be considered an overwhelming amount of evidence, the study of masculinity has been undervalued and overlooked by Assyriologists in the past. It was not until recent years that the field began to make substantial progress with leading names such as Omar N’Shea, Julia Assante, and the aforementioned Ilona Zsolnay. Without doubt, the most complete (if not the only) study of ageing and masculinity in Mesopotamia belongs to R. Harris’ 2003 *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and other Ancient Literature*. Here, Harris uses N. Foner’s 1984 study *Ages in Conflict* as a framework

¹ Transliteration from Alster 1975, 93 (modified where appropriate); own translation; see also: cuneiform published in ISET II 18 (Ni 4305).

² “Hegemony,” as defined by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, is a cultural dynamic by which the ruling group asserts dominance over subordinate groups; For an overview of Gramsci’s Marxist theories, see Mouffe 1979.

³ For the theory of hegemonic masculinity, see, Connell 1987;2005 (although this will later be discussed in more detail).

to examine Mesopotamian mythology for evidence of intergenerational conflict, concluding that myths “offer a way for the young to express hostility toward the old indirectly.”⁵ Whilst I somewhat agree that myths provide an outlet for such expressions, Harris’ deduction that gerontocracy was partially maintained by their ability to mitigate tensions arising from “youthful antagonism” and the elderly’s monopoly on capital wealth, although correct, ignores the impact of the complex hierarchies men established based on masculine ideals.⁶ In using the a range of philological techniques, this thesis offers a new approach to the study of gender and ageing in the ancient Near East. By focussing on single source (the SB Gilgamesh epic), this thesis will be able to identify and concentrate on reoccurring images and motifs throughout the epic that were intended to help the reader understand a greater message than the one gained through a superficial reading of the narrative.

Methodology

The study of any social power structure is an intrinsically gendered and, more specifically to the time and region, patriarchal issue. Therefore, at times throughout this thesis, I will be required to refer to a suitable theoretical framework which will explain the logic of an argument based on gender relationships. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, positing that multiple performances of masculinity – hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalised – interact to enforce and maintain existing social structures, provides an ideal theoretical foundation with which to investigate male gerontocracy in ancient Mesopotamia. Furthermore, dedicating a theoretical concept to your argument is an important step toward utilising interdisciplinary tools and knowledge. In N. Veldhuis’ 2018 contribution to *Studying Gender in the Ancient Near East*, he rightly criticises Assyriology’s poor theoretical basis, asserting that the lack of “substantial and meaningful debates regarding the production of its knowledge” leaves the discipline isolated from wider discussions within the humanities:

To a large extent, our research tradition, the expectations we have for those entering the field, and the achievements one needs in order to be taken seriously in the discipline are still based on this situation of “normal science,” in the terminology of Thomas Kuhn.⁷

Fortunately for this thesis, the application of hegemonic masculinity to Assyriology is hardly original; a number of Assyriologists have done so in recent years and proven it to be an effective research method.⁸ Therefore, by applying this concept to my own research, the

⁵ See, specifically Harris’ chapter *The Conflict of Generations in Ancient Mesopotamian Myths*, 67-79.

⁶ I do not wish to critique Harris unfairly; I commend her for the use of a clear theoretical framework and its successful application to a tricky and previously unapproached subject. The aim of her study is explicitly detailed in her introduction as an attempt utilise Foner’s methods to find evidence for intergenerational conflict within Mesopotamian mythology (which she does successfully). I only offer alternative suggestions for how we should approach these sources and develop further what Harris herself describes as a “brief examination.”

⁷ Veldhuis 2018, 449; Kuhn (1962) describes “normal science” as the procedure of researching in accordance with an established and vaguely-broad theory without challenging its logic or assumptions.

⁸ See, for example, Zsolnay 2017, Peled 2016, and N’Shea 2018; In Zsolany’s 2018, *Interrogating Ancient Near Eastern Gender*, she makes a short but effective case for the application of the theory of hegemonic masculinity in the study of ancient societies: “Because a hegemony must be reinforced and validated continually, the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity can then be an ideal tool with which to elucidate

topic of male ageing is brought into wider discussions concerning the ancient Near Eastern gender, and, more generally, what it meant to be a man in ancient Mesopotamia.

This thesis, unlike the aforementioned works does not is not centred around the theory of Hegemonic Masculinity but will instead use it as a background to explain how specific uses of language and imagery are used to reinforce or criticise aspects of masculine behaviour. Rather, this thesis will primarily rely on the work of previous philological studies, especially those of A.R. George,⁹ and a number of observations that I have made myself. In all, I hope to use these techniques to provide and validate a new reading of the Gilgamesh epic which understands it as a criticism of social expectations and the wider community who perpetuate them.

As I have previously mentioned, this field possesses an overwhelming amount of evidence. So that I may handle my sources effectively, I have followed the approach taken by Harris and decided to select a single literary text with which I will attempt to present a “fairly coherent and integrated picture” of my topic. Because of both the fragmentary state of the evidence and its chronological inconsistency, this paper does not aim to study its topic within the limits of a specific period or culture, but offer more general observations into the wider patterns that transcended cultural boundaries in ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁰ To identify and better understand these patterns, I have chosen to use the SB Gilgamesh epic as my primary source. Agreeing with Harris, I believe that that myths contain valuable expressions that reflect contemporary social values and anxieties, and I would add that upon examining in closer detail, expose the behavioural mechanisms used to promote and enforce certain systems of ideology.

This thesis is divided into three parts. The first is dedicated examining the language and imagery used by the author of the SB Gilgamesh epic to describe young men and how these descriptions can be used to understand the society in which the young men existed. Secondly, we will explore how the norms and functions of this society were upheld and reinforced, paying particular attention to the role of the divine and the elderly in this process. Finally, we will assess how Enkidu and Gilgamesh, as young men, perceive and comprehend their place in the world order, and whether or not they look kindly upon the relationship that they share with the aged and divine.

Wild Youth and Civilised Adults

The Metaphors and Imagery that Created the Stereotypes of Young men

The first step to answering my research question is to identify the language and imagery used to characterise young men within the SB Gilgamesh epic and then determine what these depictions reveal about the behavioural expectations of the society in which they were constructed. Because a central theme of the epic, as Rivkah Harris argues in her aptly named chapter “Gilgamesh’s Coming of Age,” is concerned with Gilgamesh’s transition into manhood, this chapter is concerned with the characterisation of Gilgamesh toward the

and explain differences in conduct, values, artistic production, and modifications to legal and commerce systems, in addition to more mundane aspects of daily life,” page 466.

⁹ 2003, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition, and Cuneiform Texts*.

¹⁰ Harris 2003, vii; Cooper 1992, 20: As noted by Harris, J.S. Cooper maintains that “it usually is impossible to label any particular Mesopotamian institution or belief as Sumerian or Semitic.” So close was “the interaction of the two linguistic communities.”

beginning of the epic where he is yet to acquire “the ‘real’ experiences that characterise adulthood.”¹¹ Here, the actions of Gilgamesh, whether directly or indirectly, engender the rest of the narrative and therefore provide a space from which to properly discuss the introduction of certain images and motifs that will be used throughout the rest of the essay. Then, we will compare and contrast these observations with their parallels belonging to the Sumerian myths of “Gilgamesh and Huwawa,” exploring how the wider corpus of Sumerian-Akkadian Eastern literature can assist in our understanding of the SB Gilgamesh epic.

Because youth is as much a physical characteristic as it is behavioural, we will foreground the question of Gilgamesh’s characterisation with his most apparent attribute, his appearance. At the beginning of the epic we are introduced to Gilgamesh in terms of his virility and health, attributes of his youth and semi-divine being that exhibit themselves via the features of his body:

<i>ṭarra lētašu kīma ša [...]</i>	59	His cheeks were bearded like those of [...]
<i>itīqi pertišu uḫtannabā kīma ^dNissabi</i>	60	The locks of his hair growing thickly as Nissaba’s.
<i>ina šīāḫīšu gitmālu lū lal ēšu</i>	61	As he grew up, he was perfect in his beauty.
<i>ina simat eršiti^{tim} dummuq</i>	62	By human standards, he was very handsome.

SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet I.¹²

The reader is not introduced to Gilgamesh, but to Gilgamesh the young man. His presence exudes strength and vitality where his thick hair, beard, and beauty as symbols of his masculine potency indicate that he is fully grown yet unacquainted with the signs of ageing. In conclusion, Gilgamesh is a young man on the verge of adulthood and subsequently belongs to social status that is expected to undergo significant changes and “rites of passage” if they are to assimilate into the conventions of manhood.

Gilgamesh’s physicality and its connotations provide foreshadow for the contemporary reader who would have been acquainted with the images and labels that formed the ancient Near Eastern stereotypes of young men. Consequently, how Gilgamesh engages with his physicality should be read and understood as consequences of his age and subtle reminders of his hurdles he is to overcome in becoming a man. It is no coincidence that the author thought it important that the description of Gilgamesh’s youthful physique and appearance should immediately precede the transition into Gilgamesh’s oppressive rulership of Uruk (1:63-93):

¹¹ SB “Standard Babylonian”; Harris 2003, 40-42.

¹² Own normalisation based on translation and transliteration from George 2003, 542-3.

<i>ul īši šaninamma tebû kakkūšu</i> <i>ina pukku têbu rû'ūšu</i>	65 66	He has no equal, his weapons <i>risen</i> , his companions <i>risen</i> on account of the <i>ball</i> .
<i>ūtaddari eṭlūtu ša uruk^{ki} ina kukitti</i>	67	The young men of Uruk are continually worried <i>inappropriately(?)</i> .
<i>ul umaššar^d gilgameš māra abišu</i>	68	Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father.

SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet I.¹³

Several interpretations concerning the nature of this passage have been put forward. Agreeing with Jacob Klein, Andrew George maintains that the young men's distress stems from "the state of perpetual activity" forced upon them through the *pukku*, or "ball."¹⁴ I suggest that this athletic motif is a euphemism designed to encapsulate the oppression of Uruk through Gilgamesh's destructive sexual potency. The phallic nature of Gilgamesh's *tebû kakkūšu*, "his weapon risen," requires little explanation; the analogy of a phallus as a weapon is a well-attested Mesopotamian trope, and whilst the verb *têbu* means "to get up," it can also express "arise" in a sexual manner.¹⁵ Thus, when considering *ina pukku* as the source of the young men's own "rising," it is easy to understand how the phonetically similar noun, *pūqu*, or "cleft/buttocks," is evoked to suggest anal sex between Gilgamesh and the young men of Uruk, where of course Gilgamesh, being the oppressor, is the active participant.

These young men are also "his companions" (*rû'ūšu*), and besides Gilgamesh's kingly rank, they share in the relative social status of unmarried men awaiting their transition into manhood. Although *becoming a man* was considered a stage in the ageing process, ancient age categories did not function in the same way as they do today. The definitions of child, teenager, and adult did not exist, and so "age categories" were more fluid and subjective according to the case of the individual. Adulthood was as much as social status as it was a direct reflection of one's age, a badge of honour that was achieved through certain rites of passage. In this case, said "rite of passage" is obstructed by Gilgamesh when he forces his companions to engage in an unproductive and oppressive form of sexual intercourse as opposed to the consensual and reproductive sex Gilgamesh prevents when he "lets no girl go free to her bride-groom" (I:76;91). In doing so, the young men of Uruk are barred from the rites of the nuptial chamber and, consequently, their manhood. As A.R. George suggests:

Gilgamesh's tyrannous treatment of his townspeople as kukittu (I:67), which means roughly "improper behaviour", can be seen in this light, not as political rejection of the institution of kingship itself, but as a condemnation of a perversion of that institution whereby the

¹³ Own normalisation and translation based on transliteration from George 2003, 542-3.

¹⁴ Klein 2002, 196-9; George 2003, 785-6.

¹⁵ For example, in Biggs' collection, an Akkadian love incantation reads, "may your penis become as long as the *mašgašu*-weapon!" Biggs 1967, 33; The verb *tebû* is later repeated in the explicitly sexual sense of word: *den-ki-dù te-bi-ma šam-ḥat ir-ḥi* "Enkidu, erect did couple Shamhat" (I:194).

community suffered by the antisocial action of a single individual instead of benefitting from him playing his proper role.¹⁶

In disrupting the reproductive mechanisms through which the community perpetuates itself, Gilgamesh stands in stark contrast to his companions and subjects who concern themselves with the wellbeing and continuity of their community. It would seem that Gilgamesh's refusal to transition into adulthood, or rejection of "mature sexuality" as Harris phrases it,¹⁷ carries significant repercussions for the rest of the city, and can be understood as a form of behaviour that is incompatible with functions of the community.

But to what extent does Gilgamesh's behaviour conflict with the norms and functions of the city? We know that Gilgamesh's refusal to mature and obstruct others from doing so is portrayed in a negative light, but to assume it represents a significant infraction without adequately understanding the community he harms would be an unfair assessment. It is to our benefit then that Uruk and its character is described to us at the beginning of tablet one. It is a city described in terms of antiquity and continuity, which attributes and necessities that Gilgamesh disrupts when he engages in subversive practices and obstructs the city's reproductive mechanisms:

<i>niširta īmurma katimti iptu</i>	7	He saw the secret and uncovered the hidden,
<i>ubla tēma ša lām abūbi</i>	8	he brought back a message from before
	...	the antediluvian age.
<i>šabatma^{giš} simmilita ša ultu ullānu</i>	15	Take the stairway that has been there since ancient times,
<i>qitrub ana Eanna šubat^d Ištar</i>	16	and draw near to the Eanna, the seat of Ishtar,
<i>ša šarru arkû lā umaššalu amēlu mamma</i>	17	that no later king can replicate, nor any man.
<i>elīma ina muḥḥi dūri ša uruk^{ki} itallak</i>	18	Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk
	...	around,
<i>šumma libittašu lā agurrāt</i>	20	see if its brickwork is not fire-kilned brick,
<i>uššušu lā iddû 7 muntalku</i>	21	and if the seven sages did not lay its foundations

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet I.*¹⁸

In the prologue, Uruk is introduced to the reader as a living monument to the memory of its earlier inhabitants, a place of preservation and continuity that, like the ancient wisdom Gilgamesh brings forth to the present, originates from the mythic days of yore (*ullû*).

¹⁶ George 2012, 228; George maintains that *pu-uk-ki-šú* in the LB manuscript likely derives from a misreading or "mishearing during auto-dictation." Perhaps it reflects a misunderstanding or even an improvement upon the word-play; *kukitti*, an obscure word which according to commentaries compiled into dictionaries is equated with "disagreement (*lā mitgurtu*), lack of prudence (*lā mitluku*) and behaviour inappropriate to one's position (*lā šuttu*)" (George 2003, 785-6).

¹⁷ Harris 2003, 42.

¹⁸ Own normalisation and translation based on transliteration from George 2003, 538.

Ultimately, the city is as much a product of its present as of its past. Unlike the individual who will eventually die, the city embodies humankind’s collective effort to create something eternal and everlasting.¹⁹ Thus, Gilgamesh’s civic disobedience, or *kukittu*, is no minor infraction, but represents a major obstacle to the continuation of a city characterised by its long-established institutions and ability to perpetuate them from one generation to the next.

It is only natural then that Gilgamesh’s individualism alienates him from the rest of the civilised world, causing the goddesses to question Anu, “have you bred, indeed, a rearing wild bull in Uruk-the-sheepfold?” (I:81). As the city’s oldest and most influential residents, the gods take responsibility in maintaining the social order of Uruk, employing the explicit analogy of Gilgamesh as a *rīma kadra*, or “rearing wild bull,” to juxtapose the destructive individualism of Gilgamesh who dominates his *herd* against the protective disposition of a shepherd who guards Uruk-the-*supūru* (“sheepfold”). In an effort to channel Gilgamesh’s destructive behaviour, the gods create Enkidu:

<i>ana ūm libbišu lū maḥir</i>	97	Let him be equal to the storm of his heart,
<i>lištannanūma uruk^{ki} lištapših</i>	98	Let them confront each other and let Uruk be at peace...
	...	
<i>ina šēri^denkidu ibtāni qurādu</i>	103	In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero...
	...	
<i>lā īde niši u mātamma</i>	108	he knows neither a people nor land...
	...	
<i>itti būlim mašqā iteppir</i>	111	With the herd, he jostled at the water-hole,
<i>itti nammaššē mē iṭīb libbašu</i>	112	with the animals, the water sated his heart.

SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet I.²⁰

It is the basic and self-serving urges which satisfy the hearts of both heroes, their potent physicality allowing them to act upon what the *ūm libbišu* (“storm of their heart”) desires, and whilst this behaviour alienates Gilgamesh from his subjects, it instead reaffirms Enkidu’s social identity “with the herd.” For example: whilst Gilgamesh is portrayed as a wild bull without equal (*la īši šānini*), Enkidu, in protecting his fellow animals from the hunter (I:122-33), contributes to the collective good of his community and consequently adopts the connotations of a shepherd who perpetuates the survival of the flock. In general, the behaviour brought about by the heroes’ *ūm libbi* stands in opposition to the values of the city, and instead finds its purpose and merit in the *šēru* (“open country”). So therefore it quite literally belongs outside the limits of civilised world.

As a human being, Enkidu’s association with the animals of the wild is undoubtedly a metaphor. It must consequently represent an element of human behaviour that stood in opposition to the aforementioned societal expectations. Insight into this metaphor is gifted

¹⁹ George, 2012, informs us that “In ancient Mesopotamia the ideal city was believed ancient and eternal, built by the gods and enduring forever. The exact same history and destiny were attributed to mankind, whose life the cityscape explicitly represents.” pp.235.

²⁰ Own normalisation and translation based on transliteration from George 2003, 544-5.

to us when the elders of Uruk critique Gilgamesh on his decision to slay Humbaba the guardian of the cedar forest: “you are young (*ṣeḫrēti*) Gilgamesh, your heart carries you away – the thing that you speak of, you do not understand” (II:289-90).²¹ Once again, it is the impulsive desires of the heart which dictate the behaviour of the hero, and now with the direct association between these actions and his youth, we can ascertain that Gilgamesh’s civil disobedience and its subsequent relegation to the norms of the wild should be read as a consequence of his youthful disposition. In this sense, behaviour associated with young men was intrinsically related to that of the *ṣēru* or “open-country” where the animals of the wild – in opposition to the norms of the city – live according to their heartfelt instincts. Thus, it is unsurprising that the huntsman introduces Enkidu as an *eṭlu*, or “young man,” the implication being that his manliness and virility are key to describing his uncivilised behaviour to his father (I:123-33); to the huntsman, Enkidu’s age was an identifying characteristic of his wild existence.

The association between the wilderness and youth is a recurrent theme throughout the SB Gilgamesh epic. However, it is ultimately part of a long-established stream of literary tradition which employs the wild as a metaphor of youth and its associated attributes. Within the Sumerian literary composition “Gilgamesh and Huwawa,”²² Gilgamesh and Enkidu venture to the mountains of cedar where Enkidu was raised:

<i>kur-^{neš}erin-kud dim₂-ma-bi šul</i> <i>^dutu-kam ^dutu he₂-me-da-an-zu</i>	12 ... 155 156	A decision concerning the Mountains-of-cedar-felling is that of young Utu, may Utu know about it from us. Utu, I know not a mother who bore me nor a father who raised me. I was born in the mountains, you raised me.
<i>^dutu ama tud-da-ḡu₁₀ nu-um-zu</i> <i>a-a buluḡ₃-ḡa₂-ḡu₁₀ nu-um-zu</i> <i>kur-ra mu-un-tud-de₃-en za-e</i> <i>mu-un-buluḡ₃-e</i>		

*Gilgamesh and Huwawa (A), ETCSL.*²³

As the forest’s divine patron, Utu raised Enkidu in line with the expectations and “social norms” of the wild where of course, Utu, as a *šul* (“young man”), exhibits the behavioural standards he wishes to reinforce within Enkidu. Contrast this with the SB and OB Gilgamesh where the addition of the senior advisors of the Uruk (*mālik rabūti*) are characterised by their *šībūtu*, or “old-age,” and it becomes clear that in both the city and the wild, the most senior inhabitants exhibit epitomise the behaviours from which the rest of the community is encouraged to emulate. With this in mind, Gilgamesh and Enkidu’s behaviour is not innate but susceptible to change, and for Gilgamesh to rightly assume his divinely prescribed role as king, he must become a model citizen by adopting the behaviours exhibited in his elders.

²¹ Harris goes further to highlight the irresponsibility of Gilgamesh, stating that Humbaba’s plea to Gilgamesh and Enkidu for his life, “You are young yet” (V:135), is confirmation that the Elder’s criticism was indeed centred upon the protagonist’s youthful irresponsibility; Harris 2003, 38.

²² Gilgamesh and Huwawa is one of the five short Sumerian poems concerning the adventures of Gilgamesh that were found on clay tablets dating to the second millennium BC. The others have been named: “Gilgamesh and the bull of heaven,” “Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish,” “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the netherworld,” and “the death of Gilgamesh;” CDLI.

²³ Own translation from transliteration in ETCSL; edited where necessary.

The behavioural norms reflected in the Gilgamesh Epic are distinguished by their pro-age bias and the devaluation of the youth. Through several literary techniques, the stereotypical characteristics of young men are undermined by their association with the behaviours of wild animals. Consequently, the concept of “immaturity” or the refusal to “grow up” is relegated to the *šēru* or “open country” where it exists outside both the physical and ideological limits of the city. Like the wild, youth was believed to have stood in direct opposition to the values civilisation: whilst the city was a monument to the continuity and collective effort of humankind, the wild represented a form of individualism that not only obstructed the social mechanisms of the community but put them at risk of collapse. The status of manhood was more than a product of age; it was achieved in adhering to the values and accepted behaviours of the city, a group of social expectations that were maintained and enforced by the most senior citizens of the community. But to understand how these behaviours were enforced and their implications, the next chapter will focus on the how the gods, as the cities most senior inhabitants, guided the process whereby behaviours were taught and learnt.

The Divine City

The role of the gods in the process of ageing

The first step to answering my research question “how do the older men of the SB Gilgamesh epic maintain positions of hegemony?” meant identifying the language and imagery that was used to undermine the status of younger men. In the first chapter, we discovered that immaturity represented a type of non-conformity that opposed the customs and ideology of the city. In this sense, maturity and civilised behaviour were interchangeable concepts that were taught and preserved by the most senior members of the community who exhibited the qualities of adulthood themselves. These were then opposed to immaturity and uncivilised behaviour, embodied in the immature and unruly young men who properly belonged to the wild outdoors. In light of this information, this chapter will now investigate how behavioural norms of the city were taught within the SB Gilgamesh epic, paying particular attention to the role of the divine throughout Enkidu and Gilgamesh’s transition into civilised adults.

In what Gwendolyn Leick identifies as a “coming-of-age scenario,” the Sumerian myth of Enlil and Ninlil explicitly relates Enlil’s subversion of civilised norms to his adolescence, as demonstrated by his introduction to the narrative as a *ḡuruš tur* or, “young man,” and his characteristic libido which, like that of Gilgamesh, engenders a hostile reaction from the gods of the Nippur:²⁴

²⁴ Leick 1994, 42; The myth of Enlil and Ninlil dates to the third millennium BC, suggesting the literary parallelisms concerning the metaphors of youth and wild found in the SB Gilgamesh are indicative of a long-established tradition.

<i>dinir gal-gal 50-ne-ne</i>	56	The fifty great gods
<i>dinir nam-tar-ra 7-na-ne-ne</i>	57	and the seven gods of deciding destinies
<i>^den.lil₂ ki.ur₃-ra im-ma-ni-in-dab₅-be₂-ne</i>	58	seized Enlil in the foundations.
<i>^den.lil₂ u₂.zug₄-ge iri-ta ba-ra-ed₂</i>	59	The ritually impure Enlil left from the city.
	...	
<i>^den.lil₂-le lu₂ abul-ra gu₂ [mu-na-de₂-e]</i>	65	Enlil said to the gatekeeper:
<i>lu₂ abul-la lu₂ ^{neš}si.ḡar-ra</i>	66	“Gatekeeper! Man of the bolt!
<i>lu₂ ^{neš}sahab₂ lu₂ ^{neš}si.ḡar ku₃.g-ga</i>	67	Man of the door bar! Man of the holy bolt!

Enlil and Ninlil, lines 56-67.²⁵

Following what we have observed in the SB Gilgamesh epic, Enlil’s destructive sexuality is relegated to the wild where it sits in isolation from the institutions and norms of the city. If Enlil is to gain any social standing, he must abandon his uncivilised tendencies and assimilate with the community. In this case, Enlil eventually “settles down” into a loving relationship with Ninlil. As G. Leick explains: “they have achieved the transition from a socially powerless state of being *tur* (“small/young”) to full adulthood and the top position in the city’s hierarchy.”²⁶ Every single one of Enlil’s actions is inherently tied to his age. So whilst his attachment to the wild becomes symbolic of his youth and distance from civilised behaviour, his return to the city and civil obedience signifies a transition into adulthood. Another interesting point of comparison is detailed here: whilst the city carries connotations of purity, Enlil is labelled as *u₂.zug₄* or “ritually impure,” which engenders a contrast between the divinely regulated city barred by its *^{neš}si.ḡar ku₃.g*, or “holy bolt,” and the unchecked nature of the wild. Like the gods who assume a leading role in maintaining the social integrity of Uruk, the gods of Nippur play a significant role in defining the social norms of the city in terms related to adulthood, suggesting a more complex relationship between the divine and civilisation.

Because Enkidu’s behaviour was taught, his subversion of civilised norms and the fact that he is a human designate his actions as unnatural and thus amenable to change. Ultimately, youthfulness did not only transgress the social fabric of the city but directly opposed the very nature of civilisation itself, and in understanding this, the huntsman seeks a solution which will bring about a “normalisation” of Enkidu. Significantly, such a solution is warranted from the huntsman’s father and not the huntsman himself. This, Tzvi Abusch considers, is because the huntsman’s own turbulent emotions, as demonstrated by his overreaction at the sight of Enkidu (I:116-21), are modelled on those of Gilgamesh. In turn, “he is presented as being in need of a parent and of a parent’s advice,” which, I may add, exhibits the self-imposed role older generations maintained through the management of accepted forms of behaviour.²⁷ What is more interesting is how the roles of senior citizens overlap with those of the divine where, as we have seen, both the aged and the gods of the city intervene in matters of civil disobedience.

²⁵ Own translation from transliteration in ETCSL; edited where necessary.

²⁶ Leick 1994, 46.

²⁷ Abusch 2015, 157-8; Wether, the gods, elders, or parents of the city, the maintaining of social norms is always dictated and overseen by the older generations.

In civilising the primitive-man (*lullû amēlu*), Shamhat, as a *ḥarimtu* – a kind of temple prostitute – just by reputation alone establishes a link between the divine sphere and the process by which Enkidu begins to assimilate with the city and its inhabitants.²⁸ Over the period of six days and seven nights, the primitive-man was treated to the “work of a woman” (I:192-4) and eventually became just like any other man (*awīlu*). Through a process of “sexual-learning” Enkidu had gained reason (*ṭēmu*) and wisdom (*ḥasīsu*), key characteristics of adulthood which are found lacking in Gilgamesh when his failure to understand (*ul tīde*: “you do not know”) is attributed to his youth by the elders (II:290). As we have already seen, sexual rites of passage (whether Enlil and Ninlil’s marriage or Gilgamesh barring the brides from their bridegrooms) were widely understood to signify transitional markers in the ageing process. Learning is used as a metaphor for ageing. Growing up was seen as a developmental process of acquiring knowledge as well as physically ageing.

If we are to understand the process of civilising and ageing as one that engenders the acquisition of knowledge, we must also venture into the question of where said knowledge originates. Such a problem can be answered through further consideration of Shamhat and the significance of her sexuality with relationship to the temple of Anu and Ishtar in Uruk. Her approaches toward Enkidu and the exaggerated consequences of their sexual-intercourse should primarily be read as a metaphor, one which, as W.G. Lambert identifies, encapsulates a concept beyond our understanding by expressing it through the medium of human physicality: “Religious devotion differs in the greater actual remoteness of the drawing power. It does not have the same physical presence and physical accessibility as a loved one, and the particular emotions evoked are correspondingly different. But in general there is a close similarity.”²⁹ Considering this, I would suggest that it is entirely possible to interpret the physical love exhibited by Enkidu toward Shamhat as an expression of divine devotion, a metaphor made further apparent by Shamhat’s initial efforts to lead Enkidu “to Uruk-the-Sheepfold, to the sacred temple, the dwelling of Anu and Ishtar!” (1:209-10).³⁰ Shamhat – as a *ḥarimtu* – embodies an extension of her divine patron Ishtar, and thus the sexual-intercourse enacted by Enkidu and herself marks the beginning of Enkidu’s intensifying relationship with divinity.

Because civilisation and acts of physical devotion are used to represent the more elaborate concepts of divinity and its relationship with humankind, the acquisition of knowledge and process of ageing not only brings Enkidu closer to civilisation but also the gods. This concept is most apparent in Mesopotamian love poetry and more specifically in the love poem of *Nabû and Tašmetu* (SAA 3 14) where the lover Tašmetu exclaims:³¹

²⁸ Harris 1975, 332: the Sippar texts contain a list of eleven *ḥarimātu* (KAR.KID.MEŠ) who are supervised by the First lamentation singer or *kalamāḥu* (VAS 9 192/3); *lullû* or in the liberal translation, “primitive man,” refers back man when they first created by the gods. In the SB creation myth, the *Enūma Eliš* (VI:6): *lu-uš-ziz-ma lullā-a lu-ú a-me-lu MU-šu* “I will raise *lullû*, his name will be ‘man’.” transliteration from, Talon 2005, 62.

²⁹ Lambert 1987, 21.

³⁰ George 2003, 551.

³¹ Translation based on normalisation published in Nissinen 1998, 588.

<i>bēlī anšabtum šuknannima</i>	13	My lord put an earring on me,
<i>qereb kirī lulallīka</i>	14	let me give you pleasure in the garden!
<i>Nabû bēlī anšabtum šuknannima</i>	15	Nabu, my lord put an earring on me,
<i>qereb bēt ṭuppi luḥaddīka</i>	16	Let me make you happy in the tablet house!

Here, the parallelism between the garden and the *bēt ṭuppi*, or “tablet house,” signifies an intimate relationship between knowledge and the sensuality evoked by the sexual connotations arising from the garden.³² By equating learning and devotion through the physical metaphor of sexual intercourse, it can be inferred that the acquisition of knowledge was an innately divine affair. Hence, Enkidu’s own “sexual learning” not only becomes symbolic of his maturation and assimilation into civilisation, but represents his growing relationship with the gods of the city and specifically Ishtar – Uruk’s patron deity – to whom he *devotes* himself to through her agent, Shamhat.

This concept is then reaffirmed in Gilgamesh’s dreams where figurative language is used to foreshadow the coming narrative and transition from the *šēru* to the city. Ignorant to the meaning of his dreams, Gilgamesh warrants assistance from his divine mother, Ninsun:

<i>kīma kišir ša^d Anim imtaqut eli šērika</i>	262	like a meteor of the sky, it fell before you.
<i>taššišuma dān elika</i>	263	You picked it up, but it was too much for you.
	...	
<i>u anāku ultamḥiraššu ittika</i>	266	And I made it equal to you,
<i>tarāmšuma kīma aššati taḥabbubu elišu</i>	267	You loved it like a wife, you crooned over it.
	...	
<i>mārī ḥaššinnu ša tāmuru amēlu</i>	288	Son! The axe you saw is a man.
<i>taramšuma kīma aššati taḥabbub elišu</i>	289	You will love him like a wife, you will croon over him,
<i>u anāku ultamaḥḥaršu ittika</i>	290	and I will make him equal to you!

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet I.*³³

According to A.D. Kilmer, the *kišru* “meteor,” is allusion to *kezru* (m) or *kezertu* (f); a kind of temple prostitute) whilst the *ḥaššinnu* “axe” evokes the word for a castrated male temple-worker, *assinnu*.³⁴ The man in question is without a doubt the aforementioned Enkidu, and with Kilmer’s analysis in mind, it becomes evident that the first dream speaks of Enkidu’s sexual encounter with Shamhat and the second foreshadows Enkidu and Gilgamesh meeting in the streets of Uruk. Whilst the relationship between the *kezertu* and Shamhat the *ḥarimtu* is obvious, the significance of an *assinnu* is less so: I suggest that because the *assinnu* symbolises change through “sexual-transformation” under the patronage of the goddess Ishtar, its association with Enkidu revisits the metaphor of his religious devotion

³² For more on the sexual metaphors of the garden, see, Lambert 187, 23-4.

³³ Own normalisation and translation based on transliteration from George 2003, 554-7.

³⁴ Kilmer 1992, 128-9; also, for brief overview of Kilmer’s study, see, George 2003, 454-5.

and physical love, and thus reaffirms the role of the divine in Enkidu's own transformation from youthful savage to civilised adult.³⁵

Gilgamesh's violent encounter with Enkidu in the streets of Uruk marks yet another transformation through religious devotion, one where the homoerotic display of wrestling draws parallels with the physical metaphor of sex and its connotations of religious worship. As Susan Ackerman has suggested: the *ḥaṣṣinnu/assinnu* pun from Gilgamesh's dream "is meant to portray the *ḥaṣṣinnu(m)*, the axe or the metaphorical Enkidu that Gilgamesh imagines seeing in Uruk's streets, as an object that, like an *assinnu(m)*, is meant to arouse his erotic desires."³⁶ In turn, this episode should be read as metaphorical contest between the two heroes' sexuality:

<i>^dEnkidu ina bāb bīt emūti ipterik šēpīšu</i>	111	Enkidu blocked the entrance to the marital-house (with) his foot,
<i>^dGilgameš ana šūrubi ul inamdīm</i>	112	he did not allow Gilgamesh to enter.
<i>iṣṣabtūma ina bāb bīt emūti</i>	113	They wrestled another in the entrance of the marital-house.

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet II.*³⁷

Enkidu's great strength and virility explicitly rule out his submission to Gilgamesh, rather, the *entrance* to the wedding-house, or *bīt emūti*, is blocked by Enkidu's foot, a metaphor that Both S. Ackerman and G. Leick suggest draws on the well-established euphemism of the feet for genitalia in west-Semitic cultures.³⁸ Although the episode is not preserved in the SB edition, the OB Pennsylvania tablet maintains that the wrestling match ends with Gilgamesh dropping to one knee (VI:20-21), symbolising his loss and submission toward the physically superior Enkidu.³⁹ Whilst this may signify a victory for Enkidu who attributes his frustration toward Gilgamesh's treatment of his subjects as the reason for confronting him, the description of Gilgamesh as "correct" or "upright", as Ackerman maintains, is conveyed through the verb *išaru(m)*, which can also mean "penis." In turn, she suggests that upon entering Uruk, the hero is "sporting a magnificent erection" which I believe to be indicative of Enkidu's true underlying motivations in *confronting* Gilgamesh; to penetrate and humble the egotistical king. In accomplishing this, Enkidu had – as Shamhat had with him – directed Gilgamesh's attention away from his youthful insurrection against civilised norms and toward a form of physical devotion which serves the interest of both parties equally as well as the community which is now at peace.

Like Enkidu's intercourse with Shamhat, his consumption of the beer and bread, and the donning of garments, to each other, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are simultaneously the means by which they devote themselves to the norms of civilisation and the reward they receive from doing so. In this sense, when Shamhat comforts the weakened Enkidu in tablet

³⁵ Noegel 2011, 179, translates lines IV:55-6 of the Song of Erra as "They rose up (in) Eanna, the cultic actors and singers. In order to strike people with religious awe, whose manhood Ištar turned to womanhood."

³⁶ Ackerman 2005, 60; For more on the homoerotics of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, see, Cooper 2002.

³⁷ Own normalisation and translation based on transliteration from George 2003, 562.

³⁸ Leick 1994, 266; Ackerman 2005, 60; "Entering through a doorway" is a well-attested ANE euphemism for penetrative sex. In the Biblical Song of Songs, the female lover exclaims: "My beloved put his hand by the hole of the door and my bowels were moved for him" (Songs 5:4).

³⁹ Ackerman 2005, 69.

one by questioning, “You are handsome Enkidu, you are just like a god, why do you roam the wild with the animals?” (I:207-8),⁴⁰ her focus upon his beauty and godliness depicts Enkidu as a gift of civilisation and thus a source of religious devotion in itself. Considering that Gilgamesh is described in similar terms, each protagonist is not only each other’s target of devotion, but the gift said devotion brings with it. It is in this manner that two sex omens from the *Šumma alū* attribute good fortune to those who engage in the sexual activity demonstrated by the heroes:

If a man has sexual relations with an *assinnu*, hardships will be unleashed from him (CT 39 45:32).

If a man has sex per annum with his social peer, that man will become foremost amongst his brothers and colleagues (CT 39 44:13).

Nissinen 2010, 74-5.

These laws, as M. Nissinen suggests, maintain that sexual intercourse between two men symbolises a power dynamic which represents dominance and reward.⁴¹ In Enkidu’s metaphorical identification as an *assinnu*, his sexual advances toward Gilgamesh can thus be understood as a relinquishment of Gilgamesh’s own hardships, i.e. his lack of a friend, and the consequent partnership of the two heroes who share equal status afterwards. As these laws indicate, the equal friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh brings equal benefit to each hero thereby reinforcing the concept that forms of religious devotion (under the metaphor of physical love) are the gifts of said devotion itself. Evidently, the sexual connotations brought about by the heroes’ encounter carry further implications relating to the nature of their “friendship” and the mechanisms by which they commit themselves to each other and the city.

In the setting of the protagonists’ newfound friendship, the two heroes further devote themselves to civilisation and more explicitly now, to the patron goddess of Uruk, Ishtar. Their quest to slay the ferocious guardian of the forest, Humbaba, carries abundant overtones of religious worship and devotion which we have previously identified within the epic and other genres. For example, in the process of receiving the divine blessing from Ninsun and other gods, the fragmented lines: “[To] the gate of Cedar [...] Enkidu, in the temple of [...] and Gilgamesh in the temple of [...] juniper, incense [...]” (III:149-52),⁴² raises a common motif found in Akkado-Sumerian love poetry and incantations; the use of juniper and cedar.⁴³ The occurrence of juniper can be explained by its ritualistic use found in an Akkadian love incantation that maintains: “you place it at the head of your bed, a censer of juniper (...) and she (Ishtar) will come” (Kar 69:8-9).⁴⁴ With this in mind and the cult of Ishtar’s active role in the transformation of both Enkidu and Gilgamesh, the combination of juniper and incense before the lacuna (III:149-52) likely concerns the same form of ritualistic burning found in the incantation, suggesting that the heroes supplicated to Ishtar before leaving for the cedar forest. In light of this, the subsequent quest to slay Humbaba should

⁴⁰ Translation from George 2003, 551.

⁴¹ Nissinen 2010, 75.

⁴² Translation from George 2003, 551.

⁴³ For a brief overview of the combination of cedar wood and Juniper in Mesopotamian love poetry, see, Nissinen 2016, 13.

⁴⁴ Translation from Biggs 1967, 76.

be primarily understood as an intensification of Enkidu and Gilgamesh’s devotion to the city of Uruk and its patron deity, Ishtar.

However, Enkidu and Gilgamesh’s intentions to please the goddess change after Humbaba’s curse: “may the pair of them not grow old, apart from his friend Gilgamesh, may Enkidu have nobody to bury him!” (V:256-7). Here, Enkidu is denied both the longevity and well-being associated with youth, but also the reputation he hopes to be carried beyond his death by the fame he hopes to acquire in the expedition:

<i>šuzzizma dārâ [a-x x x]</i>	188	Establish an everlasting [fame,] how Gilgamesh [slew] Humbaba.
<i>kī^dGilgameš^dḪumb[a-ba ināru]</i>	189	

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet V.*⁴⁵

Whilst the heroes are mortal and their physical existence thus limited, they understand that their reputations can live on through their fame and memorial after death. As a result, Humbaba’s curse which denies Enkidu such a privilege is countered by a two pronged attack in which they murder Humbaba’s sons, symbolically denying his children the opportunity to grow old and continue their father’s legacy beyond his death. The heroes, frustrated that they should devote themselves to cause without reward, return to the city where Ishtar’s proposal of marriage to Gilgamesh is rebuked through an array of insults directed at her tendency to betray her lovers whom treat her well.

Elements of this human-divine relationship permeate multiple aspects of the heroes’ adventure into the cedar forest. From the very outset of the heroes’ departure, it is made clear that the forest lies beyond the distant boundaries of the known world, and so only Enkidu with his experience of the wild “knows the way to the Forest of Cedar” (III:7). The forest occupies a space unknown to the norms and functions of civilisation and therefore lies outside the range of divine supervision. Recognising this, Ninsun despairs at the danger Gilgamesh’s own ignorance poses to himself, and thus pleads for Shamash for his protection: “he will face a battle he does not know, he will face a route he does not know (...) As for him [place him] in [the care of the watches of the night]” (III:49-75). In principle, it is not the venture itself that raises issue, but the lack of adult guidance and supervision that concerns Ninsun and the elders. One consequence of Ninsun’s plea to Shamash is that Gilgamesh receives a series of advisory dreams with instruction on the slaying of Humbaba, and each of Enkidu’s interpretations ending with “and in the morning we shall see a favourable message from Shamash” (IV:33;162). Ultimately, the heroes’ journey remains under the guidance of an unseen-but-present divine figure.

Upon further consideration of religious overtones layering the Humbaba episode, the conflict between the heroes and the forest guardian represents a parallelistic commentary detailing a far more complex altercation between civilisation and the rule of nature. In this instance, the key players of this episode represent a conflict between their divine patrons, whether Enkidu and Gilgamesh who supplicated to Ishtar beforehand and aim to annihilate the “evil thing” that Shamash hates (III:53) or Humbaba who “in order to

⁴⁵ Own normalisation based on transliteration from George 2003, 611. I have followed suit with Michael Clarke 2019, and followed Georges penguin translation which fills the lacuna whilst George’s critical edition is more conservative in its translation.

keep the cedars safe, Enlil made it his destiny to be the terror of the people” (II:218a-19b).⁴⁶ Naturally, the causes of such a conflict are reflected in its location at the cedar forest where Humbaba prevents civilised man from felling cedar for the construction of temples,⁴⁷ like the savage Enkidu who guarded the wild animals against the hunter. Therefore, it is unsurprising that after defeating the forest guardian, the heroes themselves take their prized cedar and fabricate a door for the temple of Enlil at Nippur in an effort to quell the god’s resulting anger (IV:293-97). For this reason, it can be inferred that the episode concerns the development of Enkidu and Gilgamesh’ opposition to the wild and subsequently indicates their growing dedication to the gods and their cities. As a result, the heroes’ conflict with Humbaba becomes part of the epic’s ongoing commentary committed to understanding the dynamics of humankind’s relationship with the city and its divine patronage.

As we have observed, the process of becoming civilised was intrinsically related to ageing. The acquisition of knowledge throughout the ageing process worked as a metaphor for the broader connotations deriving from the “lived experience” and the knowledge accumulated with it. Marked by sexual rites of passage, milestones in the ageing process were characterised by forms of religious worship that were presented through the metaphors of physical devotion. Because of this, the products of civilisation were depicted as sensual and materialistic and understood as the mechanisms whereby people devoted themselves to civilisation and the gods but also the rewards they received in doing so. Ultimately, civilisation was a divine gift to humankind, and consequently, its recipients devoted themselves to patrons who provided them with such luxuries.

Death and Dependency

The cost of wisdom and the luxuries of civilisation

Having argued that the gods dictated the terms of civilisation and, with them, the definitions of manhood, this chapter aims to assess the extent to which the protagonists of the epic accepted the terms and conditions of their relationship with the city and its gods. In finding an answer, we must examine how the characters themselves understand and attempt to make sense of their civilised existence, noting how changes in their mental and physical wellbeing are used to represent apprehensions and regrets concerning their transition into manhood. To begin, we will examine the language and imagery used to describe the start of Enkidu’s transformation in tablet one and work our way through the narrative by paying particular attention to how the protagonists confront aspects of civilisation in their effort reason with the complexities of the human experience. To end, we will explore the reasons for Gilgamesh eventual return to the city and its customs, asking whether or not Gilgamesh’s inability to gain immortality should be understood as an inevitability or personal failure.

⁴⁶ The significance of Shamash within the SB Gilgamesh, according to Bachvarova 2016, 175, is a continuation of the Sumerian version in which the cedar forest’s location in the Zagros mountains marks the home of Utu, the Sumerian counterpart of Shamash.

⁴⁷ a practice known to us through, though not limited to, an inscription belonging to Naram-Sin maintaining that he brought Cedar down from the mountains of Lebanon to rebuild the temple of Ishtar; Frayne 1993, 28-29.

Enkidu's sexual encounter with Shamhat marks the first instance of divine intervention within the epic. His transformation from a *lullû amēlu* or "primitive-man" into a fully grown man or "*awīlu*" marks the beginning of Enkidu's relationship with the city and its gods. Shamhat, however, is more than an extension of the city and its divine patron Ishtar, she is the broker who provides the delights and conveniences of civilisation in exchange for something far more valuable – youth. Throughout the epic, accepting the luxuries of the civilisation comes at cost and, in seducing Enkidu, the *ḥarimtu* denies the hero the simplicities and joys of his pastoral existence, instead, replacing them with a new social identity that is dictated by the conditions of civilisation:

<i>dādūšu iḥbubū eli šēriša</i>	193	His love crooned over her back.
	...	
<i>ultaḥḥi^denkidu ullula pagāršu</i>	199	Enkidu had polluted his cleansed body.
<i>Ittazizzā birkāšu ša illaka bulšu</i>	200	His legs stood still, the heard was on the move.
<i>umtaṭṭu^denkidu ul kī ša pāni lāsanšu</i>	201	Enkidu was diminished, his running was not as before,
<i>u šū iši tēma rapaš ḥasia</i>	202	but he had reason, he was broad of wisdom.

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet I.*⁴⁸

By coupling with a temple prostitute, Enkidu is introduced to civilisation through a developed understanding of sexuality. His newly-found wisdom, as demonstrated by his sophisticated love-making and ability to now speak (*dādūšu iḥbubū eli šēriša*),⁴⁹ comes at the cost of his youth and the strength that stems from it. To all appearances, Enkidu's transformation into a civilised man is marked by the exchange of *life* for learning where he surrenders the strength of his youth over to the sensual gratification found in acts of physical devotion and the wisdom hereby gained in it. As a result, the "civilising" of Enkidu becomes a broader metaphor for ageing where his strength gives way to the knowledge and wisdom accumulated through the lived experience. Subsequently, Enkidu's transition into adulthood adopts the connotations of sacrifice that present themselves in the form his weakened (*mutaṭṭû*) body.⁵⁰

It is not the sexual encounter in itself that deprives Enkidu of strength, but the wisdom that it engenders. Wider metaphors concerning acts of physical devotion should not be read as the cause of ageing but, instead, as mechanisms that provide the means of ageing – in this case, wisdom. So whilst it is easy to perceive the acquisition of knowledge as a positive attribute, it is important to note that it is the very thing with which Enkidu has weakened and polluted (*šuhḥu*) "his cleansed body." Precisely how the wisdom "pollutes" his body is revealed to us later when Enkidu reflects upon his wild upbringing: "His eyes filled with [tears,] his arms fell limp, strength [...] Through sobbing do quake [my...], terror

⁴⁸ Own normalisation and translation based on transliteration from George 2003, 548-50.

⁴⁹ *dādūšu iḥbubū eli šēriša*: *iḥbubū* < *ḥabābu*, meaning to "murmur, chirp, or tweet," suggesting that like a bird, his love (*dādūšu*) sings to her but, more precisely, over her back (*eli šēriša*).

⁵⁰ See, George 2003, 199: The verb *mutaṭṭû*, meaning "to diminish," can refer to speed and strength.

has entered my heart" (II:180-91).⁵¹ Here, we can discern that the ability to reason confers a sense of awareness upon the Enkidu that leads to an emotional unravelling that collapses into physical weakness. Accordingly, when Gilgamesh approaches Uta-napišti in sorrowful mourning, he is met with constructive criticism that calms and placates his emotions in an effort to reduce his fatigue:

<i>attā taddalip minâ talqu</i>	297	You, you kept toiling sleepless (and) what did you get?
<i>ina dalāpi tunnaḥa ramānka</i>	298	You are exhausting yourself with ceaseless toil,
<i>šir'ānīka nissata tumalla</i>	299	you are filling your sinews with pain,
<i>ruqūtu tuqarrab ūmīka</i>	300	bringing nearer the end of your life.

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet X.*⁵²

Unable to escape the thoughts concerning the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, the pain and suffering that Gilgamesh inflicts upon himself through his mourning literally draws him closer to the end of his life.

Such issues are of such great concern to the heroes that they can be found as the driving causes for many of their decision. In recognising that the civilised world is a place of death, Gilgamesh understands that he must acquire fame if he is to establish something eternal and everlasting (*dārû*) to live on in the collective memory of the community after he is dead. In the Sumerian myth of Gilgamesh and Huwawa, Gilgamesh explicitly relates the suffering of the city to his reasons for seeking renown:

<i>en.ki.du₁₀ murgu ḡuruš-e til₃-la saḡ</i>	4	Enkidu, since a young man cannot pass beyond the final end of life,
<i>til₃-le-be₂-še₃ la-ba-ra-an-e₃-a</i>	5	I must enter the mountain lands to establish my name.
<i>ku-ra ga-an-kur₉ mu-ḡu₁₀ ga-am₃-ḡar</i>	6	Where a name can be established there, I shall establish my name,
<i>ki mu gub-bu-ba-am₃ mu-ḡu₁₀</i>	7	and where a name cannot be established,
<i>ga-bi₂-ib-gub</i>	7	I shall establish a name for the gods.
<i>ki mu nu-gub-bu-ba-am₃ mu diḡir-re-e-ne</i>	...	
<i>ga-bi₂-ib-gub</i>	...	
<i>iri^{ki}-ḡa₂ lu₂ ba-uš₂ ša₃.g ba-saḡ₃</i>	23	In my city the people are dying and afflicted.
<i>lu₂ u₂.gu ba-an-de₂ [ša₃.g-ḡu₁₀] ba-an-giḡ</i>	24	The people have become lost and my heart is ill.
<i>bad₃-da gu₂-ḡa₂ im-ma-an-la₂</i>	25	I hung my neck over the wall
<i>ad₆ a-a ib₂-diri.g-ge igi im-ma-an-siḡ₁₀</i>	26	and I saw corpses in the water make it overflow.

*Gilgamesh and Huwawa (A), ETCSL.*⁵³

⁵¹ Translation from George 2003, 696.

⁵² Own normalisation based on translation and transliteration from George 2003, 696-7.

⁵³ ETCSL, 2003; own translation and transliteration edited where appropriate.

In the image of the corpses (*ad₆*), we find the motif of the dead mayfly upon the water, a metaphor for humankind that A.R. George attributes to the mayfly's short lived life: "It lives for a very short time, for a few minutes to a day, and, having no functional digestive system exists only to copulate and die."⁵⁴ Though a pessimistic analogy for the human life course, it is worth noting that while the individual will eventually perish, their achievements and memory will live on in their offspring and the community that they perpetuate during their lifetime. Like the city, the water in which the mayfly dies provides the comforts and necessities from which the species repopulates and continues its legacy. After all, the Sumerian logogram for water "a" can also be read as "semen" and, consequently, the connotations of rebirth and fertility that are found in the water are shared with the city.

Whilst the mayfly symbolises the mortality and continuity of humankind, it also relates to the relationship between humankind and the gods. Like the mayfly that depends on the same waters in which it eventually dies, humankind's dependence upon the city – a place of sensuality, convenience, and aid from its patron god – relegates the control of the human life-course to its divine patron. This point resonates in the epic when Uta-napišti exclaims that "at some time the river rose and brought the flood, the mayfly floating on the river" (X:312-13).⁵⁵ In a reference to great flood that Enlil sent to purge humankind from the earth, Uta-napišti brings home the point that in becoming reliant on the benefits and luxuries of the city, humankind places itself at the mercy of the gods. Civilisation provides wisdom and pleasure but also takes in the form of ageing as represented by physical weakening. In the case of Enkidu, his familiarisation with the civilisation diminishes (*mutaṭṭû*) and pollutes (*šuhḥu*) his body while his dependency on the delights of civilisation grow and become further embedded within his lifestyle. Gilgamesh and Enkidu eventually recognise this and when Ishtar proposes in marriage to Gilgamesh offering him an array of luxuries and gifts, he rebukes her with a series of analogies designed to undermine the relationship between humankind and the city:

<p>[mannu... ana kâš]i iḥḥazki <i>kuš nāda murasat nāšiša</i></p>	<p>32</p>	<p>[Who] would take you in marriage?</p>
<p><i>kuššēnu munaššikat šēp^{min} bēliša</i> <i>ajjum ḥāmeraki ibūr ana dāriš</i></p>	<p>38</p>	<p>A water skin that [wets] him who carries it,</p>
<p><i>kuššēnu munaššikat šēp^{min} bēliša</i> <i>ajjum ḥāmeraki ibūr ana dāriš</i></p>	<p>41</p>	<p>a shoe that gnaws the foot of its owner!</p>
<p><i>u jāši tarammīnma kī šašušu tutarrīni</i></p>	<p>42</p>	<p>What bridegroom of yours has endured forever? <i>(Gilgamesh goes on to list a number of Ishtar's lovers of whom she betrayed)</i></p>
<p><i>u jāši tarammīnma kī šašušu tutarrīni</i></p>	<p>79</p>	<p>And you would love me and change me as you did them?</p>

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet VI.*⁵⁶

As a patron of civilisation and, more specifically, Uruk, Ishtar is employed to create a dialogue between Gilgamesh and the city. The hero is aware that the luxuries of civilisation come at a cost that humankind cannot afford, and in listing a series of her ex-lovers of

⁵⁴ George 2012, 238-1. The symbolism of the mayfly is perhaps captured best in German as *die Eintagsfliege*, literally "the one day fly."

⁵⁵ Translation from George 2003, 697.

⁵⁶ Own normalisation based on translation and transliteration from George 2003, 620-23.

whom Ishtar has betrayed, asks if he too can ever satisfy her. Like the “shoe that gnaws the foot of its owner,” the gifts of civilisation will eventually bring misfortune upon their users. In recognising this, Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s marriage proposal and forfeits the gifts of civilisation. Unknowingly, in dismissing civilisation, Gilgamesh had forfeited his most prized gift, Enkidu, who later dies as a result of a curse placed upon him by Ishtar due to the killing of the bull of heaven. Accordingly, by refusing Ishtar and engendering the death of the bull of heaven, Gilgamesh, as Enkidu’s most treasured gift, had brought him misfortune.

Upon his deathbed, Enkidu reflects on his relationship with the city, cursing Shamhat for introducing him to its temptations, exclaiming: “Because you made me weak, me who was pure! And me who was pure, you made me weak when I was in the wild” (VII:130-1).⁵⁷ In referring to his wild existence, Enkidu reminisces about the days of his youth before he was imbued with the wisdom and knowledge that polluted his body. Šamaš comforts the dying hero, explaining to him that he should be thankful to Shamhat for it was her that introduced him to the delights and luxuries of the city, including Gilgamesh. The latter will pull out his hair, tear away his finery and mourn for him in the wild where, donning the skin of a lion, he will search for eternal life away from the death and sorrow found in the city.⁵⁸ In doing so, Gilgamesh travels to the very end of the known world where he seeks the secrets of immortality from Uta-napišti who was granted eternal life by Enlil for preventing the extinction of humankind and the animals during the great flood. The irony is that in seeking wisdom, Gilgamesh follows the same procedures that led him and Enkidu toward civilisation and, consequently, the life in which they try to escape.

Uta-napišti advises Gilgamesh that if he wants the gods to convene and reconsider his fate, he must stay awake for six days and seven nights as Uta-napišti had during the great flood. Gilgamesh fails this task when he is immediately seized by his fatigue and falls asleep, the message been the same as Uta-napišti’s previous advice: In concerning himself with his own mortality, Gilgamesh had weakened himself and brought his life nearer to its end. In falling asleep, Gilgamesh proves that he is not able to withstand pain and suffering without giving into comfort and sensuality:

amrī eṭla ša irrišu balātu
šittu kīma imbari inappuš elišu

213	See the fellow who demanded life!
214	Sleep is wafting over him like fog.

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet XI.*⁵⁹

Gilgamesh’s failure to stay awake should be read as a commentary on his inability to distance himself from the pleasures and conveniences of civilised life, a failure that prevents him from acquiring eternal life as Uta-napišti had done when the convenience and luxury of the city were taken away from him in the flood. For everyday Gilgamesh sleeps, a round of bread is placed out: the first was dried up, the second was leathery, the third was soggy, the fourth had turned white, the fifth was freshly baked, and the sixth was still on the coals (XI:221-30). The moral being that through giving into the sensuality of sleep, Gilgamesh, like the bread, was *decaying* with age. If Gilgamesh were to become immortal he must abandon

⁵⁷ Translation from George 2003, 641.

⁵⁸ In the Biblical tradition this motif appears in the Book of Daniel when Nebuchadnezzar is exiled from the city by God to roam the wild where “he grew hair like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird,” only returning to humankind once his faith had been restored in God (Daniel 3:33-37).

⁵⁹ Own normalisation based on translation and transliteration from George 2003, 716-17.

all forms of luxury including the ability to reason and understand; an impossible request that even Uta-napišti did not achieve, instead, gaining his eternal life once the luxuries and benefits of civilisation forcibly taken from him during the flood. This point is emphasised by the gods when they exclaim: “Uta-napišti and his woman shall be like us gods! Uta-napišti shall dwell far away, at the mouth of the rivers” (XI:204-5).⁶⁰ Here, Uta-napišti lives an immortal existence away from the delights of the city and the gods who find residence there.

Eventually, Gilgamesh accepts that he is not capable of turning away the temptations of sensuality but understands that he must return to the city where he can live a mortal existence in luxury and convenience as Uruk’s king. On his way back to the city, however, he is told to retrieve a plant called “The Old Man Has Grown Young” that – predictably – allows a man to recapture his youth. Once Gilgamesh had retrieved the plant, he goes down the water to bathe where a snake, smelling the flower’s fragrance, carries the plant away, throwing off its skin as it turns in escape (XI:305-7). Once again, in giving into temptation and sensuality, this time through the metaphor of bathing rather than sleep, Gilgamesh had forfeited his youth. In gaining the flower, the snake symbolically loses its old skin in return for a younger one as an indication of its returning youth. The snake is a simple creature, and without reason and wisdom it does not fall prey to the temptations that would deprive it of its life.

Gilgamesh returns to the city where, just as the epic began, tablet eleven ends up on the walls of Uruk where the collective city is admired for its longevity and grandeur (XI:322-328). Gilgamesh could not achieve eternal life but can devote himself to the project of the city and its community that, unlike him, will live on eternally. This point resonates at the end of tablet twelve:

<i>ša ina tāḫāzi dēku tāmur atamar</i>	148	Did you see the one who was killed in battle? I saw (him).
<i>abūšu u ummašu rēssu našû u aššassu ina muḫḫišu ibakkâšu</i>	149	His father and mother honour his memory and his wife weeps over (him).
<i>ša šalamtašu ina šēri nadât tāmur atamar</i>	150	Did you see the one whose corpse was left lying in the open countryside? I saw (him).
<i>eṭemmašu ina erṣeti ul ṣalil</i>	151	His ghost does not lie at rest in the netherworld.

*SB Gilgamesh epic, tablet XII.*⁶¹

Whilst life as a civilised man is painful and tough, the realisation that the collective effort found in the community provides the individual with a purpose and the content in knowing that what they do in their life will be remembered by what and who they leave behind. Gilgamesh’s transition from youthful antagonist to the adult king should be understood as a journey of self-realisation where, as A.R. George suggests, “the poem tells a story about finding a new balance between individual and collective, a story that asserts a belief that a human life gains meaning as part of a greater whole.”⁶² That is not to say that civilisation was understood as a fair or even enjoyable relationship with the gods, it was a relationship

⁶⁰ Translation from George 2003, 717.

⁶¹ Own normalisation based on translation and transliteration from George 2003, 734-5.

⁶² George 2012, 240-1.

which demanded tremendous sacrifice but in turn provided wonders and conveniences that, once experienced, could never be refused.

Of course, none of this undermines the fact that civilisation represents an abusive relationship between the gods and mankind. The journey of self-realisation is in itself meaningless until a person is imbued with knowledge and the abilities that allow them to comprehend and understand their own mortality. Rather, the passing of youth only became an issue once the characters of the epic had gained the means to understand it. Enkidu reminisced about his life in the wild, a life that he, like Gilgamesh, could never return to because of the wisdom he now possessed. when we think back to Enkidu's cleansed body, it not only evokes the same connotations of "purity" that are associated with the divine but refers to the pastoral innocence that Enkidu abandons when he gains wisdom and knowledge.⁶³ Through this double entendre, we are reminded that Enkidu's youth is a product of both his divine creation and his wild upbringing. It would seem then that the qualities of youth, i.e. strength, individuality, and the other attributes more generally associated with the wild were understood as characteristics that were shared with the gods. However, this does not mean that we should read Enkidu's association with the divine as a literal indication of his eternal life but, instead, as a metaphor for vitality that is exhibited in both the gods and young men. In all, *Sîn-lēqi-unninni*, the author is critical of civilisations elderly who take from the youth their lives of ignorant bliss and tempt them into lives of pain and commitment to the eternal project of civilisation.

Conclusion

In her aptly named chapter, *Gilgamesh's Coming of Age*, Rivkah Harris concludes that the author of the SB Gilgamesh epic, *Sîn-lēqi-unninni*, "is critical of Gilgamesh's wild and uncontrolled behaviour, frequently characteristic of youth," positing that, "Gilgamesh as an immature youth was devoid as yet of the 'real' experiences that characterize adulthood."⁶⁴ In doing so, Harris contradicts her later assertion that myths provided a space for pro-youth sentiment designed to mitigate frustration toward the authority of seniors.⁶⁵ I hope to have proven to the reader that the SB Gilgamesh epic is, in fact, a carefully composed narrative that engages with a number of images and linguistic techniques designed to criticise the relationship between humankind and the gods through the metaphor of civilisation. The author skilfully engages with a number of popular motifs associated with youth and adulthood, purposing them toward creating a narrative that tells the story of ageing through the metaphors and imagery of the wild and journey of the two heroes, Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

At its heart, civilisation was a relationship between humankind and the divine where the human participants devoted themselves to the continuation of the community where the patron deity of the city made their home. In reward for their dedication, humankind was gifted wisdom which they used to create the luxuries and wonders of civilisation but also reflect back on their youth where they believed their vitality lay before temptations of the city and the wisdom they attained via the lived experience "polluted" their bodies and made them age. Once it is too late, the adult man now at the end of his journey of realisation

⁶³ The Sumerian *ku₃.g* "pure" can be translated as "holy" and often refers to divine presence.

⁶⁴ Harris 2003, 40-42.

⁶⁵ Harris 2003, 79.

understands that there is no turning back, and must consequently devote the rest of their life to the continuation of a community which can carry on their memory after they die.

The aged characters of the epic, understanding that the fate of their memory lies in the younger members of the community, subject the young men of Uruk to the same fate as them by enforcing a set of societal expectations that reward maturity over youth. As a young man who refuses to “grow up,” Gilgamesh threatened the mechanisms whereby the older members of the community lived on forever in the memories of their descendants. Throughout the epic, the elderly are seen making attempts to amend Gilgamesh’s youthful disposition, forcing him to adopt a lifestyle dedicated to the never-ending project of civilisation.

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