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Greeks and Hebrews

*Gilgamesh*, Books VI-XI

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Ishtar's Double Standard:

Portrayal of Sexuality in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Sex plays a pivotal role in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. From civilizing Enkidu to inciting Ishtar's deadly rage, sex and desire drive much of the action in the ancient epic. The poem's characters, however, treat the four main sexual actors wildly differently from each other. The titular Gilgamesh, the hero of the story, described early on as "virile... {pulsing} with erotic power" (82). Shamhat, a priestess of the fertility goddess Ishtar, has sex as part of her temple duties. She serves as Enkidu's creator, using her "love-arts" distinguish him from wild animals. Enkidu is also a hero-- his life leads to Gilgamesh's humanization. Ishtar, however, antagonizes the heroes. When she propositions Gilgamesh, he rejects and insults her in an episode of fury that lasts sixty lines. In response to his slander, Ishtar calls down the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh. The difference in the way Gilgamesh, Shamhat, and Enkidu are portrayed versus the way

Ishtar is portrayed as striking, but not random- Ishtar is the only woman who has sex purely for pleasure.

Enkidu and Shamhat both have sex for holy reasons. As detailed in the text, Enkidu's decision to have sex is not conscious. When he first meets Shamhat, he is primarily animal, and instinct drives his actions. A woman asks him to have sex, and in the absence of a Freudian ego, he simply complies. Shamhat, on the other hand, has sex with multiple people, multiple times every day. In more modern literature, she would be described as a slut, but from the Babylonian perspective, her actions are pure. Because sex is a pious duty-- a mechanism for worshipping Ishtar, a fearsome goddess-- and not a physical indulgence, it is acceptable.

In contrast, Gilgamesh's primary reason for having sex is brutal, but his character has the opportunity for redemption. As king, he has the right to "mate first" with all the newly married virgins of Uruk, going so far as to operate on the belief that "every girl's hymen belonged to him" (87). Gilgamesh exerts power and engages in violence with his sexuality, but in part because he is male, and in part because the gods favor him, his brutality does not define his character. As he grows more compassionate and gains humility, he becomes a better king, and his citizens forgive his crimes.

Ishtar, the final sexual actor, is the goddess of fertility, love and sexuality. A modern reader with little familiarity with ancient Babylonian culture might infer that her sexuality commands respect. This could not be further from the truth, however. When she propositions Gilgamesh, he bursts into rage, calling her "a waterskin that is full of holes," (132) among other things. He then goes on to list the wrong she has done her

multiple past lovers- namely cursing them and turning them into animals. After he has finished hurling insults, Ishtar turns to the gods and, “raging, weeping” (135), begs them to lend her the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh. Ishtar is ridiculed and humiliated for her desire. This lack of respect is puzzling, especially when considering the veneration that her priestess Shamhat receives for similar actions. Here, the difference in motivation becomes apparent. Ishtar engages in sexual activity for pleasure, while Shamhat does so for the sake of piety. Neither Gilgamesh nor Enkidu are described as having sex for pleasure in the text, although it is safe to assume that they each did so. Ishtar, the goddess of love, is only female character who has sex purely because it feels good, and she is mocked and insulted for it. Female sexuality in Gilgamesh’s world is only acceptable when it is used for purposes other than personal pleasure.

Why this lopsided standard exists is unclear. Perhaps women with sexual autonomy had power to be feared. Perhaps sex was thought to distract from the essential work of daily life. Perhaps sex was seen as sacred, and using it for female base pleasure was irreverent. Whatever the reason, the message is clear: have sex, but don’t enjoy it.