

Mother, goddess,
seductress, harlot:
women in "the epic of
gilgamesh"



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In The Epic of Gilgamesh, the female characters hold small roles, but they are in no way secondary to the male characters, as their roles are pivotal to the story. Through their roles as mothers, harlots, and goddesses, they manipulate the story according to their actions. The female characters in the tale are also shown to have great influence over the male characters, and appear to be capable of changing their decisions and even bringing about their deaths. Therefore, the centrality of their roles stems largely from their abilities to alter the roles of males.

It is tempting to argue that the roles of females in The Epic of Gilgamesh are secondary and serve simply to pave the way for male characters, such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, to fulfill their more important roles. Rivkah Harris supports this view by saying that “ Women are regarded positively only when they assist Gilgamesh (and Enkidu) in their activities, when they nurture, advise in maternal fashion”[1]. Indeed, the most obvious support for this argument is the role of the harlot, Priestess Shamhat. Her primary role is the taming of Enkidu, tempting him away from his feral ways using her sexuality and her maternal instincts, and bringing him into the civilized world to teach him the ways of men. The trapper’s father tells his son that “ She will be there, stripped naked; and when he sees her beckoning he will embrace her, and then the wild beasts will reject him”[2]. In this way, Shamhat’s sexuality is used as a tool by a man, in order to tame a man, suggesting that her role is that of a stage prop rather than being a character in her own right. Adrien Janis Bledstein argues that “ In relation to Enkidu, a harlot enacts several roles: she is a seductress, wise counselor, mother, and servant. Having fulfilled these male wish-fulfillment functions, the woman

disappears"[3]. Indeed, as she leads Enkidu towards a civilized lifestyle, she provides a service in allowing his character to progress and his role to unfold, as this leads him to go looking for Gilgamesh and ultimately to befriend him. Once her service has been fulfilled, her role comes to a close, reflective in a way of her profession as a prostitute in which she fulfills men's sexual desires without any further attachments. It can therefore be argued that her sexuality and other feminine virtues are used simply to serve males, and to pave the way to Enkidu's future greatness, arguably making her a secondary character whose role is merely a supporting one.

Harris also argues that "women play subsidiary and supportive parts. All except the Goddess Ishtar assist Gilgamesh in his search for immortality"[4]. In fitting with this view, it could also be argued that Utanapishtim's wife is another example of a female role serving simply as a means of paving the way of a male character's role. Her actions lead her husband to reveal to Gilgamesh the location of a plant which restores youth, as she asks him "Gilgamesh came here wearied out, he is worn out; what will you give him to carry him back to his own country?" (116). Here, a male character's role is once again supported by a female character's role as she helps Gilgamesh gain valuable information about the whereabouts of the youth restoring plant so he can progress with his quest for immortality. The fact that her name is never revealed, and that she is instead referred to as an extension of her husband, once again marginalizes her as a secondary character. It can also be seen to reflect her role which, it could be argued, is merely supplementary to that of her husband. John R. Maier adheres to this view as he states that "wives in the poem are, significantly, anonymous, identified

only through their husbands”[5]. It could also be argued that Utanapishtim uses his wife as a tool for teaching Gilgamesh a lesson, as he orders her to “bake loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head; and make a mark on the wall to number the days he has slept” (114) in order to prove to Gilgamesh that he failed his task to stay awake for a week. Here, she fulfills a secondary role by assisting her husband, rather than taking on a central role.

However, I am inclined to argue that, while the female characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh do play small roles, they are in no way secondary characters. Their roles do appear to be based around supporting the male characters, but this makes them central characters in their own right. Shamhat’s role of taming Enkidu and in turn setting him on his path to befriending Gilgamesh is just as important as the roles of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, if not more so, as without her the majority of the events in the tale could not have taken place. Furthermore, her ability to transform Enkidu from feral to civilized highlights the power of female sexuality as the epic tells how “For six days and seven nights they lay together, for Enkidu had forgotten his home in the hills...the thoughts of man were in his heart” (65). The verb “forgotten” (65) shows the extent of the impact that the character of Shamhat has on the character of Enkidu, taking him away from his old life and introducing him to a new one. The trapper’s father also tells the trapper to “let her woman’s power overpower this man” (63), further emphasizing the power that women hold over men. Shamhat plays a dual role as both a seductress, and as a mother figure, as she teaches Enkidu the ways of civilized men. This presence of two roles within one woman tells us something about attitudes towards women in

Mesopotamian society. It suggests that there was no definitive role for women, but rather a diversity of roles. It is reflective of a society which worshiped Goddesses as well as Gods, and was rife with prostitution as well as women devoted to marriage and being mothers[6]. Shamhat tells him “ Endiku, eat bread, it is the staff of life; drink the wine, it is the custom of the land” (67). This scene is reminiscent of a mother teaching a child table etiquette. Stephen Mitchell argues that the achievement of Shamhat in taming Enkidu surpasses the achievements of any of the male characters in the tale[7]. Indeed, rather than looking at her as a paving stone for Enkidu’s journey, she can instead be seen as the origin and creator of his new life, and therefore a central and almost goddess like character. She is at the centre of a chain of events which make up The Epic of Gilgamesh.

Her mothering role also represents the Mesopotamian view of women as bearers of children and bringers of life. The reliance of Enkidu on Shamhat in order to fulfil his role is reminiscent of a child being dependent on its mother. The great masculine characters like Enkidu and Gilgamesh could not achieve greatness without a female influence or mothering figure being there to nurture and guide them. The mothering figure behind Gilgamesh is Ninsun, and unlike Shamhat to Enkidu, she is his biological mother. She has an important impact on Gilgamesh’s role as she interprets his dreams to mean that he will make a friend, telling him that “ he will come in his strength like one of the host of heaven. He is the brave companion who rescues his friend in necessity”. This interpretation of Gilgamesh’s dream is shown to be true as Enkidu seeks out Gilgamesh. Ninsun’s words are also a driving force behind the initiation of the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as

Gilgamesh says in response that “[he] shall befriend and counsel him”. By foreshadowing their friendship, she helps to make sure that it becomes a reality.

Furthermore, the role of Utanapishtim’s wife can be seen to be more central than the role of her husband, as it is ultimately her who makes up his mind to help Gilgamesh. Her display of empathy towards Gilgamesh is a very feminine display of virtue which in turn allows Gilgamesh to not only find the plant, but to learn a valuable lesson and come to terms with his own mortality after it is stolen from him by a snake. She is another example of females having great influence over males, as her good nature appears to rub off on her cold-hearted husband. Ultimately, her decision is the final one, not her husband’s. He even repeats almost her exact words to Gilgamesh saying “ what shall I give you to carry back to your own country?” (116). This emphasizes the way in which she is able to bend the will of her husband simply through speaking a few words. The control she exerts over her husband is subtle, as it appears on the surface that her husband is in control as he orders her to bake bread and she does so. However, she uses her empathetic and mild nature to make a plea to her husband to take pity on Gilgamesh, which he adheres to almost immediately. The way in which she apprehends her husband for mocking the sleeping Gilgamesh is reminiscent of a mother teaching a child moral rights and wrongs, as she tells her husband to “ touch the man to wake him, so that he may return to his own land in peace”. In spite of insisting on letting him sleep for seven days, Utanapishtim ultimately adheres to his wife’s request, once more emphasizing her influence over him, and presenting her an embodiment of

her husband's conscience. She has a major impact on the story through her display of kindness towards Gilgamesh, and her influence over her husband.

Another way in which female characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh play central roles is through their wisdom and knowledge. Joseph Campbell makes a point about females in ancient mythology, saying " Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know"[8]. In other words, the female inherently knows what the male hero can only find out through quests and trials. The main example of such a character would be the tavern keeper Siduri. She plays an important role in the tale as she foreshadows Gilgamesh's failure in his search for immortality. She tells him that "(he) will never find that life for which (he) is looking, when the God's created man they allotted him to death". She also tells him that temporary mortal existence " is the lot of man". Her words carry the clear message that human beings could never, and should never, hope to attain eternal life. All men are set to perish eventually, and death is as natural as breathing. Similarly to female characters such as Shamhat and Ishtar who drive Gilgamesh's (and Enkidu's) journeys, Siduri makes a sound and wise prediction of how Gilgamesh's path will unfold. This further emphasizes the idea that women in The Epic of Gilgamesh play an almost puppeteer like role, with the male characters simply walking the paths set out for them by females. Gilgamesh chooses to ignore Siduri's advice, leading him into misfortune, suffering, and ultimately into failure. This shows his judgement to be secondary to that of Siduri's. Like the character of Utanapishtim's wife, Siduri also assists Gilgamesh by telling him where to find Utanapishtim,

which helps him to progress with his quest. This is another example of women making it possible for men to achieve their goals. They are not secondary or subsidiary characters, they are instead the driving force behind the actions of males.

The character of Ishtar is an example of a powerful female character, who imposes her influence over male characters. Unlike the other female characters, she sets out to destroy the two male leads rather than to support them or assist them. Her actions lead directly to the death of Enkidu, showing her domination over a primary character, and rebuffing the possibility of her categorization as a secondary character. In addition, Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar's proposal is based on his fear of meeting the same fate as her past lovers. He asks her "which of your lovers did you ever love forever?" (86), which suggests that she is a woman of fickle nature, falling in and out of love with men very easily. He also compares her to "a battering ram turned back from the enemy", a metaphor made in reference to her penchant for punishing her lovers when she gets bored of them. This emphasizes the way in which she uses her power to dominate men, and ultimately destroy them, showing her to be a powerful female character. She does not support males, but rather causes them to fall. Her role in the tale is crucial, as she uses this power to bring about Enkidu's death, bringing an end to his partnership with Gilgamesh, and leading the latter to going searching for the key to immortality. In contrast to Shamhat, who serves as a giver of humanity and of new life to Enkidu, Ishtar is the ultimate destroyer of Enkidu. Enkidu's role is undoubtedly a major one, but two females with

such strong roles to play in his very existence can surely be deemed as central characters in their own right.

Unlike the other female characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh who become central characters through their female sexuality and mothering ways, Ishtar switches up the gender roles by taking on the more male virtue of destruction. Rivkah Harris argues that “ the goddess acts like a man, proposing marriage to the hero, a proposal he rejects. She then responds in a masculine fashion, seeking revenge”[9]. Indeed, she says “ come to me Gilgamesh, and be my bridegroom” (85), a request traditionally made by the male. This undermines the earlier view that women in the tale are merely supporting or subsidiary characters, as Ishtar makes the request of marriage based on her own desires rather than the desires of any man. Ishtar shows that women can be centrally aggressive characters just as much as males can, if not more so, as she succeeds in punishing Gilgamesh through the murder of his best friend. Ishtar is perhaps the most central of all the female characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh, as she plays the role of the antagonist. Without her destructive actions, Gilgamesh and Enkidu would not be faced with a true trial. She ignites a fierce battle between Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven, as she sends the bull down “ to destroy Gilgamesh” (87) Ishtar’s role is crucial in the tale, as she marks the downfall of the partnership between Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

In addition to their powerful influence over males, the roles of the female characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh are also central to the development of the plot line. As Karen Nemet-Nejat argues, “ The female characters in Gilgamesh do not have major roles. Rather, they are important in that they <https://assignbuster.com/mother-goddess-seductress-harlot-women-in-the-epic-of-gilgamesh/>

move the story forward”[10]. Indeed, without the actions perpetrated by female characters, the story would never have unfolded. For example, without Shamhat, there would be no civilized Enkidu but rather just the original, feral creature we see at the start. Meanwhile, Ishtar engineers Enkidu’s death, an extremely important event in the plot which leads Gilgamesh to seek eternal life after becoming highly aware of his own mortality. The women in the tale are the creators of the plot, and the males act in response to the actions of these women. Whilst the male characters appear on the surface to be at the center of the story, that story is supported by the presence of females. Without the female characters, the story would collapse.

In conclusion, the female characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh have small roles, but also central roles. Characters such as Shamhat and Ishtar act as driving forces to both the plot line and the roles of the male lead characters, and the extent of the repercussions of their actions make up for their lack of actual time appearing in the tale. Women in the tale appear to have great influence over men, using their sexuality to tempt them control them, while they also use their mothering instincts to teach and advise them. Through sexual temptation and mothering the female characters manage to refashion the activities and decisions of the male characters, making them central to the tale. Ishtar, meanwhile, becomes the central antagonist of the tale, and plays the role of a destroyer of males. The tale depicts males being built up and destroyed, and women can be seen at the center of both processes.

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