

# Graphic descriptions of womanhood in the epic of gilgamesh

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## Graphic Descriptions of Womanhood in The Epic of Gilgamesh

The ancient Mesopotamian poem of Gilgamesh has been revered, since its rediscovery in the nineteenth century, as a literary masterpiece. It is somewhat disappointing that its portrayal of women, however, differs little from a more modern ideal of womanhood: for one example, the lament in Tablet VIII, “ may the brothers go into mourning over you like sisters,” suggests that women were assumed to be more emotional than men, something that is widely accepted now. This essay will look at the more graphic descriptions of women in the epic, namely the images of appearance, sex, and birth, to suggest some ideas about a lot of women in ancient Mesopotamia.

In Tablet I, Enkidu is said to have “ a full head of hair like a woman” – a description which, as is clarified later, means that “ Enkidu has no father or mother, [therefore] his shaggy hair no one cuts” (Tablet II). Women were expected to have long hair, and to act as a hairdresser, and presumably general caretaker, for their family. Shamhat, the prostitute, plays a dual role as a fount of sexual pleasure and as a maternal figure to Enkidu: “ Enkidu is untaught ... and Shamhat teaches him the basics that every child must learn: eating, drinking, dressing himself” (Harris, 83).

Slightly more graphically, Enkidu's dying curse of Shamhat includes such lines as “ may a drunk soil your festal robe with vomit” (Tablet VII). The inclusion of this amongst such threats as “ may you ... not be able to love a child of your own” implies that, for women, the dirtying of a dress was comparable to infertility. Combined with the third tablet's description of Ninsun's clothing (“ she donned jewels worthy of her chest”), this suggests

that men believed that dress was an integral feature of womanhood.

This essay will now delve into the more anatomical definitions of 'graphic depiction': primarily, sex. The first reference to sex in the epic is in the very first tablet: Shamhat, the harlot, exposes herself to Enkidu and then has sex with him “ for six days and seven nights.” Sex between a man and a woman is “ the task of womankind” and seems to be the only defining aspect of some women's lives: the scorpion-beings who guard Mount Mashu are named as “ the scorpion being [and] his female” (Tablet IX), and Utanapishtim's wife is never named, even though she is one of only two immortal humans (Tablets X, XI). Simultaneously, and somewhat conflictingly for the women, sex is high on the list of male priorities. When the Elders entreat Enkidu to protect Gilgamesh on their journey to Humbaba, they phrase it thus: “ Let [Enkidu's] body urge [Gilgamesh] back to the wives” (Tablet III). Somehow wives symbolize both bait and servitude.

Also, the courtesies, for want of a better word, about sex seem to be less rigid than those with which we are familiar. Enkidu famously blocks Gilgamesh from a marital bed in Tablet II, in a situation which has echoes of polyandry: “ he [Gilgamesh] will have intercourse with the 'destined wife', the first, the husband afterward.” Similarly, Shamhat tells Enkidu “ It is Gilgamesh who Shamhat loves”; yet “ after the harlot recounted the dreams of Gilgamesh to Enkidu the two of them made love” (Tablet I). It is difficult to discern whether this is a reflection of Mesopotamian society or just wishful thinking on the part of the various authors.

Whereas Enkidu's deathbed curse of Shamhat refers to several aspects of womanhood – family, dress, and materialism mainly – his blessing talks

solely of sex. It raises questions about the attitudes towards ancient Mesopotamian harlots when Enkidu says “ may the soldier not refuse you but undo his buckle for you” (Tablet VII), as it can hence be inferred that harlots were harlots because they enjoyed sex, not because selling one's body is (usually) the last resort of a desperate woman. This problematic approach to prostitution is further compounded by the fact that only the unmarried women in the epic, such as Siduri, play a role beyond the relational role of the wives. Was marriage truly a choice for real Mesopotamian women? Or is it, again, fantasy to imagine those who prostituted themselves did so because they wanted to?

Furthermore, in the same speech, Enkidu cries “ May the wife, the mother of seven, be abandoned because of you!” This link between sex and family brings us to some of the more violent imageries associated with women in the epic. As mentioned above, Enkidu has no mother or father; on his death, Gilgamesh entreats the “ pasture lands [to] shriek in mourning as if it were [his] mother” (Tablet VIII). Mothers were expected to devote themselves to their children.

Conversely, mothers were also an extremely significant part of a man's identity. Gilgamesh is talked about in reference to his “ umbilical cord” (Tablet II), and Rimat-Ninsun is often mentioned (if obliquely and rarely by name) when others address Gilgamesh with the phrase “ your mother gave birth to you” (Tablet V, with similar references throughout the epic). Rimat-Ninsun herself qualifies her approval of Enkidu with the words “ you are not of my womb” (Tablet III), which evokes a very powerful image of the physicality of motherhood.

This graphic image is distorted when Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to Humbaba. Humbaba talks about parenthood and family and, in the midst of this speech, there is a fragment which reads “ you ... in my belly” (Tablet V). This invocation of pregnancy imagery changes the reader's perspective of the declaration, at the end of the tablet, that Gilgamesh and Enkidu “ pulled out [Humbaba's] insides including his tongue.” This act is reminiscent of violent childbirth and creates connections between the pain of labor, of parenting, and of growing up.

Finally, the flood is depicted with many images of labour and birth: Ishtar, who is the only female character who expresses no maternal characteristics, “ shrieks like a woman in childbirth” (Tablet XI) to see the destruction of mankind: “ No sooner have I given birth to my dear people than they fill the sea like so many fish!” she cries. The flood “ struggles with itself like a woman writing,” graphically suggesting some kind of rebirth in disaster. As Harris explains, the role of womanhood in the Gilgamesh epic is a mother. Any trespasses to different styles of life are forgiven if the woman is motherly: Shamhat teaches Enkidu how to behave, and Siduri helps Gilgamesh to recover from grief. Ishtar, however, is mocked and reviled for being unmotherly, even though her other behaviors (such as promiscuity) are echoed in some of the other female characters. The authors of Gilgamesh had much patience for many different behaviors expressed by women, but only if they were tempered by maternal feelings.

### Bibliography

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