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Wildness and Captivity

The Myth of Gilgamesh and Enkidu: One of the Oldest Stories in the World

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When students entered the auditorium where I was presenting a colloquium in the Blount Undergraduate Initiative (a special program in Arts and Sciences at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa) recently, they heard contemporary rock: some of David Byrne's *The Forest*, inspired by the Sumerian myth-epic of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, staged by Robert Wilson at the New York International Festival of the Arts in 1991.

I might have shown as well a clip from a *Star Trek-NE* episode, "Darmok," in which the story is central; or of Gordan McAlpine's online graphic-novel version of Stephen Mitchell's 2004 presentation of his new English version of the myth (on strippedbooks.com; 2005). Or I might indicate that my most recent search on "Gilgamesh" on Google led to 1,910,000 hits, or that Saddam Hussein compared himself to Gilgamesh (Damrosch 254).

As odd as it may seem, what may be the world's oldest recalled story remains quite alive today, as in the twenty-six television programs in animé, *Girugamesshu* (see the Wikipedia entry).

Basically we have here a hero quest, or several, as in The *Great Gatsby* or more recently *There Will Be Blood*, each portraying submotifs of domination or submission of the lead figure's people. But there are references as well of friendship and leadership, and the striving for *kleos* in Greek or *fama* in Latin—"to make a name for oneself," one of the most important projects of masculinity in antiquity: Gilgamesh states "I will make a lasting fame," an emphasized goal in this myth (Mitchell 26 f.)

The richness of this myth is such that we could spend months plumbing its depths. What I restrict myself to here will be

- the history of transmission (and censorship) of such myths
- the initial nineteenth-century interest in the many Gilgamesh myth fragments, largely motivated by similarities with biblical materials
- psychological aspects of friendship, homosocial aspects; the development of Gilgamesh's personality
- as in the heroic monomyth sketched by Joseph Campbell, the return to the civitas (civilized urban community) with a boon, when Gilgamesh gives up his quest for immortality for Enkidu and himself, and
- my regular emphasis of the complexity of important mythic materials; and the influences and adaptations of this myth.

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Here is a brief summary of the mythic account:

1 The old Mesopotamian city of Uruk (now known as Warka, Iraq) is stressed by the capriciousness and self-centered nature of the ruler Gilgamesh—he keeps the young men busy with warfare, and he exercises the so-called right of the king to have intercourse with every bride before she enjoys her first marriage night with her new spouse (*jus primae noctis; droit du seigneur*).

2 The citizens complain bitterly to the gods, and this council creates a wild, brutish, even animal-like man, *Enkidu*—who represents the rough edge of nature on the plains or steppes, as compared to life in the city.

3 Hearing of the wild man, Gilgamesh dispatches a temple priestess, Shamhat, to woo Enkidu with her sexual prowess, and indeed Enkidu is so enamored that as the text states, "he stayed erect 7 days and 7 nights." (Note that in contrast to the later biblical story of the "Fall" in the primordial *pardesh*, the Persian idealized "Garden," in this myth sexuality is an entrée into civilized existence.)

4 Shamhat introduces Enkidu to human food, helps him shave his shaggy body and wash himself, and escorts him to Uruk. When Enkidu learns of Gilgamesh's practicing the first-night ritual, he is furious, and loudly challenges Gilgamesh at the door.

5 An earth-shattering fight between the two giants ensued, but Gilgamesh barely comes out the winner—and then immediately embraces Enkidu as the long-sought companion who is as strong and powerful as he is. Subsequently the two journey into many heroic adventures and become famous for dealing with the wild beasts such as Enkidu has formerly palled around with.

6 Back in Uruk, the city's guardian deity-goddess, Ishtar, proclaims her love for Gilgamesh, but he rejects her overtures rudely. She in turn sends the hideous Bull of Heaven, *Humbaba*—who is the guardian of the Cedar Forest at the command of another senior god, Enlil—to destroy Uruk in retaliation for the insult.

7 Gilgamesh and Enkidu make short shrift of the bull, and in a supreme insult to Ishtar, cut off the animal's genitals and throw them in her face. That's a bit much for the gods, and Enkidu is doomed to die. We begin to see some changes in Gilgamesh as he worries for his companion's health over the twelve days before Enkidu dies.

8 Gilgamesh's grief is so intense it nearly destroys his sanity, weeping as he "veiled Enkidu's face like a bride's"; but now Gilgamesh has to face the fact that even though he's 1/3 divine and 2/3 human, he also must consider death: "Must I die too? Must I be as lifeless as Enkidu? How can I bear this sorrow that gnaws at my belly, this fear of death that restlessly drives me onward?"

9 As a last resort, Gilgamesh decides to trek to the underworld to see if the one mortal granted immortality—namely *Utnapishtim* (the correlative of the later biblical Noah, who however was not made immortal)—can undo the death sentence. Obtaining access to Utnapishtim involves many of the characteristic tests and trials of the hero, but then Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh his Flood and Ark story—it was much larger than the later Noah's, by the way—and says that Gilgamesh may get somewhere if he can just pass the trial of staying awake for seven days.

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10 Well, of course he falls asleep right away ("So Gilgamesh sat down against a wall to begin the test. The moment he sat down, sleep swirled over him, like a fog;" M 191), and every day Utnapishtim's wife places a loaf of the bread of the day by his head to demonstrate his weakness. However, the wife has compassion, and urges her husband to give him "*something* for his journey home." That something was the knowledge of a healing herb growing deep down in the ocean, "this marvelous plant, the antidote to the fear of death."

11 After 400 miles trek—everything, every measure in this myth, is gargantuan!—Gilgamesh is worn out, hot, and miserable, but lo! A pond of cool water appears. Gilgamesh strips off his clothes and bathes; but when he's in the water, a snake "smelled [the plant's] fragrance and stealthily it crawled up and carried the plant away." And since myths love to pad their narratives with *etiologies*—why such and such is called such and such, how a certain place is named Gordo or Tuscaloosa—we are told that as the serpent disappeared, it cast off its skin, a kind of serpentine immortality.

12 Another four hundred miles and they stopped to eat, at a thousand they pitched their camp, and now Gilgamesh looks admiringly at the famous walls of Uruk he had constructed: "This is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk [6 miles long, by the way—it was not conquered until 1000 years later, by the Assyrian Sargon of Akkad], follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public spheres."

13 Those who have read the mythic account will remember that these are nearly the same words that appear in its Prologue: see the shining ramparts, walk on the wall…etc. And now we realize we've been within a story within a story: We are told that we should find the cornerstone and under it we'll find a copper box that is marked with the name of Gilgamesh. "Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablet of precious lapis lazuli. Read how Gilgamesh *suffered all* and *accomplished all*."

As I indicated previously, this is probably the oldest story in the Western world, although it was lost to consciousness for over 2000 years. It dates back almost four thousand years Before the Present—to oral materials about a real, historical king ~2750 BCE. The recovery was part of nineteenth-century interest in the new science of archaeology, especially in what is now named Iraq (formerly Persia), mostly attempts to "prove" that biblical events such as the Garden of Eden, the Flood and Ark, could be "verified scientifically": the beginning of modernist worship of the hard sciences, the claim that "if physical evidence can be found, it must be true"—even though we realize now that physical evidence can demonstrate any number of meanings according to original or contemporary contexts.

Remember that there are flood myths in every part of the planet; the stories of the flood so important because few Americans know little more of the Tanach/Old Testament than Genesis—so the Noachic flood, or the suggestion that there might have been a historical Garden was considered important to "prove" that biblical stories were actually historical, when of course their primary intention was *theological* and *inspirational*--historicism was only valued several thousands of years later. Such is true as well for the accounts of the biblical "sheriffs" (known biblically as Judges)—figures who were both wise persons and shamans, i.e., psychically active deciders/leaders such as our era has found in Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Kennedy brothers.

The main texts we have derive from Ashurbanipal's library—late seventh century BCE, preserved in Iraq's dry climate for centuries. The sun-dried mud/adobe tablets were often broken up, however, so that we have a raft of fragments from many different sources, and no single "authoritative" manuscript—as is the case for most biblical manuscripts from antiquity; any biblical book, if studied carefully, manifests a number of different fragments, or sources from various politically and theologically oriented traditions/schools.

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While the Gilgamesh fragments have frequently been collated and translated across the twentieth-century, the careful and graceful version of Stephen Mitchell, 2004, is what I now consider the best: it has a wonderfully fulsome introduction as well as detailed explanatory endnotes (note also the Norton Critical Edition, ed. Foster, and Maier, ed., *Gilgamesh: A Reader*).

The myth complex had tremendous influence upon other literature of antiquity—at least in most Mesopotamian cultures—and later, as in the Homeric treatment of the love-relationship of Acheleus and Patroklos (anglicized as Achilles and Patroclus).

To plumb the dynamics of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's *relationships* and the *socio-historico-religious contexts*, we would need to spend some time discussing the roles of the Mesopotamian pantheons, and the important status of the supreme goddess Ishtar, of whom we hear repeatedly in the ancient Near Eastern materials, and the others in the divine council of the deities who yearly declare human fate: it is possible, for instance that Ishtar desired Enkidu to serve as a male prostitute such as were found in her temples—thus infuriating Gilgamesh.

We can trace a psychological arc from narcissistic self-aggrandizement, to friendship with a truly-beloved other, to grief at Enkidu's death. And of course there is a pilgrimage to the underworld to gain a healing medicine; then losing that, returning humbled, yet able to celebrate his civic achievements. Gilgamesh the brutal overlord has made the transition into being a noble governor.

Mitchell is one of the first interpreters I have studied (and I must have ten or twelve versions) who does not shirk the male-male relationship components of the Enkidu and Gilgamesh story. There was a later chapter (Tablet #12) that is usually rejected by straight scholarship that makes explicit references to male-male love-making (M 218, fnn 23+), which will not shock contemporaries aware of similar references in later classical Greek practices. *The New York Review of Books* (September 2009) has an illustrated review noting how homosexual practices are fully documented in Greek art, as in one beautifully executed silver cup that features two examples of male penetration (the Warren Cup, now published overtly after the cup itself was denied entry into the United States as being obscene). In Mitchell's phrasing, "Like David and Jonathan, each loved the other as his own soul" (25)—although with the Greeks, intercourse with women as well was certainly not ruled out.

It is interesting that *sexuality* is (as opposed to the situation in Genesis) primordially positive, not negative. Shamhat

brings Enkidu to heterosexual fulfillment as perhaps Enkidu and Gilgamesh find similar fulfillment in a male-male relationship—this is not a Puritan-patriarchal story by any means! Probably the term *homosocial* is the best term to use, for two reasons: the term homosexual was first developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for something long a part of the Western world. And then there is the homophobic censure of Western culture, indeed often sex-phobic, that almost certainly would have eliminated any explicit references over the thousands of years these materials were transmitted.

I could show you many passages where explicit references such as that the Temple Priestess "opened her legs" to Enkidu could only earlier be translated into *Latin* lines among the English: of course from the perspective of conservative academics it was considered that those ancient folks couldn't have treated sexuality as part and parcel of *religiosity*! Oh no.

While one might suggest that initially Gilgamesh's quest was primarily for immortality for Enkidu, or for himself, I think it becomes very clear as Gilgamesh returns from the underworld recognizing that his search to restore Enkidu is fruitless. So Gilgamesh learns how to deal with the limitations of human life-span and to recognize limitations on his own reign/person.

During the long, arduous journey back to Uruk, he begins to realize that civilization, especially urban, is itself a sort of immortality. The myth begins and ends with the civitas/communitas, and is in many ways the account of the hero who takes responsibility for that communal weal.

There is a lot to do with concern with *civilization* in the myth: already Shamhat tamed and "civilized" Enkidu. But in one of the rich ironies of the myth, we see that it is Enkidu who brings Gilgamesh into a new recognition of his much-needed social responsibility. He moves away from his narcissistic individualism into acceptance of kingship as responsible sponsorship of his people/city/land —symbolized as this responsibility is in the great Wall and The City.
In this case, the initial emphasis upon the bombastic rough strength of Gilgamesh, grasping whatever he desired, begins to change toward the essential role of the Western hero, that is to say, bringing back from his adventures and trials something of great value to all his people (a boon)—in many such myths, this hero becomes a judge and lawgiver: a pillar of the community, no longer an oppressor of it.

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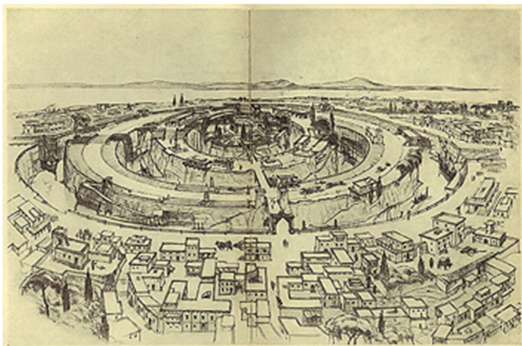
When I start a class on mythology, I find that I have to do two things right off: first of all, to persuade some in the audience who have a trivializing view of myth as representing falsehood. What people usually mean, when they speak, say, of The Myth of the Overpaid Football Coach, is referring in a debunking manner not to a myth at all, but to a stereotype or superficial conception of something they despise.

Secondly, I try to indicate that mythology is not just the province of the nursemaid-storytellers who agitated Platon—in matter of fact, he actually crafted a fair number of myths to use in his philosophical teaching (Catalin Partenie has usefully edited a volume that introduces ten of the major ones, including the Cave, the Winged Soul, the Androgyne, and the myth of Atlantis).



And I guess third, I emphasize the *context* of the mythological materials—any one of them represents the extremely complex background that makes up the socio-historico-cultural text that has resonances across the spectrum of our literary heritage. Obviously in myth studies, but also in textual studies—the realm of historical reconstruction and iconography. Then there are always gender and class aspects, and modeling of a society's female or male hero—whether that of the classical hero, who gains a boon for the community, or the modern one, who in fact is mostly self-seeking.

And no analysis can afford to ignore the reflections from the specific original period: whether Ancient Near Eastern, or Greek, Roman, or biblical—myths are all most strongly intertextual, and influence one another. In these areas divine communications are often by dreams, which are featured so repeatedly in this myth; and the culture's attitude toward the Divine Feminine is still strong—such themes could take us into another study.

Because of these and other factors (my inclusive definition in *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* has seventeen definitional attributes that I needed two chapters to explicate fully), my mythographic emphasis has long been upon approaching any myth from many different disciplines: literary, historical, religious, psychological, philosophical. What I call "escaping from elementary and secondary school" means understanding that important myths are almost always extraordinarily complex, and will warrant attention from any of these approaches. No important myth can be boiled down to a comic-book or myth-handbook synopsis.

Think for instance of Dante's *Commedia Divina*; Goethe's *Faust*; Augustine's theological classics; *the corpus of the dialogues* reported by Sokrates; the works of Francis Bacon, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger and Freud, Voltaire and Rousseau. I've always been repelled by the slogan that all you really need to know could fit into a nutshell—I hope this presentation has provided evidence for my rejection of such a position, and that when you reach your seventieth year, you'll conclude as I have: that the more you know, the more you realize you still have to learn.

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