

MYTHIC PASSAGES

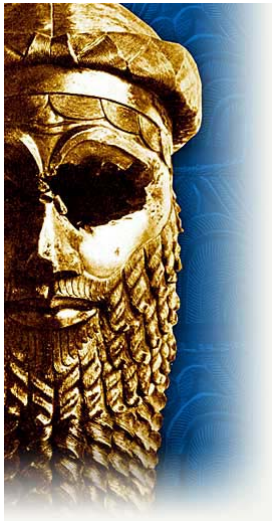
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Gilgamesh: The Rapture of Being Alive

By Robert M. Giannetti

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There is a long, unedifying tale to tell about the devaluing of sex in our society, how its glory has been diminished, its power shackled to contemporary commercialism, trivialized as a commodity, overexposed to the point of, well -- boredom. That is not the tale I will tell here. There is a more interesting, and truly “sexy”, tale to tell from the epic poem, Gilgamesh, a work emanating from c. 2000 B.C., in the region that is roughly modern-day Iraq. Indeed, there is a dimension of this poem that can help restore some sense of the mythic wonder and power of sex, a perspective that often eludes our current esthetic sensibility.

Well outside the grip of Judeo-Christian strictures, and the cultural polarities of repression and hedonism that afflict the politics of our own era, Gilgamesh can open our eyes anew to the civilizing dimension of sexual indulgence, contrary to what its ubiquitous presence in today’s culture might suggest. Gilgamesh belongs to a historical era in which heroic death in battle was regarded as the fast-track to fame, and hence the only sure form of immortality for an all too mortal hero. But the epic resonates at a deeper level with questions at the heart of human existence. In this work we are brought to the threshold of what Joseph Campbell meant when he said to Bill Moyers that it is not the meaning of life but the experience of “the rapture of being alive” that is important.

That rapture is very near the surface of the great tale of Gilgamesh and his friend, Enkidu. Aside from their heroic friendship and the great deeds of valor that provide some shreds of immortal fame for them both (we’re still reading about them, after all), they each have significant interactions with women in the story, and, by extension, with the feminine sides of their natures. Putting Gilgamesh himself aside for a moment, it is interesting to look first at Enkidu. When we first encounter him, he is literally running with herds of wild animals, stooping at water holes to drink with them, devoid of any vestige of civilized appearance or character. The gods have determined to raise this “forester” as a heroic friend and companion of Gilgamesh, but he first needs to be cleaned up and taught the ways of civilized man. In addition to acquiring the outward trappings of culture, he needs to be attuned to the fullest dimensions of what it means to be human. A sacred temple girl, Shamhat, is enlisted in this cause and it is she who introduces

him to sex, showing him “what charm and force a girl can have”. Considering Enkidu’s total lack of sophistication at their first encounter, she takes a direct approach to capture his attention:

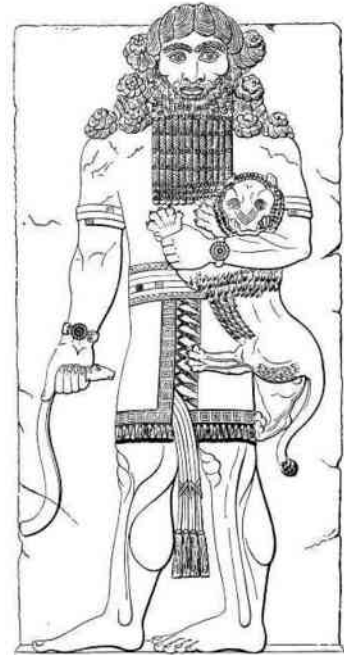
... she jumped him fast
knocking out his rapid breath with
thrust after loving thrust.
She let him see what force a girl can have,
and he stayed within her scented bush for
seven nights, leaping, seeping, weeping, and sleeping there.

After that week of pleasure,
Enkidu returned to the herds
but the beasts fled from him in haste.
They stampeded away from his new self.

But he enjoyed the memory that no virgin has
and, returning to his fine lover, he once
more knelt between her legs
as she spoke these words to him:
“Now you are as if a god, my boy.”

Those final words were to find their way at a later date into Genesis, where in Satan’s mouth, they would be used to tempt Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit, “for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good from evil.” In Gilgamesh, the experience of sex and its civilizing dimension are unadulterated with the taint of religious guilt or the titillation of the commercial marketplace. It is simply the experience of the rapture of being alive.

Gilgamesh, for his part, goes on to befriend Enkidu, who generally complements his friend in deeds of valor, earning them both the prize of epic fame, the only kind of immortality their harsh existence allows. After Enkidu’s death, however, the heartbroken Gilgamesh goes on an adventure in search of the secret of eternal life. At least one episode drawn from that quest is relevant to the present discussion of the relations of man and woman in the tale, and that is Gilgamesh’s encounter with the mysterious Siduri, the gentle girl who sits by the sea and gives travelers lifesaving drinks that refresh the soul. Gilgamesh tells her of his love for his friend, his sadness over his loss, and his fears about his own mortality. The wise Siduri comforts him with an unexpected bit of advice:



Remember always, mighty king,
that the gods decreed the fates of all,
many years ago. They alone are let
to be eternal, while we frail humans die
as you yourself must someday do.
What is best for us to do
is now to sing and dance.
Relish warm food and cool drinks.
Cherish children to whom your love gives life.
Bathe easily in sweet, refreshing waters.
Play joyfully with your chosen wife.

It is the will of the gods for you to smile
on simple pleasure in the leisure time of your short days.



rapture of being alive. Coming out of ancient Iraq, it is a perspective worth remembering and cultivating.

These are not words generally found in ancient heroic literature, but they constitute a clear and worthy alternative to war and mayhem, no matter how glorious the deeds to be enshrined in the immortal words of the bards. We can find this sentiment in Homer, in Andromache's entreaty to her ill-fated husband, Hector, not to return to battle, for instance, but there the heroic calling clearly trumps the tug of hearth and home. The older sentiments in Gilgamesh are more nuanced in this regard, and have a certain transcendence that cannot be reductively dismissed as mere carpe diem. It is important to recognize in Gilgamesh an early and enduring paean to the power of sexual relations, the balance of the masculine and the feminine, in achieving the experience of the

Citations

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Gilgamesh (Jackson trans.), Tablet I, Column IV, 172 – 181, 186 – 190, pp. 23-24; Tablet X, Column III, 87 – 99, p. 51.