Chapter Six

The Bull in the Ring

The Shape of the Story in *Gilgamesh*

In Tips for a First Reading of Tablet 6 we identified the main characters and the four episodes: 1. Ishtar Proposes to Gilgamesh; 2. Gilgamesh Rejects Ishtar; 3. The Bull of Heaven Descends; and 4. The Heroes Celebrate Victory. The stories need to be considered in light of the *Gilgamesh* series as a whole and in comparison with earlier written and visual treatments of the hero, his conflict with the powerful animal world, and his relationship with the divine *nin*.

The story of the Bull of Heaven in *Gilgamesh* is a small-scale double of the Humbaba episode. Tablet 6 is one of the shortest stories in the collection, running to just 182 lines of poetry. The Humbaba episode, with its elaborate preparation, journey, dreams, and the fight itself, takes up at least 900 lines over three tablets. What the Bull of Heaven episode loses in length it gains in intensity.

The first half of *Gilgamesh* includes a number of innovations to the traditional stories of the hero. What is especially noticeable is the increased importance of Enkidu, Ninsun, and the sun god Shamash. These elements are well integrated into the story.

A decisive change takes place immediately after Tablet 6. Once again, a series of episodes is strung together, elaborated and in some cases—especially in the story of the Flood—new to the Gilgamesh collection. Tablets 7-11 are particularly well integrated into a unified whole. The controversial Tablet 12, which is shorter even than Tablet 6, will have to be taken up later to see if it, too, has been folded into a unified story.1534

If we look at the collection as a whole, then, Tablet 6 stands out in its uniqueness. We have looked at the elements that make up the Bull of Heaven episode in Tablet 6. We will consider in some detail the earlier versions of the story to show how the historical context allows us to see what was preserved and what has been changed in *Gilgamesh*. There is another dimension that can be considered at this point. In stringing together Gilgamesh stories, the *Gilgamesh* poet put the Bull of Heaven at the center.

A word about ancient storytelling practices. Gilgamesh stories were part of a school curriculum well over a thousand years before our *Gilgamesh*. Students used the stories to learn how to read and write and to master the intricate cuneiform writing system. At any given time, however, the number of literate people in any part of Mesopotamia must have been tiny. And “books,” the clay tablets made up by the students themselves, were not mass-produced. Specialists carefully guarded their copies. (Religious and magical texts often carry warnings that they are not to be exposed to the wrong people.) It is unlikely that tablets circulated through the population.

All of this is to emphasize the fact that we have found in writing a very small portion what must have been a very robust tradition of oral storytelling. The conditions of oral
performance in largely non-literate societies are strikingly similar. Of many similarities, one stands out: the importance of the center.

Oral storytellers traditionally compose the poems as they go along, but have the larger shape of the story in mind. What occasion demands it—a very successful performance at, say, a wedding feast—the storyteller may be urged to elaborate and expand the story. On other occasions, the storyteller may have to bring the story to a conclusion in a hurry. In either case, they operate with a keen sense of the center, which is not only a turning point (the “crisis”), but which often carries the weight of the main point of the story as a whole. For a variety of reasons, modern literate societies have come to expect “new” stories that move relentlessly toward an ending, which is often a surprise. They develop suspense in a way that traditional stories, already well known to the audience, rarely develop.

Here’s an example that is probably familiar to readers of Western literature. Exactly at the center of the *Odyssey* a group of people settle in to hear a professional storyteller tell a story that became quite controversial in ancient Greece: the affair of the goddess Aphrodite (much like our Ishtar) and her lover, the warrior god Ares. Not to be outdone, a guest at the feast, whom we know (but the people do not know) is the hero Odysseus, is given a chance to tell a story. He takes the opportunity to string together what for many readers of the *Odyssey* are the best, most memorable stories in the epic. The story of the one-eyed creature who is tricked into releasing Odysseus and his men is perhaps the favorite among these tales.

Perhaps less obvious to modern readers of the *Odyssey* is the little trick used by Odysseus the storyteller exactly at the midpoint of his collection of stories. He finds a way to stop speaking just as the audience is caught up in the performance. He is then persuaded to keep going when the audience showers him with gifts. The same trick can be found in any marketplace or festival in, e.g., Morocco today, when the storyteller pauses while his assistant passes the hat. When enough coins are collected, he can begin again and complete the cycle of tales.

One way of thinking of Tablet 6 in *Gilgamesh* is, then, to consider it the central story in the collection. The victory of Gilgamesh over the Bull of Heaven is the high point in the development of Gilgamesh as king. Where the Humbaba story is, for Gilgamesh, a way to make a name for himself (and for Shamash a defeat of “evil” in the land), the Bull of Heaven is a story of the hero saving the people of his city-state from destruction and death. The *Gilgamesh* version shows the hero receiving the adulation and thanks of his community. He is not simply the manliest of men; he is acting for their benefit.

Tablet 6 is a highpoint in other respects. In very few lines the poet shows us that the defeat of the Bull and the admiration of the people provide Gilgamesh with the greatest “joy” of his career. After this moment we will see little of that. Rather, the story will be driven relentless tragic “woe.” We see the two men, at first rivals then best friends and brothers (by adoption of Ninsun), holding hands, celebrating, then resting in the same room. Joy, love, and peace prevail. This is a moment of perfect unity among individuals and within the Urukean city-state.
The turn is already glimpsed in the final lines of Tablet 6.

The Eclipse of the Sun
The addition to the Bull of Heaven story of the heroes’ pious offering of the Bull’s heart to Shamash is another indication of the way the Gilgamesh poet was able to integrate disparate material into a new synthesis. The Sun never entirely disappears from new version, and his appearance in the next episode is, as we shall see, both the high point and low point of the Sun’s influence on the heroes.

The Sun—Utu in Sumerian—was never quite as prominent in Sumerian society as it was in other ancient cultures. Possibly the dependence upon a lunar calendar for the monthly festivals and nighttime rituals in the temples made the Moon—in Ur, the god Nanna, in our text Sin—and even Inanna as the Morning and Evening Star more conspicuous in myths and rituals. The Sun gained influence in its connection with kingship. A famous case is an early law code that was inscribed on a black stone pillar. At the top of the stele is a representation of the Babylonian king Hammurabi receiving the laws from the Sun god. Where Sumerian Utu had been worshiped mainly in the southern city of Larsa, the Akkadian influence of Shamash appears to have spread from his northern city of Sippar throughout Mesopotamia. The 2nd and 1st millennia BCE show a great many hymns and rituals that attest to the importance of Shamash. Possibly the West Semitic peoples who came to dominate much of Mesopotamia, especially in the north, were responsible for this shift in emphasis.

As the one who brings light, the Sun helps the traveler on his path, as he does the heroes in search of Humbaba. In Gilgamesh the Sun enlightens the heroes during the dark night through dreams, as we have seen.

The dreams will themselves turn dark in Gilgamesh.

Just as prominent in Gilgamesh is the Sun’s concern for justice. It is Shamash who sees Humbaba as something “evil” that must be eradicated from the land. This aspect of Shamash is related to the duties of the king to provide justice to the people, hence his promotion of law codes. (Early kings were expected to provide for the most oppressed people, especially widows and orphans.)

We think this sense of justice has been woven into the fabric of Gilgamesh. What gets the stories of Gilgamesh moving is, of course, his oppression of the citizen of Uruk. The adventures are not only interesting themselves, but they set Gilgamesh on a path where experience will bring understanding—much of it painful. Up until the midpoint of Gilgamesh the painful part has not been all that evident. With Enkidu Gilgamesh has been successful in the two great tests. Soon his role in the story will change.

It might be useful at this point to anticipate an aspect of Gilgamesh that will seem strange to modern readers who have been formed by the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions of monotheism. However much suffering may occur on earth, orthodox theology in these traditions insist that God is not ultimately responsible for anything “evil.” We are
certainly prepared for stories in which humans, even special figures like a Gilgamesh, may have to stumble, fall, suffer—and learn difficult truths from their experiences. The opening lines of our Gilgamesh have already pointed us in this direction. But we may be shocked to read that two of the most prominent gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon will also be forced to learn from their experiences. The King of the Gods, Enlil, has already appeared in the first half of Gilgamesh, especially as the protector of the monstrous Humbaba. Trouble lies ahead because the heroes have slain the monster.

The other high god is the ubiquitous Ishtar. We will see how she, too, will have something to learn. The shockingly disrespectful acts of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in Tablet 6 prepare us for trouble to come.

**Entering the Depths**

It’s not just a matter of monotheism and polytheism (or “henotheism,” which appears from time to time in Mesopotamia when one god—Inanna or Enlil or Marduk most frequently—is “exalted” as the greatest of the gods, like “king” Enlil in Gilgamesh).

The moral geography of Gilgamesh is not exactly what the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions would lead us to imagine, either.

Early episodes of Gilgamesh lead us from the wilderness of Enkidu into the greatest of cities, Uruk, then back into the wilderness for the battle with Humbaba, and once again into Uruk, where the heroes defeat the Bull of Heaven. The story of Humbaba shows us that going up into the mountains is not the same as Ishtar going back up to her original home in the heavens. And even so, the Great Above—another above the space inhabited by humans on the central earth—is not altogether the Christian Heaven, where all is pure and good. Sumerian mythology saw the primal division of the universe into the Great Above (an) and the Great Below (ki), with the surface of the earth at the dividing line. The high gods live in the Above, which may have been imagined as hovering as close to earth as the old ruined tells the Sumerians saw at the tops of hills around them. Ishtar, who descended to earth and brought her “house,” the Eanna temple with her, can fly up to the top of Uruk’s famous walls and higher into the heavens where her “father” is the personification of the Great Above, An, or in Akkadian, Anu. But this is not a perfectly pure place, as the Bull of Heaven story makes clear.

And gods live under the earth in ki as well.

Gods live in the world of the dead along with all humans who have gone there. Often Mesopotamians buried their dead under the floors of their houses. Usually they kept a hole or tube for the living to provide the dead with drinking water and other liquids. (The modern vestige of much older practices we now see in Halloween has its counterpart in Sumerian thought, when, for one day a year the dead returned to the earth and were fed by the living. Ishtar’s threat to bring the dead back to devour the living and then outnumber them made sense in this context.) We will see much more of the underworld in the second half of Gilgamesh. But just as the Great Above is not simply the world of Good, the Great Below is not simply the world of Evil.
For one thing, the waters that sustain life can be tapped through well, channeled in canals, and taken up by the roots of plants. In the stories of Inanna and Ishtar trapped in the world of the dead, they are revived by the waters of life (and in one version, food of life) that are found in that world. The goddess of the Great Below, mythologized as the “sister” of Inanna/Ishtar, is Ereshkigal, literally the ruler (eresh) of the great (gal) ki. (Her name was remembered centuries after Mesopotamian texts in Greek magical papyri.)

Most importantly, for a reading of the second part of *Gilgamesh*, is the increased influence of the god who was identified with the waters below the earth, the god Enki, or in Akkadian, Ea. Very extensive writings—rituals, hymns, and myths—dealing with this god have survived. Among them is the earliest written magical rituals to have survived from Mesopotamia. In the so-called “Ea-Marduk” texts (perhaps more properly the “Enki-Asalluhi” texts), the Son observes a terrible problem on earth and, unable to solve the problem himself, goes to the Father (Enki) for advice. The Father transfers power to the Son who, through ritual acts and magical spells, produces the good effects he is looking for.

This god of the depths could be seen as the counterpart to the Sun in the first part of *Gilgamesh*. Where Shamash brings enlightenment, clarity, reason and justice, though, Ea brings a much trickier sort of wisdom, more cunning and ambiguous, and altogether darker and ironic view of the world than we had seen earlier.

We will see that one of the most impressive innovations of the *Gilgamesh* poet is the introduction of the Flood story. There we will see terrible devastation caused mainly by a capricious and arbitrary decision of the high gods, especially Enlil. The god of the depths will solve even that problem—but at what cost?

Caught in the middle is that most ambiguous of figures in *Gilgamesh*, Ishtar. Unlike the wise and controlled mother, Ninsun, Ishtar (sometimes seen as her rival in Uruk) is such a compound of motives and contradictions that she is clearly the most complex of figures in the poem. The problematics of Ishtar’s actions in Tablet 6 show her at her most conspicuous. Much of the time we see her in her extensions—in Irnina, Siduri, perhaps the wife of the sage Utnapishtim, and in the women who serve her. The woman who is sent out from Uruk to seduce Enkidu is one such extension. Ishtar shows up rather unexpectedly in the story of the Flood.

In Ishtar we see the problems of a simple moral topography in *Gilgamesh*. She can be up in the mountains where Humbaba dwells, up in the heavens where she cajoles and threatens her father, up on the walls of Uruk—but she remains the most earthly of deities. Her sexual union with humans she selects was a great mystery for millennia in Mesopotamia. And it combined with stories of her descent into the world of the dead and her resurrection to produce the powerful and tragic love story with the “lover of her youth,” Dumuzi.

Everywhere with Ishtar we see complexity, irony, light and darkness, love and violence mixed.
The second half of *Gilgamesh* sends Gilgamesh into such a land.

**The Reception of The Bull of Heaven Stories**

One reason for considering *Gilgamesh* as a “national epic” and Uruk as a model of a Mesopotamian city-state is that the stories of Gilgamesh (or Bilgames) quickly became standard items in the Sumerian school curriculum, in much the same way that study of Homer’s *Iliad* and * Odyssey* and the Latin *The Aeneid* came to define the educated person in the Greco-Roman world. Stories of Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven were already prominent by the end of the 3rd millennium BCE.

More than ten lists of Sumerian literary works have survived from ancient Mesopotamia. The Decad, as we have seen, is an elaborate list with some sixty-two entries divided into six groups of about ten. The list was found at Nippur, but the first entry, a poem praising King Shulgi of Ur, points to the systematic reorganization of scribal schools during the reign of that king. Uruk is prominent in a number of ways. Interestingly enough, Uruk is much better served in the list than Ur or even Nippur.

King (and *en*) Shulgi himself claimed descent from Uruk and was inaugurated into *en*-ship and kingship in that city. The goddess Inanna is very prominent throughout the list. Gilgamesh’s ancestors in the so-called First Dynasty of Uruk, Dumuzi, Enmerkar and Lugalbanda, are also there. For our purposes, though, the list is important because it shows that by the end of the 3rd millennium the Sumerian stories of Gilgamesh were already part of the curriculum.

If the place on the list is any indication of prominence in the curriculum, the stories of Gilgamesh deserve notice. First to appear (at #10) is a version of Gilgamesh and Humbaba. (A second version of the story is listed at #14.) Just after Gilgamesh and Humbaba is the Sumerian story of Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven. A “Gudam” story, possibly “The Gudam Epic,” is also listed.

The list, then, confirms what later centuries would demonstrate both in the Akkadian literary texts and in Mesopotamian art, that the two heroic narratives pitting Gilgamesh against the monsters were recognized as central to the developing traditions of Uruk’s hero.

There is a certain irony in this list from Nippur, the city that overtook Uruk as the center of Sumerian culture in the 3rd millennium. Nippur itself and its powerful god, Enlil, are not central to the curriculum at all. In other words, the curriculum was still rather more Uruk-centered than Nippur-centered, reflecting an older tradition. Uruk’s heroes are even more prominent than the other humans, mostly kings, who appear on the list. No human heroes associated with Nippur appear in the curriculum.

Outside of and parallel to the literary tradition, the two contests between the heroes of *Gilgamesh* and awe-inspiring creatures, Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven, continued to inspire the visual arts for centuries. Even if the early “Contest Scene” that, as we have seen, depicted a Bull-Man restraining a great bull and a Nude Hero plunging a knife into
the shoulders of a bull, turns out to be earlier in art than the historical Gilgamesh, the visual record of the victory of Gilgamesh and Enkidu over The Bull of Heaven is well attested. The fight with The Bull of Heaven was placed at the center of the stories that comprise the *Gilgamesh*.

**Early Written Texts Dealing with The Bull of Heaven**

Only a few works are known from the earliest period when *literary* (as opposed to even earlier *lexical* texts and practical texts like ration lists). The Early Dynastic Period, from roughly the middle through the second third of the 3rd millennium BCE, is marked by the rivalry between Sumerian city-states and the rise in prominence of the kings as rulers of those city-states. Gilgamesh is the most prominent and the most legendary of the early kings, as we have noticed many times. As one might expect, the earlier the texts the more difficult they are to decipher and translate.

### “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh”

One of these very old texts actually opens with The Bull of Heaven. A Sumerian composition, it points to many of the activities of Gilgamesh, as we have seen before, but without naming him directly. Rather, the hero of the piece is a figure called Amashumgal-anna, an epithet also used for Dumuzi. If the *Ama* part of the title could be read, not “mother,” as is usual, but *en*, as Bendt Alster has suggested, it may be that we are seeing the ideological bridge that connects Gilgamesh, as *en*, with the *ens* of Uruk who were the “priest-kings” of the city centuries long before Gilgamesh himself appeared.

The Sumerian poem edited by Douglas Frayne opens with the line that identifies the hero of the piece, the one who is “the slayer of the Bull of Heaven” (*gu*-an GÍR). The poem may be nearly six hundred years earlier than the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven,” whose text is from the Ur III period (ca. 2050 BCE).

At the end of the manuscript we learn that the poem is a “drum song” (*tigi NA₂*) and a kind of magical incantation known as an *é-nu-ru*. It addresses the goddess Inanna and appears to praise her; the last line is a praise of Amashumgal-anna. Gilgamesh is not mentioned by name. (Dumuzi is not mentioned either; while he carries this epithet, he is not known as the protagonist of the heroic acts referred to in the poem.)

The protagonist, slayer of the Bull of Heaven, is himself metaphorically a bull, the “breed-bull of Ur.” Significantly, he is identified as the “divine king” (*dnu-gal*) of Inanna’s city, Uruk. Another line connects him specifically with Inanna, perhaps as his standard bearer. Later he is said to have rammed the “great standards” deep in the earth. This follows lines in which the hero is described as one who wears a “bright cap” (*bar-su za-gir*) and who, note, “embraces Inanna” (*gú*-dinanna lá). These details would seem to identify the hero with the traditional “priest-king,” the *en*, depicted in earlier Uruk art.

Hymns of this sort often list epithets that show the one praised in a most positive light. They do not necessarily follow a narrative logic. It is difficult to tell if the heroic acts mentioned in the poem are presented in anything like a chronological order. But after a
series of actions the hero, on an arduous journey, carries off the “herb-pot of life” (ūgur-zi), also identified as the tree of life (gish-tī). This looks like a version of Gilgamesh’s quest for a plant of renewal, which he loses before he is able to return to Uruk. (Two key lines are missing here, but there is a suggestion that when the hero sets the herb-pot on the banks of a river, he may have lost the plant.)

Three lines at the end of the poem strongly suggest the main point of the hymn. The divine-king Ama-ushumgal-anna, though he is “anointed with first-quality oil” (ī-nun-ti-a), which must mark the position he has attained (through Inanna?), he is not given a “life of long days” (nu zi-ud). This looks suggestively like a motif seen much later in Homer, where in the underworld Achilles laments his early death. Certainly the reward of the heroic “priest-king” of Uruk is not eternal life.

Besides the (tragic?) episode of the “herb-pot of life” are many other references suggestive of later Gilgamesh stories. The hero is certainly a warrior, “eager for battle,” and one who killed wild bulls on “a distant shore.” As in our Tablet 6 of Gilgamesh the hero hangs up horns of a defeated bull and fills the horns with “fine first-quality oil.” Where Gilgamesh in the later Akkadian version smashes certain stones, an act that delays his journey across the waters of death and makes it impossible for anyone else to make the journey after him, Ama-ushumgal-anna smashes certain GA-stones. The smashing of the stones may be paired with what follows, when the hero rips mes-trees from their roots to make a shade from the sun. (Perhaps this is a rather obscure reference to the later Sumerian “Gilgamesh and the Huluppu-Tree.”) Certainly Gilgamesh in the late version is the ultimate traveler. Not only does he kill wild bulls, but he also opens up new paths in the mountains. Like the god Enki he takes a boat through the dangerous waters of the engur, where he encounters terrible torrents, rains that split rocks and split open heaven itself.

In another place the hero uses punting-poles to cross a barrier of great waters, much like Gilgamesh, who must use such poles on his dangerous crossing to see the sage Utanapiṣtim. He waters the cattle pens and directs water into the fields—acts that connect him with the mastery of both animal husbandry and agriculture, also achievements of the “priest-king,” the en.

While in later traditions nothing is said of Gilgamesh as a boy, the Early Dynastic hymn devotes at least two lines to the hero’s youth. He was a “little brawler, suckled with wholesome milk” and a “clever youngster, a steward” (shabra) who puts ancient relics in order.

Again, it is important to note that the sequence of these heroic acts is not entirely clear, so it is not certain that they follow a path of greater significance. Perhaps the most intriguing hint is the hero’s defeat of a certain aquatic beast, the kūshu-a-nim. It is not clearly what the creature is. It appears to be a terrifying animal living in the marshes. The lines occur just before the hero takes his boat on the dangerous journey. While such a water-creature can be found in the mythologies of many cultures, there is no enough evidence yet to see how the kūshu-a-nim functions in Sumerian myth and
literature. It is also not clear if Ama-ushumgal-anna is himself a creature of the cosmic waters, the abzu and the engur.

“Bilgames and The Bull of Heaven”
The story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeating the Bull of Heaven at the center of the Akkadian Gilgamesh was certainly inspired by earlier stories in Sumerian. Two of the Sumerian versions of the story have been discovered. Bilgames and The Bull of Heaven is similar to our later Akkadian story in many ways, but it includes many significant differences. ("Bilgames" is the reading of the name in some Sumerian texts.)

Both stories have the goddess, in a fury at being rejected by Gilgamesh, demanding that her father send down the powerful Bull of Heaven to punish the hero. In both cases Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight and defeat the Bull—and use the defeat to further insult the goddess. The rejection of Inanna and the insult to her have been described as the single most shocking slight to a deity by a mortal in Mesopotamian literature.

In the old Sumerian tale the insult to Inanna is softened, perhaps only slightly, by the final lines of the poem and the dedication of the poem to Inanna. When she sends the Bull against him, Gilgamesh promises that, if he slays the Bull he will throw the carcass in an alley and divide the spoils, giving the hide to tanner, the meat to the orphans of the city—and its two horns to Inanna herself, as oil vessels in the sacred Eanna temple. Gilgamesh threatens the Bull itself in exactly the same language (a distinctive feature of Sumerian poetry, as we have noted elsewhere). The poem ends with the fulfillment of Gilgamesh’s boast, again in the same language as the earlier passages. The poem is concluded, then, with at least some degree of reconciliation with Inanna: the gift of horns and oil, both precious items for the temple of the goddess.

No such reconciliation is evident in the later Gilgamesh version, as we have seen. There the precious horns are shown to the artisans of the city even as Ishtar and her wailing women lament over the body of the slain Bull. The gigantic horns—said to be of lapis lazuli—are admired, and they to given, not to the goddess but to Gilgamesh’s deified father, Lugalbanda, for the father’s chamber. Tablet 6 ends with further boasting by Gilgamesh and a grand celebration of victory. The final lines of the tablet point to the sudden change in the fate of the two heroes. At the moment of their greatest triumph, one of the men will have to die—and the story will immediately turn tragic. What reconciliation between Gilgamesh and the goddess, if it does occur in the story (and we think it does), will happen much later, when an exhausted Gilgamesh returns to his city and to his goddess.

There is another, even more surprising—if not shocking—difference between the two accounts. Gilgamesh 6 contains, we recall, one of the most eloquent putdowns of anyone in Mesopotamian literature when Gilgamesh rejects the love Ishtar offers him and goes on to enumerate the many lovers the goddess has had—and has destroyed in the process. In the Sumerian Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven also offers herself to Gilgamesh, but his response is very different from the later version. Like so many ancient texts, this one...
is very tricky and difficult to translate, is no small measure because there are gaps in the surviving documents. It is clear that Gilgamesh does not respond to Inanna immediately. Rather, he turns to his mother for advice. He repeats to her what must have been a very appealing offer (though the offer is couched in difficult negative expressions, as we shall see). Only a part of mother Ninsun’s response has survived. As reconstructed by Douglas Frayne, the mother’s advice is to turn down the offer and go it alone.

“Gifts of Inanna must not enter your lordly palace,
The goddess Ninegal [i.e., Inanna] must not smother your heroic might,
The goddess Inanna must not block your way!”

The key line might be rendered, “she must not weaken your warrior’s arm,” but the sense is clear enough. This looks quite a bit like a very widespread fear in cultures that value the heroic warrior: sexual acts will weaken the fighter’s ability to perform in battle. (The Bible contains explicit rules about when a soldier may or may not have sex even with his own wife.) There is not elaboration of Inanna’s many lovers and her infidelities; and there is no concern that Gilgamesh, being a mortal man, cannot provide gifts worthy of the goddess. Rather we see a mother’s advice to her son: entering into Inanna’s house will weaken Gilgamesh.

When the text is taken up again after a gap, Gilgamesh is using his mother’s exact language to reject Inanna’s offer. She flies into a rage and demands that the Bull of Heaven be sent to avenge the insult. Gilgamesh’s rejection does include several lines beyond what we know of Ninsun’s advice to him. No doubt they were part of her advice, but the textual evidence is not there to prove it. They appear to make explicit that way Inanna could “block the way” of Gilgamesh. He now boasts that he will himself bring the cattle and sheep of foreign lands to his home in Uruk; and he himself will find silver and precious carnelian in abundance. He will, by implication, do these heroic tasks without her help.

**Ishtar’s Offer and Gilgamesh’s Rejection of Her Offer**

The differences between the Sumerian and Akkadian versions are sometimes subtle. The Sumerian story has nothing to do with the Oppression of Uruk. Since it is not linked to other tales, it does not mention Gilgamesh’s previous achievements, especially the conflict with Humbaba. And there is nothing of the early civilizing development of Enkidu through the activities of Ishtar’s temple woman.

Mainly, though, the Sumerian version Gilgamesh does not, apparently, respond to Inanna’s proposal with a long (and eloquent) litany of her lovers’ mistreatment, as each lover has his fate changed by the goddess. But at least somewhat balancing the negative view provided by the Akkadian version is the concern the goddess shows for her city.

*Gilgamesh* Tablet 6 opens with Ishtar’s attraction to Gilgamesh and her offer of a kind of marriage.
The Goddess Proposes to the Hero in Tablet 6 of Gilgamesh

To the beautiful Gilgamesh great Ishtar lifted her eyes.

“Come here, Gilgamesh, be my lover!
Let me taste your body.
Be my husband, and I’ll be your wife!

“I’ll order harnessed for you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold,
its wheels of gold and its horns of precious amber.
You will drive storm-demons—powerful mules!

“Enter our house, into the sweet scent of cedarwood.
As you enter our house
the magnificent doorway itself will kiss your feet.
Kings, nobles and princes will bend down before you.

“Mountains and lowlands both will bring their yield to you.
Your goats will drop triplets, your ewes twins.
Even loaded down, your donkey will overtake the mule.
Your horses will win fame for their running.
Your ox under its yoke will have no rival.”

Gilgamesh shaped his mouth to speak,
saying to great Ishtar:
“What could I give you if I take you as a wife?”1548 (6.6-23)

Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s offer in an eloquent poetic speech.

Gilgamesh Responds to Ishtar’s Proposal

“What could I give you if I take you in marriage?
...headdress and clothing?
...my bread? and what keeps me alive?
...food fit for a god?
...drink fit for a king?
Will I bind...?
Will I heap...up?
...a coat?
What would I get if I married you?

“You’re a fire that goes out in the cold,
a door that does not keep out wind or storm,
a palace that crushes the fighters defending it,
an elephant that destroys its housing,
tar that defiles the one carrying it,
a waterskin that soaks the one who lifts it,
the stone that crumbles in the wall,
the battering ram that shatters the wall for an enemy,
the shoe that bites the owner’s foot!

“Which of your lovers have lasted forever?
Which of your heroes has gone up into the heavens?
Come, let me name your lovers for you.

“The one who carried jugs of cream on his shoulders...,
Tammuz, the lover of your youth,
year after year you set up a wailing for him.

You loved the colorful shepherd bird:
you struck him and broke his wing.
In the woods he stands crying, ‘Kappī’ My wing!’

You loved the lion, the perfection of strength:
you dug for him seven and seven ambush pits.

You loved the stallion, eager for battle:
you ordained for him the whip, the goad, the lash;
you made him gallop seven double-leagues;
you made him muddy the water as he drinks.
You doomed his mother, Silili, to endless weeping.

You loved a shepherd, a keeper of herds,
who gave you cakes baked in embers forever,
and slaughtered kids for you day after day:
you struck him, turned him into a wolf.
his own boys drove him away
and his dogs snapped at his haunches.

“You also loved Ishullanu, your father’s gardener,
who always brought you baskets of date
and every day made your table gleam.
You lifted your eyes to him and went to him:
‘My Ishullanu, let’s have a taste of your strength.
Take your qātu and touch my hurri-dādu!’
Ishullanu said to you,
‘Me? What do you want from me?
Didn’t my mother bake? Haven’t I eaten?
Should I eat the bread of slander and insults now?
Should I be covered with reeds against the cold?’
You heard his answer.
You turned him into a dallālu, a frog (?),
and stuck him in the middle of his garden,
where he can’t go up, can’t go down.

So you’d love me in my turn and treat me like them? (6.24-79)

The Great Refusal
Gilgamesh arrogantly refuses the offer. For one things, he asks, “What could I give you if I take you in marriage?” For another, her gifts can be destructive. Gilgamesh calls the goddess “a fire that goes out in the cold/ a door that does not keep out wind or storm” (6.33-4), a palace that crushes its defenders, “tar that defiles the one carrying it,/ a waterskin that soaks the one who lifts it” (6.37-8), even “a shoe that bites the owner’s foot” (6.41).

Finally, Gilgamesh asks, “Which of your lovers have lasted forever?” To emphasize the point, Gilgamesh insults the goddess further by listing her former lovers (6.42-79). In each case she has established the destiny of the being she loved. For Tammuz, “lover of your youth,” she set up ritual wailing year after year. The list of her lovers includes the “many-colored” allallu-bird, the lion, the stallion, a shepherd, and finally a gardener, Ishullanu.

The catalog of lovers begins with Dumuzi/Tammuz, her most famous lover. While he does have a brief appearance among the legendary figures in the First Dynasty of Uruk according to The Sumerian King List, Tammuz was widely known throughout Mesopotamia as the substitute for Ishtar when she was killed in the underworld. He did not go to his death willingly, but he enabled her resurrection. (His sister, according to the Sumerian version of the story, offered herself as a sacrifice so that Tammuz would spend only half of each year in the world of the dead. She spent the other half of the year in the world below for Tammuz.)

The other lovers in the list form a series from wild to domesticated animals and from less civilized to more civilized humans. The series culminates with a shepherd who is turned into a wolf and a gardener, Ishullanu, who, though he brings Ishtar baskets of dates daily, is subjected to a kind of living death when he, like Gilgamesh, rejects her proposal. Each story of a lover is successively longer and more detailed than the previous one. That narrative device also emphasizes the fates of the Shepherd and the Gardener. While most scholars liken Ishullanu’s transformation into a dallālu to a frog, it may be that the one who tends the date palm is stuck halfway up the plant, so he can neither move up (to complete his role as the one who implants the male spathe into the female date palm) nor move down to earth.

In her anger at Gilgamesh’s refusal, Ishtar demands that her father send down The Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh. (She threatens to break down the gates of the Netherworld, letting the dead rise to devour the living.) Once again Gilgamesh and Enkidu, though, are up to the task. After a great struggle, the heroes slay the great Bull. Enkidu flings a part of the Bull in Ishtar’s face, and she is reduced to lamenting the insult with her temple women.
In an unusual move, the heroes make an offering to the Sun God, Shamash.

After they had killed the Bull they tore out his heart.  
They set it in the presence of Shamash.  
They stepped back and fell prostrate before Shamash.  
They sat down, brothers, the two of them.  (6.149-52)

Then, in what has been described as the most shocking insult given to a deity in Mesopotamian history, Enkidu flings a part of the Bull in Ishtar's face, and she is reduced to lamenting the insult with her temple women.

The heroes cleanse themselves and propose a rather obvious riddle to the people who are looking on.

They washed their hands in the Euphrates,  
took each other by the hand and went in. (6.170-71)

The riddle is an undisguised boast.

Gilgamesh speaks these words to the people assembled,  
to the women he says:  
“Who is the most beautiful of heroes?  
Who is the most glorious of men?” (6.174-77)

In the palace the men celebrate their victory.  
In his palace Gilgamesh holds a joyful celebration (*hidūtu*).  
On the couch of night the heroes lie down, and sleep.

Enkidu, lying down, sees a dream.  
Enkidu jerked upright to set the dream free,  
Saying to his friend:  (6.183-87)

― Friend, why are the Great Gods in council?” (= Tablet 7.1)

By the end of the episode, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are perfectly one. “They sat down, brothers, the two of them” (*kilallān*) (152). The riddle Gilgamesh poses is transparent enough. The men are enjoying themselves.

The tablet ends in a masterful way. The heroes have triumphed everywhere. Gilgamesh boasts of himself and Enkidu. For the restless one there is a moment--the only moment in the long work--of both joy and rest. “In his palace Gilgamesh holds a joyous celebration
(hidūtu).” (The term hidūtu is related to the hadū of the Joy/Woe Man. Other versions of the Gilgamesh story show Gilgamesh establishing festivals day and night.)

At the moment of highest joy, the story takes a tragic turn. The dream Enkidu has jerks him upright. The catch-line indicates where this is heading: the Great Gods in Council will determine the fates of the men—and one will die.

Tablet 6, with its very active goddess Ishtar, is often taken as somehow self-evident. Ishtar has transformative powers, surely. Many hymns to the goddess emphasize her ability to change the fates of humans. The list of former lovers shows her fickle, unstable, perverse. Certainly Gilgamesh was wise to decline the invitation, one often hears. Sheldon Kopp, for example, though he admires Gilgamesh greatly, finds it disappointing here. For Kopp it is fascinating to see that though the insight into each person’s double nature is central to Gilgamesh, there is as yet little understanding of the dual sexual nature of each person. The myth of feminine evil is maintained. The female is the “dangerous sex” whose task it is to stir men’s lust, but who in so doing betrays them and robs them of their power. When she is free she may operate independently against men as a weapon, so it is necessary to bind her so that she may instead serve as a tool.1549

The extensive literature on the so-called Sacred Marriage suggests this is only a partial estimate of Ishtar, one that dangerously misrepresents the importance of the feminine in Mesopotamian culture.1550 The marriage of the king (who becomes Tammuz in the ritual) and the goddess (usually in the form of a priestess) was an ancient and very important annual ritual, one that contributed not only to the fertility of the community, but one that was involved in “establishing the fate” of the community for the year. Ishtar was not the only goddess involved in the Sacred Marriage in Mesopotamia, but in one way she gained a unique superiority. The very word for the Goddess in Akkadian was a form of her name: ishtaru. It approaches our concept of “divinity” as closely as any term in Akkadian. Against the “infidelity” of Ishtar is the arrogance of the hero, a trait that clings to the lover of her youth, Tammuz.

The consequences of the hubris of Gilgamesh and Enkidu shown in this episode come swiftly

Complexities of Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal

In a very important and much discussed article, Tzvi Abusch claimed that Ishtar was being quite deceptive in the proposal she makes to Gilgamesh.1551 His analysis of Tablet 6, lines 1-79, is both comprehensive and very subtle. At the center is his claim that Ishtar deceptively offers Gilgamesh death and a life in the netherworld after death. There is a Mesopotamian tradition that Gilgamesh gained a godlike status in the netherworld, where he acted as a judge, which was the fate of Ishtar’s first love, Dumuzi (Tammuz). Abusch does not follow the connection between Gilgamesh and Dumuzi. Rather he focuses on the subtle ambiguities of Ishtar’s speech and Gilgamesh’s equally subtle rejection of her.

I should add at this point that Abusch is one of the Gilgamesh scholars who thinks there is an organic link between Tablets 1-11 and Tablet 12. He sees that Gilgamesh in Tablet
is given a very detailed description of the fate of various humans in the netherworld—
exactly the kind of knowledge he will need when he does, in fact, become a judge in the
netherworld.\textsuperscript{1552}

I would offer a slightly different analysis of the proposal and rejection. I think that Ishtar’s
selection of her human lover is firmly in the tradition of the selection of the Sumerian \textit{en},
usually translated “lord,” to serve as her earthly \textit{dam}, or spouse. This very ancient
practice, which is best illustrated in the extensive love literature involving 
Dumuzi/Tammuz, continued, at least at Uruk, into Neo-Assyrian times. Abusch makes
much of the marriage formula in \textit{Gilgamesh}, which is offered to Gilgamesh. Abusch is
certainly correct in noting that the proposal is unusual in two respects. It is initiated by
the female, not the male, and it is unilateral.\textsuperscript{1553} This is, if I read the sources correctly, the
formula for a type of “sacred marriage,” which has been discussed at great length and is, 
nevertheless, largely dismissed by Abusch. What is unusual about what has been called
Entrance Marriage is that it reverses the norm: the male mortal not only marries the
goddess, but lives with her in her “house,” the very center of sacrality in Uruk, the \textit{gipar}
of the Eanna temple.\textsuperscript{1554}

Ishtar’s proposal is relatively short (lines 7-21), but packed with attractive gifts. She offers
Gilgamesh a chariot of lapis and gold, to be drawn by “storm demons” like giant mules.
She invites him to enter their house, with its scent of cedar—quite a precious wood for the
relatively tree-less Sumerian south. In that place the very door-sill will show him honor.
Kings, nobles, and princes will kneel before him and give him lavish gifts. Perhaps even
more important, considering the power of Ishtar over the forces of “life,” are her gifts to
him of goats that will bear triplets, ewes that will give birth to twins, a donkey that even
with a heavy pack would overtake a mule; horses that run proudly before the wagon; an
ox that will have no rival. Between the Agricultural Revolution that set the stage for the
development of cities in Mesopotamia and the Industrial Revolution of the Modern Age
it would be hard to find anyone who could not see the value in these gifts. Sheep and
goats that were immensely productive, donkeys to transport goods, and an ox to plow the
fields were of course central to animal husbandry, trade, and the raising of crops.
Historically, Uruk gained its enormous advantage in productivity by selecting a grain
(barley) that would tolerate the saline soil of the floodplain and figuring out how to
irrigate long rows plowed by oxen. For thousands of years Uruk’s wealth lay in its
agricultural productivity. Ishtar’s temple controlled vast lands and flocks. (In contrast,
the polities that counted its wealth in precious objects held by temple and palace were
vulnerable to attack.)

Abusch pays relatively little attention to the details of this third part of Ishtar’s proposal.
He notes that the “storm-demons” who will drive the chariot have an infernal character.
And he makes a good case that the honors Gilgamesh will enjoy are those he would have
in the netherworld. He sees the details as referring to funeral rites and activities
Gilgamesh would perform in the world of the dead.
I would not argue with Abusch that for the elites in the netherworld, which in some literary accounts (including Enkidu’s dream in Tablet 7 and the descents of Inanna and Ishtar into the netherworld) including important priestly classes and gods), the world of the dead was organized hierarchically and structured to look more like Milton’s Pandemonium than the dreary place Enkidu describes in Tablet 11. My argument would be that Mesopotamia modeled the netherworld the way they did (in less detail, admittedly) the place of the gods in the heavens, on what they knew of earthly palaces, temples and the like. Rather than splitting the netherworld from the world of the living, the ambiguity in Ishtar’s speech may derive from homologies.

When Ishtar (and Inanna) are captured in the netherworld and killed there, raising the paradox of an immortal who is yet subject to death, the wherewithal to resurrect her are found there, the bread and water of life. Even so, Mesopotamian visions of the netherworld, as far as I have been able to discover, do not include the ordinary work of shepherds and farmers. The underworld is mainly viewed as sterile and static. Ishtar’s offer of fertile and tame animals seems to me incompatible with Abusch’s otherwise attractive thesis. Petr Charvát, as we have seen, offers pretty convincing evidence that the en of Inanna in Uruk engaged in regular rituals (involving a nin, his female counterpart, either Inanna herself or a human as proxy, or both en and nin figured by statues, in a ritual involving a bed) that look a good bit like “sacred marriage” rituals for the fertility and general prosperity of the land.

Often overlooked in Ishtar’s proposal and in the Ishtar literature generally is that even where she offers “fertility,” she does not offer the most conspicuously missing feature in Mesopotamian kingship, which followed a dynastic formula: children for Gilgamesh. The name of a son of Gilgamesh is known from two documents only, The Sumerian King List and the very brief History of the Tummal. The first mentions an Ur-Lugal, who had a reasonable though unremarkable tenure in Uruk after Gilgamesh; the second mentions father and son together as restoring the structure known as the Tummal. The Sumerian “Death of Gilgamesh” makes the point that Gilgamesh was fated to be king but not to have eternal life. When he finally accepts the idea, he takes elaborate steps to prepare a tomb and a place for himself as a lesser god and governor of the netherworld. The entire royal court is buried in his stone tomb: his beloved wife, beloved child, a second wife and a concubine, his minstrel, cupbearer, barber and retainers. Even in this remarkable document, which does mention his friend Enkidu by name, gives no names of these folks. The list is simply a conventional catalogue of what we could expect of a royal household. It is assumed that the king has at least one child, but no name is actually given. Ur-lugal, who was quite likely an historical personage, is likely to be the most forgotten person in history.

The point of Ishtar’s proposal at this point is, as I see it, the goddess offering to house her spouse in the Eanna. However powerful her spouse may be, the en is a consecrated and convented man, just as the female spouses of male deities were considered to be. A rather odd point about the Sacred Marriage is that it rarely produces offspring. Inanna/Ishtar may have her man, but she does not become a mother by him—and in her
proposal she does not offer that Gilgamesh will have any children. Kingship and enship were quite different positions even when they met in kings like the Ur III king Shulgi. Such kings reportedly engaged in very explicit sexual encounters with the goddess, but they do not do it in expectation of dynastic continuity. In *Gilgamesh* Gilgamesh is already king before he is offered, as I think, enship. Significantly, his resistance to the offer does not involve his need to have a successor.

Abusch’s remarks on the four lines that end Ishtar’s proposal (lines 18-21) are remarkably brief and unsupported. “With his settlement in the netherworld, Gilgamesh will become the possessor of vigorous herds, and they will become his embodiment. Perhaps this power is activated by the offerings of tribute (line 17). In any case, Gilgamesh will serve as a source of fertility, a power not unusual in one who resides in the earth.” It may well be that after death Gilgamesh will promote fertility on the earth, as Dumuzi would, but Abusch does not pursue the parallel here. I know of no case where herds are kept in the netherworld, but on the face of it, these lines offer what a goddess like Ishtar could provide her en.

I should mention that Abusch sees a parallel between Ishtar and the figures of Calypso and Circe in the *Odyssey*, that they are “lonely and sexually needy” goddesses who live in the underworld. I will leave it to Classicists to comment on the Greek goddesses. Abusch is on surer grounds when he sees parallels between Ishtar and Ereshkigal, goddess of the netherworld, who is often identified as the sister of Ishtar, that is, I think, Ishtar’s underworld counterpart.

**On the Great Refusal**

Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar is much longer than the proposal, and brilliant. One has to credit the power of poetry to strengthen the message. I think it is not surprising that readers of *Gilgamesh* remember Gilgamesh’s elaborate putdown of the goddess far more than they remember details of Ishtar’s proposal. Abusch devotes more than ten pages to Gilgamesh’s speech (161-73), and it is a model of close reading of a literary text. With a specialist’s command of Akkadian grammar, vocabulary, and poetic devices, Abusch masterfully shows the patterns that emerge in Gilgamesh’s carefully worded response. (Recall that in the older Sumerian “Bull of Heaven” Gilgamesh merely repeats, in a very few lines, his mother’s warning that the goddess will weaken Gilgamesh’s “warrior’s arm.”)

Abusch’s analysis is so thorough and subtle that I can only send readers back to his essay for the details. Some highlights, though, should be mentioned. As mentioned previously, Gilgamesh lists Ishtar’s lovers, beginning with the famous Tammuz, the lover of her “youth.” Then there were animals (bird, lion, horse), each closer to humanity than the previous one. The human lovers, a shepherd and a gardener, Ishullanu, are figures increasingly close to “civilized” life. Abusch notices that Gilgamesh is called “king,” the embodiment of Mesopotamian “civilized” life, for the first time by a third party, just after Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar. That is, the catalog of lovers presents a movement from wild and unsettled to tamed and civilized.
Abusch shows also that the choice of verbs, adverbs, and distributive nouns supports “progression along past-present, nature-culture axes” (164). In each case Ishtar’s lovers have been transformed and have suffered loss. The analysis shows this clearly, although I am still not sure that the catalog “amounts to an offer of death” (164-65). The power of Ishtar to transform nature is traditional; she is even capable of changing male into female and female into male. Abusch again makes a very important observation when he shows that the line of lovers becomes finally a circle, when the story of Ishullanu reaches back to the first lover, Tammuz. Abusch presents the parallels between Ishullanu and Gilgamesh in great detail, and notes as well certain contrasts.

Very important to Abusch’s reading of the text is that it shows Gilgamesh’s refusal as a challenge to the old order, where the offer of a hieros gamos and the mourning over the slain Bull represent older seasonal rites. Gilgamesh asserts his will and is integrated into a more complex human organization. Even though he eventually accepts death—according to Abusch, when the netherworld itself is “made over into an organized city”—through Gilgamesh death “has been civilized.”

For our purposes these are the essential claims of Abusch. He also makes important claims for the importance of both Tablets 6 and 12 in the poem as a whole. Among other things he points out that Gilgamesh must endure a rite of passage, a change of being and the acquisition of knowledge, before he is able to accept the limitations of human life.

I think that, given the many insights into Gilgamesh offered by Tzvi Abusch in his essay on Ishtar’s proposal and Gilgamesh’s rejection, it must be regarded as a key analysis of the poem as a whole. My only problem with it is that Abusch need not have restricted Ishtar’s proposal to a deceptive offer of death. I think that the tradition of a “sacred marriage” in which even a king like Shulgi of Ur enters the sanctuary of the goddess in Uruk, where the goddess proclaims him her lover and initiates him into sexual congress and places him on the throne—the only other piece of furniture beside the bed mentioned in her “storehouse” bedroom—suggests that Ishtar’s offer may indeed involve a powerful life after death, such as was achieved by the tragic Dumuzi/Tammuz, but that it would also have provided Gilgamesh with power, wealth and status in Uruk. His rejection of the offer dooms Gilgamesh to an agonizing journey after the death of his friend Enkidu. That journey provides him with the knowledge he will need to return as an enlightened king to his city. It is a rite of passage that Gilgamesh presents in a most powerful way.

Many readers have noticed that the frame that returns at the end of Tablet 11 to the opening of Tablet 1 shows Gilgamesh admiring the famous walls of his city. The frame also highlights what is not as frequently noticed: that the interior of the city is marked by the dwelling of Ishtar. She lives at the very center of Uruk and it, in a profound way, the heart of the city. When Gilgamesh returns, finally at peace after his many trials, he is, in my reading of the poem, accepting the role of king and en, that is, accepting her offer. It is not without significance that, as Jeffrey Tigay noted, the Old Babylonian formula that described Uruk as the city of Anu and Ishtar, has been reduced in the Standard Akkadian Gilgamesh to the dwelling of Ishtar alone.
Inanna’s Offer and Bilgames’s Rejection of Her Offer

Compare Gilgamesh’s refusal of Ishtar’s proposal in Tablet 6 to the episode in an earlier Sumerian version.

The Sumerian Bull of Heaven story contains a detail that speaks to the very idea of the heroic. Quite unlike the Akkadian story, Gilgamesh does not reject Inanna’s proposal because he fears he will suffer the fate of her other lovers. Rather, he takes the proposal to his mother, who advises him against it because it will sap his strength. That is, as we have seen, the conflict between Inanna and Gilgamesh involves the warrior’s taboo: sex will weaken him, as in the story of Samson and Delilah. Another translation of the key lines is this:

“The gifts of Inanna must not enter your chamber,
the Divine Palace Lady must not weaken (your) warrior’s arm!” 1567

For a poem that opens with praise of the “hero in battle,” Inanna’s gifts must represent a threat to the hero’s very identity.

The gifts Inanna offers Gilgamesh are quite different from the ones Ishtar offers him in Gilgamesh. Mainly she designates Gilgamesh as her “man.” That is followed by what appear to be a series of negatives, which would be very odd in this context. The syntax is very difficult to follow. Andrew George translates the lines in this way.

From the palace of Abzu she cast her glance on the...;
“O wild bull, you shall be my man, I will not let you go,
O lord Bilgames, you shall be my man, I will not let you go,
In my temple Eanna I will not let you go to pass judgment,
In my holy Gipar I will not let you go to render verdicts,
In the god An’s beloved Eanna I will not let you go to pass judgment!” 1568

Since she loves her “wild bull,” she will not let him go. That is expected. What is not expected is that she will not allow him to “pass judgment” and “render verdicts” (which means the same thing) in her holy of holies, the gipar of the temple Eanna, where Inanna has her bed and where “Sacred Marriage” texts show her transforming the human she has selected into a semi-divine being, one who is in those texts allowed precisely to act as a judge. The rendering of justice is a prerogative of the en chosen by the goddess.1569

The problem with the text may be handled if we interpret the syntax much the way English traditionally has done with double negatives. While English teachers fret about students using double negatives, there is no question that in spoken English the device is most often used to emphasize the positive. Sumerian allowed the same modal prefix /na/, usually negative and prohibitive, also used as an affirmative.1570 I suggest that the prefix /nu/ is used here as an emphatic positive. If this is possible, Inanna would be promising that Gilgamesh would indeed become a judge in Inanna’s temple, the very heart of Uruk.

Gilgamesh, for his part, will come to see this as a terrible constraint upon his freedom.
The last line of Inanna’s offer is broken (“O Bilgames, be you..., and I will be...!”), but it strongly suggests the marriage formula Ishtar offers Gilgamesh in the Akkadian text, “Be you my husband and I your wife!” (6.9). The oddity of Inanna speaking from the Abzu is reinforced by what she apparently will not let Gilgamesh do. She may be using double syntax. On one level she emphatically offers something that will ironically on another level be carried out in the underworld.

Tzvi Abusch has argued that Inanna’s offer in the Akkadian Gilgamesh is highly deceptive. She appears to offer the perfection of life on earth while she is actually presenting him with what Gilgamesh eventually becomes, a judge in the world of the dead. In other words, she offers him, as she had done with a series of lovers, a kind of immortality, but only in the underworld. This may account for tricky formulation. The spouse of Inanna is not only her consort in the gipar; he gains the power to make judgments from the throne that is, like Inanna’s bed, also to be found in the sacred precinct. Does her offer, in each instance, doom Gilgamesh to the fate of the lover of her youth, Dumuzi? The spouse of the goddess will continue his life as a judge in the underworld.

Gilgamesh’s response to the proposal, once he obtains his mother’s opinion that he should reject it, suggests that he does not want to be trapped in the relationship with Inanna.

“O lady Inanna, you must not block my path! Let me catch wild bulls in the mountains, let me fill your folds! Let me catch sheep in the mountains, let me fill your pens! Let me fill...with silver and carnelian!”

In sharp contrast with his rejection of Ishtar in Gilgamesh, the hero in this version wants to continue the other role he had become famous for, traveling in the mountains, opening the passes, and capturing animals—as the en is portrayed in 4th millennium cylinder seal impressions. His counteroffer is conciliatory: he will act in this fashion for her, to fill the herds and flocks that were so much a part of the temple economy. But she does not buy Gilgamesh’s clever response. In a fury she sets about punishing him with the Bull of Heaven.

Heroic activity in “Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven” is seen, first, then, in the traditional images of the en as master of animals in the mountains. When, with the help of Enki, Gilgamesh arms himself and fights the Bull of Heaven, he more nearly approaches the image of the warrior-king. Challenging Inanna, Gilgamesh establishes his independence; protecting the city from the dreaded monster, he performs the way a 3rd millennium king was expected to perform.

But at least somewhat balancing the negative view provided by the Akkadian version is the concern the goddess shows for her city. In both Sumerian and Akkadian stories, the Bull of Heaven, whatever else it may symbolize, clearly represents the threat of drought. The Sumerian has Inanna leading the Bull of Heaven from the sky.

In Uruk the bull devoured the grass,
in the Engilua canal it drank the water,
one league it reached along the Engilua canal, its heart was not sated.
It devoured the grass, it laid the earth bare,
it devoured the date-palms of Uruk, bending them to its mouth.\textsuperscript{1575}

The Akkadian version is similar but by no means identical.

[Down came] Ishtar, leading it onward:
when it reached the land or Uruk,
it dried up the woods, the reed-beds and marshes,
down it went to the river, lowered the level by seven full cubits.\textsuperscript{1576}

Like plague and flood, drought is a disaster for large settled communities like Uruk, located on a flood plain.\textsuperscript{1577} The Akkadian text emphasizes the destruction caused by the Bull of Heaven. Twice it opens a pit, and hundreds of men fall into the pits. But in this text only provision has been made for Uruk’s survival. The high god Anu yields to the goddess’s threat, but asks that the goddess provide seven years of chaff and hay. The text is rather broken at this point, but it appears that Ishtar assures Anu that such provision had already been made. Even if Gilgamesh is defeated, the people will survive.

**Fighting the Bull of Heaven: A Comparison**

The complexities of the Akkadian version\textsuperscript{1578} have already been discussed. As with most of these stories, each version lends itself to a variety of interpretations. The late version of the Humbaba story, for example, offers a theological explanation: the heroes act against Humbaba at the prompting of the sun god because the giant represents “evil.” On some level, however, the cutting down of Humbaba must have been related to the value precious wood held for the resource-poor Mesopotamian south. Even though the defeat of Humbaba angers his protector Enlil, the heroic work is finally seen in a positive light.

With The Bull of Heaven, what is at stake is not so apparent. Few lines are devoted to the details of the heroes’ battle against the Bull of Heaven; the Sumerian text spends more time on the boasting of Gilgamesh. In a broken passage, he does ask that his mother, Ninsun, and sister, Peshtur, approach the god Enki as the hero prepares for battle.\textsuperscript{1579} Presumably Enki provides him with a way to defeat the monster. Particularly if Inanna has not built up the storehouse to protect the citizens against the drought, defeating the Bull of Heaven would seem to liberate Uruk in a mythological pattern familiar to Sumerian literature, where Inanna is engaged in a contest with Enki.\textsuperscript{1580} The Sumerian poem ends with Gilgamesh making use of the entire body of the slain Bull of Heaven, including a basket-load of meat that is distributed to the most vulnerable citizens of his city, its orphans. Gilgamesh asserts his leadership of the city at the expense of the goddess herself.

The precious horns of the Bull of Heaven, which may have magical powers themselves but are specifically designed to carry oil of anointing, are presented to Inanna in Eanna at the very end of the poem—in striking contrast to the parallel in *Gilgamesh*, where the hero takes the horns into his father—called “his god”—Lugalbanda’s chamber.\textsuperscript{1581} Gilgamesh is, of course, regularly the *en* as well as *lugal* in the Sumerian poem. At the end of the
Chapter Six: The Bull in the Ring

poem the king takes a knife, “no butcher being to hand,”\textsuperscript{1582} and cuts off the haunch of the Bull, which he then throws at Inanna. The butcher (\textit{muhaldim-gal})\textsuperscript{1583} might seem to us an unlikely members of the cultic personnel, but the office is well represented throughout the periods in which the temple flourished.

\textbf{Gilgamesh “Lord” and “King”}

Another rather subtle difference between the Sumerian and Akkadian versions is in the titles used to describe Gilgamesh. Throughout the Sumerian poem Gilgamesh is repeatedly described as the “lord,” that is, the \textit{en}, of the city. In a few places, though, he is called king (\textit{lugal}). At the end of the story we see an emphasis on his kingly position.

\begin{quote}
The king, as if he were the chief cook, wielded a knife,
He hacked off a shoulder piece, Inanna flew off like a pigeon
Whose wall he had destroyed.\textsuperscript{1584}
\end{quote}

Frustrated at his inability to get to the goddess, he tells Inanna that, “Just as I destroyed this, so too I would do with you!” \textsuperscript{1585}

Finally Gilgamesh completes the task, cutting up the carcass and providing the community with meat and hides. Ultimately he is reconciled with the goddess when he offers her the horns of the Bull, filled with precious oil, in her Eanna temple.

\textbf{“The Gudam Epic”}

\textit{The Gudam Epic} is very brief, even for Sumerian “epics,” which tend to be poems of about 200 to 300 lines long. The beginning of the text is missing and what has been found runs to about 45 lines. Douglas Frayne, who has translated the poem, thinks it may be a variant of “Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven.”\textsuperscript{1586}

What has survived focuses on The Bull of Heaven itself. The Bull is in Uruk drinking beer and wine and eating flour and fish. A minstrel, Lugal-gaba-gal-di, sings that the Bull is not just eating bread and beer—he is eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Urukeans. The people have already armed, however, and they attack him.

The Bull shows fear momentarily, and wishes he could flee back to a temple of Zabala (one of Inanna’s cities) where he would be safe. He does, though, slaughter the “mob” that pursued him in the streets of Uruk.

One man alone saves the day, striking the Bull with a double axe and flattening him. The Bull weeps and asks Inanna to save him. Inanna responds with what appears to be an ambiguous answer: he will lie down in the fields of Zabala, where he had lived before.

Presumably the hero has struck a mortal blow, but the poem ends without making that entirely clear, and the final comment commends the heroism of the goddess Inanna. The one who had defeated the Bull is not named, but he is certainly Gilgamesh. (The
minstrel’s name is a close variant of Gilgamesh’s minstrel in “Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven.”) Nothing is said of Enkidu’s part in the story.

An interesting note is mentioned about the hero, if it is Gilgamesh. He is called “the fisherman” and “the son of the fisherman of the goddess Inanna.” This may shed light on the parentage of Gilgamesh, whether or not it refers to mysterious Lugalbanda, who is usually credited with being the father.

**A Hittite Version of Gilgamesh Tablet 6**

Some time during the second half of the 2nd millennium BCE the stories of Gilgamesh made its way into Hittite territory in what is now Turkey. Two Akkadian language versions of *Gilgamesh* have been found at Hattusha, the Hittite capital. And at least two versions in the still relatively unknown Hurrian language have been discovered.

The Hittite Gilgamesh includes The Bull of Heaven adventure. The episode takes up the second of the three tablets—once again at the center of events. Unfortunately, the second tablet is not well preserved.

What does seem to be clear is that Ishtar offers her love to Gilgamesh, while he has offered to build a fine temple for her. The passages where he rejects her offer and she brings down the Bull of Heaven have not yet been found. Certain aspects of the story are clarified at the beginning of Tablet III, where the best-preserved parts of the Hittite story have been found. It fills in details from *Gilgamesh 7* that have been lost.

Tablet III deals with the death of Enkidu and Gilgamesh’s desperate journey. The great gods debate the heroes’ killing of the Bull of Heaven and Huwawa and condemn Enkidu.

The passage is worth presenting in its entirety.

“[ ... ] we will sleep.” It dawned, [and] Enkidu said to Gilgamesh, “Oh my brother—the dream which [I saw] last night! Anu, Enlil, Ea, and the Sun-god of Heaven [were seated in council]. And Anu spoke before Enlil, ‘Because they have killed the Bull of Heaven, [and because] they have killed Huwawa, who [made] the mountains thick with cedars’—so said Anu—‘between them [one must die]!’ And Enlil said, “Enkidu shall die, but Gilgamesh shall not die!’

“Then the Sun-god of Heaven responded to heroic Enlil, ‘Didn’t they kill them (!) at my (!) behest—the Bull of Heaven and Huwawa? And should innocent Enkidu now die?’ Enlil became angry with the Sun-god of Heaven, ‘Why do you accompany them daily like a comrade?’ [Enkidu] lay down to sleep before Gilgamesh, and his tears [flowed] forth like canals.

He said, “Oh my brother, you are indeed my dear brother. I will [not] be brought up again to my brother from the netherworld. I will take my seat with the shades. [I will cross] the threshold of [the dead], and I will never [see] my dear brother again with my eyes!”1587
The Hittite version thus interprets the roles of humans and gods in the story. There are a number of noteworthy features. For one, the indictment is brought by the god Anu, who is always seen in association with Uruk—usually as the father of Ishtar. It is his Bull of Heaven (the phrase could be read the Bull of An, since the name An/Anu means “the Above,” or as we moderns like to translate it, the Heavens). Anu is the first god to be mentioned in the standard indication of the pantheon, which begins, “Anu, Enlil, and Ea” (the three who are mentioned in this passage). These three gods were often thought to be of a single generation, as brothers; though Enlil is the most powerful of the three—and king of the gods in some traditions—Anu was the eldest and most respected.

At any rate, Anu indicts the two men for killing The Bull of Heaven and Huwawa. The unusual inversion of the two events may be due to the special relationship of the Bull of Heaven to Anu himself. The decision to condemn only Enkidu is made by the powerful Enlil, who had a special relationship, as we have seen, to Huwawa.

The passage highlights the conflict between Enlil and the younger god, the Sun-god of Heaven. With Ishtar, the Sun-god is often thought to be of a second generation of the high gods. Here he is angry with Enlil because, we find out at this point in the story, the Sun-god had urged the men to go after Huwawa. The reason for the Sun-god’s actions is not made clear; perhaps in the still fragmentary Tablet I the reason would have been given.

Enlil concludes the session with a contemptuous put-down of the Sun-god. In the Standard Akkadian Gilgamesh the Sun-god and Ishtar, as they are here, are much more involved in the lives of humans than are the older, more remote figures.

The dream ends badly, of course, for Enkidu. After the two heroic exploits, the story turns tragic. We do not know if the Hittite version includes a passage where Enkidu is ultimately reconciled with his fate—as we have in the Standard Akkadian Gilgamesh. We do see the response of Gilgamesh to the death of his friend.

Visual Representations
The early cylinder seal impressions from Uruk and other places, especially Susa, show in theme and style the importance of the Big Man. The Uruk Vase represents the theme on a larger scale.

Among cylinder seal impressions, one (Fig. 14 above) Beatrice Goff notes, shows a man with a stick protecting a cow in the process of giving birth. The human fights off a lion. Behind the man is the severed head of a bull. (Does this suggest that in the domestication of animals, humans have not only taken the place of the animals, leading and protecting them—but that humans have injected the power of the bull? Bulls in herds are, of course, the ones that are “sacrificed,” to keep order in the herd; otherwise, for their usefulness to humans, bulls and rams are castrated—a sacrifice of their ability to be parents.)
The seal impressions from Archaic Ur (Fig. 11 above) show sex scenes in what I would think are ritual acts. While scholars have said from time to time that penetration from behind—copulation that approaches the animal type—prevails, the Ur seals show more face-to-face encounters. In the process the sexual partners come closer to “equality” (since both males and females are represented as hairless) than to the domination of one sex over another. At least one of the scenes shows male and female humans with heads of animals (masks, for rituals?).

Sometimes it helps to consult an expert in addition books and web sources. Joel Kutz, a veterinarian whose practice changed radically from large farm animals to pets over his career in Upstate New York assured me that cows when they are ready to give birth and retreat from the herd, if they are attacked by a predator, would more likely to be helped by other cows than by the bull. Bulls take no interest in the birth or in the development of the calf. If anything, they might attack the young as a rival.

**The Bull of Heaven in the Visual Record**

As we have seen with the Humbaba episode, Wilfred G. Lambert demonstrated the popularity of both heroic contests in *Gilgamesh* in the visual arts of Mesopotamia. The 2nd and 1st millennia provide us with a number of representations of Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven, mainly on cylinder seals.

[Fig. 49: See “Illustrations”: NB Cylinder Seal Impression of Bull of Heaven]

A cylinder seal from the Neo-Babylonian Period (1st millennium BCE) shows two heroes fighting a winged bull. The bull is at the center of the scene. The bull has a human face, much like the guardians of cities and temples, the *lamassu*. In addition to the wings, which indicate the creature’s “heavenly” aspect, the seal has two mounds that also indicate a divine origin or dwelling of the bull—and of the large female figure who stands behind Gilgamesh. She stands on the mound and, like Ishtar in many other visual representations, holds her arms high. In one hand she holds a bow. Her other hand holds up the arm of Enkidu and also contains what may be a sign of living vegetation: “life” balancing “death.”

The two heroes have brought the bull low. Gilgamesh, with a high headdress that includes the horns of divinity, also carries a bow almost identical with Ishtar’s. He holds the bull down with one hand and with the other plunges a knife into the neck of the bull. Facing Gilgamesh, on the other side of the bull, Enkidu holds one arm high (with the help of Ishtar, apparently); with the other arm he holds onto the tail of the bull. One leg holds the bull down. Above the bull large birds attack a creature, possibly also a bull.

The two heroes are bearded and about the same (almost gigantic) height. The horned headdress shows the superior status of Gilgamesh—while Enkidu wears no head covering. He is, besides, naked from the waist up. Unlike the long garment Gilgamesh wears, Enkidu’s dress is simpler, a short skirt.

The two heroes are equal, then, but not identical.
Chapter Six: The Bull in the Ring

With such a small image (the cylinder seal is slightly over 1 inch high), we would not expect a subtle indication of emotions. And besides, the conventional iconography of heroic activity shows humans with essentially passive faces, as if they approached the divine passivity of the gods. (Even the bull here seems not to be responding emotionally at the moment of his being killed.) But Ishtar is a different story, and it might reflect her ambiguity in this scene. The face of the goddess (or her human counterpart) is tense with what may be anxiety. Her large eyes observe the scene. In one sense she seems to be supporting the heroes. On the other hand, if this is what we think it is, a repetition of the scene in Tablet 6 where the two heroes defeat the Bull of Heaven, her expression may be one of intense anger. After all, according to *Gilgamesh*, Ishtar has called the Bull of Heaven down into her city in order to punish Gilgamesh, the man who had the audacity to reject her.

Life and death are in the balance here. In the text Enkidu gives himself the task of seizing the bull by the tuft of its tail. Gilgamesh is the one who, like a butcher, drives his knife between the “yoke of the horns and the killing-spot” into the bull.

The triumph will lead, though, to tragedy. One of the heroes will die for killing Humbaba and, now, the Bull of Heaven.

A particularly striking image cut into a somewhat larger cylinder seal (1 ½ inch high) shows two large rampant bulls on either side of a sacred tree. The bulls are about to touch the tree with their forelegs. Holding these large, powerful bulls are two figures who are almost as large as the bulls themselves. Both figures have human faces and long beards. Both are naked. Each is able to restrain his bull. One of the nude figures holds the bull by the tail while he plunges a knife into the bull’s shoulder.

The other figure is rather more bizarre. Though he has head, face, and upper torso of a man, he sports a pair of horns, and his lower torso is virtually identical with the bull he is holding.

The drawing is beautifully symmetrical. The tree, flowering, on a mountain top, has the two bulls on either side. The sacred tree is, of course, a very widespread symbol, in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, of Life. (In this scene it may represent a stylized Ishtar as a source of Life.) In Mesopotamian art different figures appear to be fertilizing the tree or taking from the tree a life-giving substance. Here the bulls are powerful and no doubt breeding stock. The human figures, though, have the power to hold them in check, perhaps a symbol of domestication, and to kill the bulls if necessary.

While the half-human, half-animal figure shares features with Enkidu of *Gilgamesh*, and the other figure shares with Gilgamesh himself (and perhaps the Persian Mithras) what may be a sacrificial killing of the bull, the identification of the two as Enkidu and Gilgamesh has been challenged. It is possible that, as with other features of the Gilgamesh series a much older story has been attached to Gilgamesh in the Bull of Heaven episode.

(The cylinder seal, now in the British Museum, is much older than the impression discussed above. Dated approximately 2200 BCE, it is called a “Contest Scene.”)
Humans, Animals and Plants
The 6th Tablet of *Gilgamesh* stands by itself as a coherent narrative with a beginning, middle and end. Like other parts of the *Gilgamesh* collection, though, it raises a question of its position in relation to earlier and later stories. It is in some ways a doublet of the heroes' victory over Humbaba, although it is narrated in far fewer lines. It is a story that is sometimes paired with the Humbaba story, sometimes not. The colophon points out that the story continues in Tablet 7 (by giving us the first line of that tablet) and is thus connected with the gods' decision that one of the heroes must die. The death of Enkidu will initiate the second part of *Gilgamesh* (Tablets 7-12).

Tablet 6, then, could be considered one of several stories set one after the other like beads on a string, but it is certainly connected with the episodes in Tablet 7 and beyond.

Like other parts of *Gilgamesh*, though, Tablet 6 contains certain images, motifs, and mythemes that appear to have been added to this version of the story, and they raise again the question of the internal unity of the piece. When Ishtar assures her “father,” Anu that she has provided enough surplus grain for the citizens of Uruk to survive a long famine, the insertion makes Ishtar look good but at the expense of the symbolism of the Bull itself. And the insertion of a short scene in which the heroes pay tribute to the Sun, Shamash, may or not be related to the image of Shamash as the god of cosmic justice.

The Bull of Heaven, as we have already suggested in Chapter One, is a complex symbol. One level possibly involves the political implications of the military defeat Sargon of Akkad (the great outsider from the north) that punished the Sumerian cities of the Mesopotamian south. But by connecting The Bull of Heaven with Ishtar, the “sacred marriage,” the threat of famine, and precious horns to be filled with oil, Tablet 6 associates the gods, the city and its ruler, sexuality and fertility in a complex way.

We might remind ourselves that in a herd of domesticated cattle, most bulls are expendable. In the wild the bulls will fight until the losers are driven out of the herd.

In domesticated herds, the mature, fertile bull is useful only for breeding. The ancients discovered that others could be made useful by castrating the males, leaving them powerful but docile. And we see them on Mesopotamian cylinder seal impressions as they were used to plow fields and perform other services for humans. Uruk provides many examples of the uses of bulls and cows because the temple owned so much of the stock, and domestication was validated by religion. Very young males could be killed for food or as offerings to the gods; very likely the two activities were intimately connected in Uruk, where feeding of the gods (and the personnel who kept the temple) was always a major daily activity.

The Sumerian story of The Bull of Heaven ends with the hero making good use of every part of The Bull of Heaven. Some parts are given for food to the orphans of the city; entrails provide food for animals; the hide is given to the tanner. These benefits to the city have been dropped in *Gilgamesh*. Both versions do, however, refer to the precious
horns. In *Gilgamesh* the hero gives the horns to his deified father, Lugalbanda. In the Sumerian story, on the other hand, he offers them to Inanna in her Eanna temple.

The Bull can symbolize, then, any threat to the city, but especially the threat of famine. It is possible that the Bison-Bull that appears in Old Akkadian cylinder seal impressions symbolizes the danger to earth when the waters fail. In those impressions the Bison-Bull is restrained by The Sun God. The Sumerian story shows how Gilgamesh was able to turn the threat literally into a way to feed and protect the citizens.

The Bull of Heaven would appear to capture the complexities of human interface with the natural, social, and religious environments.

Stories of Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven seem simple enough on the surface. A man (or two men, as the story developed) is forced to fight a creature from the Above, therefore with greater than earthbound power to begin with. The victory of Gilgamesh and Enkidu has reminded readers of bullfights that are still common today (and made popular among the literati when Ernest Hemingway suggested the archaic, mythical dimension of the spectacle). The Bull of Heaven episode has reminded others of Mycenaean bull jumping games, where brave youths leaped over the horns of gigantic bulls.

**The Bull of Heaven and Other Creatures**

According to F. A. M. Wiggermann, who treats a great variety of unusual hybrid creatures in his *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts*, the “bull of heaven,” *gud-an-na*, is represented as a humped bull. On late 2nd millennium and 1st millennium cylinder seals he is the winged, human-faced bull fought by Gilgamesh and Enkidu. There is still a question if the Bull of Heaven is connected with the dying god, *dGu4-gal-an-na*, or with the mythological figure, a bull slain as depicted on cylinder seals. Still to be determined is the possible association between the Bull of Heaven slain by Gilgamesh in Sumerian and Akkadian tales with the “lover of Ishtar’s youth,” Dumuzi (or Tammuz), who is listed prominently in Gilgamesh’s litany of lovers ill treated by Ishtar. Dumuzi is sometimes represented as a guardian of the gate of heaven, perhaps the benefit he gains for his suffering and death as a substitute for Ishtar in the world of the dead. According to the Sumerian “The Descent of Inanna,” Dumuzi’s sister offers to share his fate in the underworld so that for six months of the year Dumuzi would live there and for six months he would live in the upper world. The sister, Geshtinanna, would then also participate in the life/death cycle. If, as is thought, the female called Belet-sederi, “scribe of the Underworld,” in Enkidu’s dream (Tablet 7) is identified with Geshtinanna, the Bull of Heaven in *Gilgamesh* 6 may tie both Gilgamesh and Enkidu to the ancient story of Dumuzi.

**Sexuality and Fertility**

What complicates the story of humans triumphing over a powerful creature like The Bull of Heaven is its connection with the great goddess Ishtar (Inanna). Where Ishtar is almost hidden away in the background of *Gilgamesh* stories—in the mountains as Irminna, at the lip of the sea as Siduri, as the mother goddess in the Flood story, and indirectly in the
mortal women who serve her—here she is at the center of things. She initiates the action by proposing to Gilgamesh, and she brings about the battle by angrily insisting on drawing The Bull of Heaven down into the city. Her women, the *kezertu*, *shamhatu*, and *harimtu* (6.161-62), who are notable for their sexuality, appear here in their other social role, as mourners. Ishtar organizes them for lamentation over the dead Bull of Heaven, much as they mourn for the slain Dumuzi in other Mesopotamian literature. Their double role reminds us that Mesopotamians saw life and death—and sexuality—are intimately related.

It is useful to remind ourselves again that sexual attraction (*hili, kuzbu*) was an attribute of gods and goddesses of Mesopotamia. It is not just beauty or, as it is in some instances “luxuriance” and “abundance.”1593 of water, the beauty of buildings and bed chambers. It is mainly an overwhelming, almost irresistible sexual attraction, a divine radiance. Ishtar is the greatest (though not the only) embodiment of *kuzbu* among the divine beings. In a Sumerian myth, “Inanna and Enki,” it is one of the divine attributes, or *me* that was held by the crafty god Enki but was wrested away from him by Inanna.

While it is a means to propagation, it is not the same as “fertility,” with which *kuzbu* is often confused.

Ishtar’s proposal raises the same embarrassing issue that the seduction of Enkidu has for many modern readers. While *kuzbu* could be dangerous, which is the basis of Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar’s proposal, it was not considered essentially sinful or destructive of religious values. The condemnation of the Queen of Heaven in the Hebrew Bible and of the Whore of Babylon in The New Testament are no doubt religious as well as political challenges to “pagan” outsiders to the Kingdom of God. But there is no evidence that Mesopotamia shared such views.

The furor caused by Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, brought our ambivalence over sexuality to light. The suggestion that Jesus might have had sexual relations with a woman—and even a child by her—made a great many people nervous. The Augustinian view that the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis was at heart a sexual fault and that *The Da Vinci Code*’s Mary Magdalene was, as traditionally thought, a prostitute (and therefore deeply flawed, of course) are still well engrained in the Judeo-Christian imagination in spite of at least one tradition that has recently been rediscovered in the literature of the Gnostics, a tradition that found far more complexity in the stories than the orthodox hold.

We might notice again that Ishtar offers Gilgamesh the fertility of the earth as especially of the animals humans had domesticated. But her intimate sexual love does not promise offspring for Gilgamesh himself. (The descendants of Gilgamesh are never an issue in *Gilgamesh* or in any other Gilgamesh stories.) Ishtar here preserves that position that seems so paradoxical to us: sexuality that is both productive of the agriculture and animal husbandry upon which Mesopotamians depended for their survival, and yet divorced from the reproductive needs of humans. This anomaly may have been rooted in the historical development of Uruk, where the mother goddesses, which had been important
to the city, were displaced by Inanna, who is only rarely (if at all) seen as a mother. (The
great exception we shall see later in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 11.)

**Animal Husbandry and Human Sexuality**

Ishtar offers Gilgamesh fertile animals, and she offers him sexual union. She does not
offer what you might have expected: progeny. There is only one document from
Mesopotamia that provides the name of a son of the famous hero, *The Sumerian King
List*. The many “sacred marriage” texts and love songs involving Inanna/Ishtar promise
intimacy, including sexual intimacy with the goddess, but not children.

With such a preoccupation over the obvious necessity of maximizing useful animals in
their herds, one might well wonder why the Mesopotamian temples did not simply extend
that preoccupation to human reproduction, which, of course, was important in its own
right. The cities of Sumer may have been overpopulated at any early period. I rather
think, though, that the close observation of animals led Mesopotamia to appreciate the
importance of sex apart from reproduction.

This distinction points to the striking development in the *Gilgamesh* stories: Shamhatu’s
seduction of Enkidu, humanizing and civilizing him; Inanna’s offering of herself to
Gilgamesh; Uruk as seen as the city of Inanna. Recall the discussion of the Sacred
Marriage in Chapter Two. EN+NIN, if Charvat is correct, is attested in the very earliest
writing. He considers the union of male and female on a mat (“bed”) that represents the
interface of the Great Above (AN) and the Great Below (KI) what others have called the
Sacred Marriage. The ritual promotes Life (TI), though not necessarily progeny for the
male participant, the EN. It would, though, promote the continuation of life in the plant
and animal world.

The unusual combination of the Great Goddess with her human lover, whom she selects,
is symbolic of the many changes that took place in Uruk. At the same time that the
worship of Inanna (and her connection with Akkadian Ishtar) spreads throughout
Mesopotamia), the development of the *lugal* (perhaps first at Ur) and the increasing
power of the palace (vs. the temple) makes the Urukean model of the city state give way
throughout Mesopotamia, even in the south. The Nippur model and later the
Babylonian model tend to make the great goddess of the city at most a “consort” of the
great god (and the wife of god and of king models of motherhood).

This leads to a question for anthropologists. Would the models of Babylon, perhaps of
Nippur (and Assyria?) show that their societies were *chieftainships* rather than city states
like Uruk and maybe Eridu and Ur? Is the great king a reversion to an earlier, widespread
type of human society? The chief is the great bull in the herd, animal or human. (What
differentiates the human is the capacity for intimacy and continued concern for spouse
and offspring.)

The *conflict* between Gilgamesh and Ishtar in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 6, already a possibility in
the Sumerian Bull of Heaven story, becomes central to the series of *Gilgamesh* stories. I
still think that the conflict is resolved when Gilgamesh reenters Uruk at the end of Tablet
11, but I know others may disagree. The other possibility is flat despair on Gilgamesh’s part because his quest has failed.

**Tablet 6 and Other Myths**

The stories that make up the first half of *Gilgamesh* are adventures that were popular in ancient Mesopotamia and pop up in nearly every culture. The battles between the heroes and the monsters Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven are as close to us as TV cartoon superheroes. (In a less ironic age than ours, even such cartoons carried a certain moral weight. Victory over the monster was a triumph of Good over Evil. Now that it is virtually impossible to tell the difference between the side with which we may even empathize and the other side, with its leering, demonic nihilism, the older *gravitas* is made to appear like mere sentimentality.) The two episodes in *Gilgamesh* are not simply battles of cosmic opposites. Shamash may consider Humbaba as “evil” to be eradicated. Humbaba’s plea for mercy suggests that he is more than a symbol of evil, and other matters are at stake in the conflict. That the Sumerian Bull of Heaven stories could end with praise of the goddess Inanna also makes us pause.

Still, there is something about these tales that inevitably lead to comparison with other heroic tales. As a category of myth, the stories might seem best to fit with Dragon-slaying tales. We still retain some memory of Greco-Roman myths of gods or humans battling monsters. Stories of Apollo or Perseus or Herakles are still around. (The increased importance of Apollo, originally a rather minor figure, into a cosmic hero who defeats the Dragon—and the great goddess the dragon protects—and establishes himself as the light-bringer of Delphi, is probably the closest parallel in classical myth to the increased role of Shamash in Mesopotamian myth over the centuries.) When Achilles finally enters into battle with Hektor, it is as if humanity and the gods stop to watch something of greatest importance. Odysseus back home to liberate his wife and household also seems to point beyond its setting in a small, obscure city-state Ditto with Aeneas in his final great battle. There was a reason for the many imitations of such stories in the West and for the epic to have provided the backbone of literature for many centuries.

It is, finally, not so difficult to see that it takes heroic struggles with forces outside and inside the city to develop a king in the city-state that Mesopotamia remembered as *the city*. Everything within the walls of Uruk—that is, everything civilized—requires taming of wild forces and strengthening the inner person. *Gilgamesh* as an “epic” is peculiar in that we are likely to think that the parts are reversed. The English Renaissance thought that both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* contained “wisdom” that every leader should know. The poet Edmund Spenser built his allegorical epic, *The Faerie Queene*, on the basis that the *Odyssey* strengthened the inner man and the *Iliad* saw how such virtues were useful in the larger world of politics and statecraft. The increasingly difficult tasks Beowulf faces in Grendel, Grendel’s Mother, and the Dragon remind us that he grows from a youthful fighter to a wise old king in the process.

*Gilgamesh* would seem to reverse this. The courage and ambition to take on a Humbaba make it likely that the heroes will prevail over the Bull of Heaven, when it is forced upon
them. We might have expected that Gilgamesh would make his dangerous solo journey, the subject of the second part of *Gilgamesh*, first—then make his mark by defeating the enemies of civilized Uruk. When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk at the end of Tablet 11, he will seem to most readers a very old man, burdened by the terrible wisdom he has had to endure.

The genius of the *Gilgamesh* poet is, we think, that he made this reversal work.

**Notes to Chapter Six**

1534 For a detailed study of the relationship between Tablet 6, as the center, and the other tablets, whose linear development of the narratives “hinges upon” Tablet 6, see H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “The Craftsmanship of Sin-leqi-unninni,” 45-79, esp. 48-53.


1536 Graham Cunningham prefers to call them “Divine Dialogues,” since early incantations involve Enlil and Ningirimm. For the increasing importance of Enki/Ea (and Assalluhi/Marduk) at the expense of Enlil, see Cunningham, 52, 68-72, 76-80.


1538 The beginning of *The Gudam Epic* is missing. In the Decad, #13, between “Gilgamesh and The Bull of Heaven,” The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature 1.8.1.2, and “Gilgamesh and Akka,” ETCSL 1.8.1.1, is a “Gudam (...) the city,” ETCSL 1.3.4. It is followed by “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (Version B), *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 302.

1539 The list also prominently includes “Gilgamesh and Akka” (or Aga) at #12 and “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld” at #20 (*The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 302).

1540 “Enlil in the Ekur” appears just after “The Exaltation of Inanna” in the list. Two versions of “Enlil and Ninlil” show up in the third section (*The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 301-303).

1541 Bendt Alster, “Tammuz,” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD)*, eds. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1572. Alster points to an historical inscription that shows Dumuzi/Tammuz, like Gilgamesh, as divine protectors of Utuhegal of Uruk; he considers Dumuzi, as husband of Inanna, part of the pattern in which a mortal becomes husband of a goddess, 1570.


1543 D. Frayne, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgameš;” discussed in “The Birth of Gilgameš in Ancient Mesopotamian Art,” 39. One manuscript is from ca. 2600 BCE (ED IIIb) Tell Abu Salabikh; it is written in Sumerian logograms; two other manuscripts, written in syllabic Sumerian, is from ED IIIb of some three hundred years later; they were found in Ebla. The poem is thus almost as early as the historical Gilgamesh, thought to have lived in ED II, ca. 2700 BCE.

1544 Exactly what the “stone things” were that Gilgamesh destroyed (*Gilgamesh* 10.88, 10.157) has been long debated. Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, “Crossing the Waters of Death: The 'Stone Things' in the Gilgamesh
Epic," *Festschrift für Hans Hirsch* (Vienna: Instituts für Orientalistik, 1996), 213-17, surveys scholarly opinion and suggests that the stone things were light anchors for kedging, pulling a boat toward an anchor that was tossed ahead. The Hittite version of the story suggests that two stone images or statues were needed for crossing the waters of death; Gilgamesh destroyed them and made the passage much more difficult. See Gary Beckman’s translation in Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 164.

1545 CAD 8.602.

1546 As above, among the many writings on Inanna and Ishtar, see especially Rivkah Harris, “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic,” 219-30; rpt. Maier, *Gilgamesh, A Reader*, 79-94; and in Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 207-18.


1548 The Akkadian reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
a-na & \text{ dum-qi šá Gilgamesh i-na it-ta-ši ru-bu-tú Ishtar} \\
al-kám-ma & \text{ Gilgamesh lu-ú ha-‘i-ir at-ta} \\
in-bi-ka & \text{ ia-ši qa-a-šu qi-šam-ma} \\
at-ta & \text{ lu-ú mu-ti-ma ana-ku lu-ú áš-šá-at-ka} \\
lú-šá-as-mid-ka & \text{ mugírra uqni Ĺ hurasi} \\
sá & \text{ ma-gar-ru-šá hurasa-ma el-me-šu gar-na-a-šá} \\
lú-ú & \text{ sa-am-da-ta ume ku-du-na rabi} \\
a-na & \text{ bit-ni i-na sa-am-ma-tí ereni er-ba} \\
a-na & \text{ bit-ni i-na e-re-bi-ka} \\
sip-pu & \text{ a-rat-tu-u li-na-áš-ši-qu šepe-ka} \\
lú & \text{ kám-su ina șap-ší-ka šarre kabte u rube} \\
[xx]-da-at & \text{ šá-ma-a-ši-qu šepe-ka} \\
enze-ka & \text{ tak-ší-ka lahe-re-ka tu-‘a-a-mí li-li-da} \\
mure-ka & \text{ ina bil-ti pare li-ba-a’} \\
sise-ka & \text{ ina mugirri lu-ú šá-ru-uh la-sa-ma} \\
alpe-ka & \text{ ina ni-i-ri šá-ní-na a-a ir-ši}
\end{align*}
\]

(after Simo Parpola, *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*, 91)

1549 Sheldon Kopp, 25.


1553 Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal,” 149-53. He compares the formula here with Ereshkigal’s proposal to Nergal and the demon Arad-Lili to a human female, both associated with infernal regions, 149. The language used in *Gilgamesh* is close to that in an incantation to free patients from witches and evil by transporting them to the netherworld, 151.

1554 On “Entrance Marriage” and the question of “sacred marriage(s)” see above, and Maier, “Sacred Marriage(s) in Mesopotamian Literature,” 17-34.

1555 Petr Charvát, *Mesopotamia Before History*, 139-142.
See Douglas Frayne’s translation in Foster, 143-54, and George’s in *The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation*, 195-208. In the netherworld Gilgamesh’s verdict will be as weighty as those of Dumuzi and Ningishzida.

The men as well as the women in the service of the goddess (such as the women mentioned in *Gilgamesh*) were slaves to their deities, an honorable position such as it was in the Hebrew Bible or the Qur’an. Temple slaves had the additional requirement that they could not be freed or sold. The slave of Ishtar would be branded on the wrist with a star, her symbol.


Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal,” 166.

In this context Abusch briefly comments on the Sumerian “Bull of Heaven,” “Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal,” 166-70, 170n66 and 173n68, a text that is now better known than when Abusch published his essay.


Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal,” 184. The application of the rite of passage to *Gilgamesh* is greatly expanded by Susan Ackerman in *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David*, 72-73, which draws heavily on Abusch’s essay.

See Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 60, 62, and 68-71 on Tablets 1.16 and 11. 332. Note also that where the Old Babylonian version indicates only Anu, the Standard Version adds Ishtar.


For the Sumerian texts, see “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven” in The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. The fuller version is in the Me-Turan text (A22-A39); the B-text (B7-B18) is somewhat shorter. Compare the translations of George and Frayne (in Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 122-23).

See Marie-Louise Thomsen, *The Sumerian Language* (Copenhagen: Akademish Forlag, 1984), 190-99. A similar pattern can be found, I think, in “The Death of Gilgamesh,” according to the interpretation by Niek Veldhuis, “The Solution of the Dream: A New Interpretation of Gilgamesh’s Death,” 134-37, where what appears to be a negative particle (/na/) is understood as a positive modal prefix. Veldhuis offers several parallels “The Incantation to Utu” and “The Eridu Lament.”

Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal,” 148-52. Abusch points out that the unilateral proposal is not the conventional marriage formula, in which bride and groom give mutual consent to the marriage, 149. See also Vanshphib, “The Craftsmanship of Sin-leqi-unninni,” 49, 52, for the centrality of Tablet 6; and Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love*, 72-73, 111-18, 145-48.

For a modern parallel in a Middle Eastern/North African setting, see the Moroccan Tuhami’s plight when he unwittingly becomes a spouse of the Inanna-like demoness Aisha Qandisha when she seduces him. His life is changed utterly, since she directs all of his subsequent relationships with women. (Middle aged, Tuhami had not married or, more importantly for his culture, produced offspring). Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami, Portrait of a Moroccan*, 164-69.
The latter would support Claus Wilcke’s contention that the political subtext of “Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven” is Sumer’s struggle for independence from Akkadian rule; see his “Politische Opposition nach sumerischen Quellen: Der Konflikt zwischen Königustum und Ratsversammlung Literaturwerke als politische Tendenzschriften,” La Voix de l’opposition en Mesopotamie (Brussels: Institute des Hautes Études de Belgique, 1975), 37-65, and Tigay, 34-35.

The Akkadian flood story, Atrahasis, depicts flood as the third, and greatest threat to humans; the first two attempts of the gods to destroy humanity are through plague and famine. See Dalley, Myths from Mesopotamia, 1-38.

While versions of the Bull of Heaven episode have been found at Hattusa and Emar, no Old Babylonian versions have been discovered, and it appears that the episode was not part of the first extensive combination of Gilgamesh stories, as Jeffrey Tigay pointed out, The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic, 69-70. Abusch, “Ishtar’s Proposal and Gilgamesh’s Refusal,” argues that the addition of The Bull of Heaven episode is linked to the late version addition of Tablet 12.143.

For Enki’s contests with goddesses, see Kramer and Maier, Myths of Enki, The Crafty God, especially “Inanna and Enki,” 57-68.
