Chapter Seven
Mourning and Melancholia

they weep they wail
they weary and wear out
singing songs to quell a god’s rage

--”Lady of Largest Heart”

Ishtar kur: The Tragic Turn in Tablet 7

Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, the first American to publish a translation of Gilgamesh a decade after George Smith found the key tablets in Nineveh, suddenly places the story of Ishtar’s descent into the world of the dead at the moment when Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill The Bull of Heaven. No one today would think of combining the two stories—even though they share some of the same poetic qualities.

“The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld” is an independent literary work, like Gilgamesh, written in the Akkadian language. It would not be until the 1940s that Samuel Noah Kramer would put together enough of the Sumerian “The Descent of Inanna to the Underworld,” a longer poem, to compare with the Akkadian version. The Sumerian account makes it clear that the Great Goddess Inanna journeys to the land ruled by her sister, Ereshkigal, only to be killed by the sister. The god Enki is able to find a way to resurrect her, but she is not allowed to return to her home on earth until a substitute is found for her.

We have seen that the first of Ishtar’s lovers in Tablet 6 was Tammuz. Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton saw the connection between Tammuz of Tablet 6 and “The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld” and tied the stories together. He thought that Ishtar, in despair at the loss of The Bull of Heaven, entered the underworld but was then released. For Hamilton, as a consequence, Gilgamesh became ill and Enkidu died. It would not be until the end of the story that Gilgamesh was healed—and Enkidu was brought back to life!

The key passage that Hamilton needed has still not been recovered. All scholars agree that some version of a Hittite Gilgamesh text explains that the gods need to punish someone for killing Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven. The selection of Enkidu rather than Gilgamesh may have been arbitrary and capricious. (In the Hittite version, Enlil demands the death of Enkidu, Shamash challenges the ruling, and is silenced for his trouble. Enlil insults Shamash by insinuating that the Sun God has become a companion to those lower creatures. At any rate, it is clear that Enkidu suddenly becomes ill and dies. He is never brought back from the dead (in any version of the Gilgamesh stories that have been discovered).
To scholars today, Hamilton’s leap from the killing of The Bull of Heaven to Ishtar’s despondency, which leads to her entering the underworld, is not possible. Hamilton had, however, pored over the scholarship that was available to him in the early 1880s, and he was following George Smith in this reconstruction of *Gilgamesh*. Smith thought that after Enkidu told Gilgamesh about his fate, someone was speaking to Ishtar, urging her not to descend into the world of the dead. Ishtar, Smith thought, “suffering all the pangs of Jealousy and hate, revels in the dark details of her description of the lower regions, and declares her determination to go there.”  When the first Oxford Professor of Assyriology, A. H. Sayce, revised Smith’s remarkable and influential *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, Hamilton used Smith’s interpretation to develop the story even further. Sayce continued to maintain that Ishtar’s “Descent” was a part of the Gilgamesh story.

Smith, Sayce, Hamilton and others in the early days of deciphering the *Gilgamesh* tablets agreed with the idea that the story had turned tragic after The Bull of Heaven episode, that Enkidu died and Gilgamesh fell ill. The agonizing journey of Gilgamesh led to what early readers found most important in *Gilgamesh*, a retelling of the Flood story in a way that paralleled the biblical story. That was the astonishing find that made George Smith such a celebrity that the Prime Minister of English, Gladstone himself, attended the inaugural discussion of the work.

The early interpreters saw a love story in *Gilgamesh* and, more important, a final reconciliation of humans and deities. Gilgamesh was purified and Enkidu resurrected.

“The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld” is not entirely clear about the resurrection of Tammuz, but the Sumerian version of the story does make that clear. Dumuzi, who is selected to pay as the substitute for Inanna because he failed to recognize the authority of the goddess, is captured, tortured, and killed. He is relieved of his time in the underworld, however, when his “sister,” Geshtinanna, offers to become a substitute for him—or half the year. Dumuzi’s death was recalled in ritual mourning during the hottest months of the year, when in Mesopotamia vegetation dies. From the earliest days when “The Descent of Ishtar” was rediscovered, Tammuz was considered one of the “dying gods” of antiquity, periodically—like the vegetation he embodied—dying and then revived.

While no scholars today accept “The Descent of Ishtar” as part of *Gilgamesh*, they continue to notice certain stylistic similarities between the Akkadian poem and *Gilgamesh*. Moreover, similarities between Sumerian and Akkadian “descent” literature and Enkidu's death point to the importance of Enkidu as a substitute for the more important Gilgamesh.

The gap at the beginning of Tablet 7 has not yet been filled. Before Enkidu has his vision of descending to the world of the dead, he has another vision that presumably explains his fate.
Enkidu Must Die

No sooner than the two heroes experience their moment of perfect joy at the end of Tablet 6 than they fall asleep—and Enkidu dreams. He awakens Gilgamesh and, as Tablet 7 begins, relates the dream that turns the story to tragedy. Enkidu is condemned to death. Through Tablet 7 Enkidu sickens from a mysterious ailment, dreams again, this time of the journey that will take him down into the dreaded underworld. By the end of the tablet, Enkidu is dead.

The larger narrative movement of Tablet 7 is clear, but the parts that have survived are riddled with gaps. Most of the gaps do not create problems for our understanding of the story, but one in particular leaves an immense problem. The first thirty some lines (of a tablet that contains three hundred lines of text) relate the dream that condemns Enkidu. Sadly, the opening lines are missing so far. At least the beginning has been restored by a prose paraphrase in another language, Hittite. All editions and translations patch in the Hittite text or at least point to it for support of a key problem: why must Enkidu die?

Answers to that question will condition a reading of the second half of Gilgamesh (and a rereading of the First Prologue).

Obviously both Enkidu and Gilgamesh have been complicit in the killing of Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven. All versions of The Bull of Heaven story show Gilgamesh as the one who actually does the slaying. Gilgamesh differs from older versions of the Humbaba story in having Gilgamesh kill the monster.

The dream Enkidu relates at the opening of Tablet 7 tells of a Council of the High Gods. How do we know that? The Mesopotamian scribes who wrote or copied texts often wrote a line or two, a colophon, at the end of a tablet. In the case of Gilgamesh Tablet 6, a scribe drew a line in the clay below the last lines of the text and added two additional lines of text. One tells us that Tablet 6 of the “series” Gilgamesh, known by its incipit or first line, “The one who saw the nagbu.” The other is a catchline that tells us what the first line of Tablet 7 is, “Why were the Great Gods in Council?”

The Hittite Gilgamesh we have mentioned from time to time earlier contains just such an episode, and that text, probably a little earlier than Gilgamesh itself gives us a version of Enkidu’s dream.1599

According to the Hittite text only three of the high gods are involved in the Council: Anu, Enlil, and The Sun God of Heaven. Anu speaks first and (apparently) decides that one of the heroes must die. Enlil follows immediately with the demand that Enkidu must die and Gilgamesh must not die. Anu at least offers a reason for his decision. The men have slain The Bull of Heaven and also Humbaba. Enlil, however, offers no reason why it should be Enkidu and not Gilgamesh who should be put to death for the offenses. (Enlil’s support of Gilgamesh is at least in line with his request in the Sumerian “The Death of Gilgamesh” that Gilgamesh be made a god, while Enki is the one who argues against that special treatment of Gilgamesh.)
Enlil is angry throughout the brief Council. As is frequently the case, Enlil provides no rationale for his decisions. As the most powerful of the gods, he can execute what he demands. The Flood story in Tablet 11 is a particularly good example of the King of the Gods acting irrationally—and he is accused of just that in Tablet 11.

The Sun God demands a reason for Enlil’s precipitous and seemingly arbitrary decision, but he receives no satisfactory answer.

Before taking up Enlil’s response to The Sun God, however, we might wonder about two minor points regarding Anu in this episode. Assyriologists are agreed that Anu (or An, in Sumerian) was in some sense the highest of the gods. Anu was the first named in the pantheon of three (or four), and named first in the most prestigious astronomical/astrological work produced in Mesopotamia. He represents or embodied the “highest heaven,” the Above itself. And on earth Anu is always related to Uruk. Nevertheless even in Uruk he rarely “appears,” and figures in few myths or rituals. Anu is prominent in Hellenistic rituals, largely because he is the Uruk equivalent of Babylon’s Marduk and so functions like Marduk in the New Year Festival. Even in the early, 4th millennium BCE text from Uruk An apparently is so little involved in the religious life of the city that he receives no offerings, while Inanna receives offerings under three of her four major aspects.

Anu does, however, appear in The Bull of Heaven story in *Gilgamesh*, as we have seen. In Tablet 6 he reluctantly gives up The Bull of Heaven to an angry Ishtar, who threatens him, as she does elsewhere in Mesopotamian myth.

It may be, then, that the Hittite version of Enkidu’s dream sees the heroes’ actions in killing The Bull of Heaven as the primary reason why one of them should die. The sequence in the Hittite text, twice mentioning The Bull of Heaven before Humbaba, as if the latter is an addition to the story, may possibly point to the primacy of that episode, as it is in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” in spite of the treatment of the Humbaba episode in *Gilgamesh*, which is more than five times as long as The Bull of Heaven in Tablet 6.

At any rate, Anu demands a death, and Enlil demands that it be Enkidu’s, not Gilgamesh’s.

The third god who speaks in the Council of the Gods is The Sun God of Heaven. (Note that neither Ishtar nor Ea appears in the dream.)

The Sun God objects to the arbitrary and capricious decision of Enlil that Enkidu must die. Translators disagree on a major point in the heated exchange between The Sun God of Heaven and Enlil. The Sun God claims that Enkidu is innocent because he acted at the word of a god. Andrew George translates the sentence in such a way that *Enlil* was the one who ordered the killing of both The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. That would be problematic in *Gilgamesh* in that Enlil is seen as the protector of Humbaba. Later in Tablet 7 a distraught Enkidu will wish that he had given an offering to Shamash rather than to Enlil after the death of Humbaba. That suggests a recognition by Enkidu that...
Enlil would likely need a kind of compensation for the death of his Humbaba. It further recognizes that Shamash had prompted Gilgamesh to fight Humbaba. Gary Beckman reads the Hittite text to put the onus on The Sun God himself rather than Enlil. It was at the “word” of The Sun God that the heroes killed The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. For Beckman The Sun God admits that it was he who ordered both actions. We have seen that this is in line with Shamash’s role in the Gilgamesh version of the Humbaba story. It may also explain why Enkidu and Gilgamesh make an offering to Shamash after the victory over The Bull of Heaven. (There is, as we have noted, no explicit intervention of Shamash in The Bull of Heaven episode as there was in the Humbaba episode.)

Beckman was, though, troubled by the statement by The Sun God of Heaven. He marks his translation with a surprise (!) at the reference to both The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba and also at the admission that The Sun God was the operative force in the two stories.

I think this is an important and subtle exchange between The Sun God and Enlil, and I suggest that Beckman’s reading, without the surprise, is in line with the subversive role played by Shamash in the great heroic exploits in Gilgamesh. Explicitly in the Humbaba story and implicitly in The Bull of Heaven story the Gilgamesh poet vastly complicates the tragedy when he adds the claim that Humbaba represented an “evil” Shamash “hated.” Why, though, does the Hittite story have Enkidu condemned and not Gilgamesh? When The Sun God of Heaven challenges Enlil, The Sun God offers a reason for his challenge. Characteristically, Enlil responds, not with a counterargument but an angry insult. Beckman translates Enlil’s response, “Why do you accompany them daily like a comrade?”  

I take this to be the ultimate insult of one god to another. If this “comrade” is like the Akkadian “comrade” (tappû), the relation between one soldier and another, it points to The Sun God as one who is complicit with the humans, but the addition of “daily” suggests that The Sun God has humiliated himself by acting alongside mere humans (even if Gilgamesh is a special case).

That is enough for Enkidu to see in his dream. He knows he is condemned, and he weeps.

**Human = Mortal**

The archetypal “human” (lullû) is never so obvious as in his leaving this life. Enkidu is, of course, as the lullû-amēlu, human-as-it-was-in-its-beginning. In Gilgamesh we see him in the wilderness among animals, seduced into humanity, and civilized. From his “birth” to his unfortunate and problematic death, we see Enkidu increasingly as, in the modern phrase, “only human.” He is the first character to fight and embrace a friend; to cry; to be despondent even as he is being adopted into the illustrious family of Ninsun; to fear Humbaba; to help a friend; to argue for killing Humbaba; to boast of victory; to make an offering to the sun for his protection; to rejoice in a glorious victory. He weeps in
anticipation of his death; feels pain; falls ill; becomes angry, cursing his enemies; and becomes depressed. He has bad dreams that turn out to be true.

For a character in a story that “evolved” from nothing to the most full “rounded” character—to use an old idea from literary criticism—in *Gilgamesh* Enkidu is a remarkable fictional construct.

He most fully embodies “humanity” as a Sumerian who dies. Like the *temmennu* or foundation, the massive platform built up with bricks that provided stability and protection to the public buildings along the Sumerian floodplain, and also a foundation document, the basis of Mesopotamian thought was that humans must die. Two Akkadian narratives we have already seen, *Atrahasis* and *Enuma Elish*, establish this *temmennu* of Mesopotamian thought. In *Atrahasis* after Enlil tries three times to wipe out the noisy humans who bother him (and is thwarted each time by Enki/Ea), a solution is found to limit the relentless expansion of humanity on the earth. That had become a problem because humanity had been formed to do a job: to work so that the gods would no longer have to work. The first human, according to *Atrahasis*, was a god, Geshtu-e, “a god who had intelligence” (and whose very name meant the “ear” of understanding), whose flesh and blood was mixed with clay. In *Enuma Elish* the construction of a first human is even a darker affair. When Marduk is able to defeat the Terrible Mother Tiamat and to construct a universe out of her corpse, he seizes upon the one who started the war to bear the penalty for the crime. That was Qingu, son and lover of Tiamat, to whom she had given divine powers and authority over her army of demons. Qingu then stands accused of inciting Tiamat. The gods “cut off his blood.” On the new creature formed with the blood of Qingu the gods impose the task of taking over the toiling of the gods.

Quite unlike the creation stories in Genesis, then, the primeval human in Mesopotamia may have had intelligence, but humanity was hardly the last great creature in an orderly series of creations, a being to have sovereignty over the earth and its living creatures.

The exceptions stand out: King Shulgi of Ur and a few other deified kings; Gilgamesh and the humans who survived the Flood the most prominent. The youthful lover of the Great Goddess, Dumuzi or Tammuz, was celebrated in song and ritual for thousands of years.

In one sense, then, we are all like Enkidu. We cannot escape his fate, and we know it. “Being human” evokes our empathy even before we know he will die, and it increases as we watch him die. In develops in even greater intensity when we, with Gilgamesh, lament his death—and turn to develop empathy within ourselves for Gilgamesh. The loss of his friend makes Gilgamesh vulnerable in a way he had not been through the heroic adventures the two men shared.

Enkidu’s death is not only central to *Gilgamesh* but is told in a different way in the epilogue, Tablet 12.
Whatever else is happening in the Council of the Gods that determines Enkidu’s fate, it becomes clear that the principle of substitution is operating: Enkidu dies for Gilgamesh just as Dumuzi dies for Inanna.

**Enkidu, Shamash and the Harimtu**

The story turns to terror. Tablet 7 is quite broken, but the narrative line is clear. Because of the decree of the gods in council, one of the men who killed Humbaba must die. Suddenly, Enkidu sickens. The tablet is filled with sickness, terror, and weeping. Enkidu reports upon a dream of the Netherworld he has had, filled with horror. It will be worse for him because he has not died in battle, a glorious death.

What is remarkable about this episode is that Enkidu’s sickness and approaching death brings out a terrible anger in him. When the Standard Version picks up the story, Enkidu angrily strikes out against the beautiful door he had made out of the cedars that had been protected by Humbaba. Enkidu had made the door and sent it down to Enlil in the holy city of Nippur. Now he would tear it down. He should have given it to Shamash, who had provided him the weapon to kill Humbaba.

Gilgamesh tries to calm his friend, but he fails in this attempt to reason with Enkidu. In the process Gilgamesh lets slip a principle that will come to haunt him. Enlil will never retract his verdict. “People often die before their time,” Gilgamesh rather casually explains (7.54).

Enkidu then turns to Shamash, weeping, and strikes out against the hunter who had discovered him in the wilderness and lead him, eventually, to the sexual encounter with one of Ishtar’s women, the harimtu who transformed him from an animal into a human.

Then Enkidu can only lash out at the harimtu. Enkidu utters a great curse upon her (7.66-95), decreeing the fate of all temple women like her. The curse upon the hunter takes up only six lines; the curse on the harimtu takes up fully twenty-eight lines! (He does not, by the way, know the illness that has seized him. He accuses her of making him ill, but the terms he uses point to no specific disease. He was “pure,” ellu, and she “made him sick” (GIG DÛ-in-ni, the author using Sumerograms for both noun, mars u, and verb, 7.128-29).

Immediately, though, Shamash calls to him from the heavens:

Shamash heard, opened his mouth,  
and from afar, from the heavens, in alarm he called to him:

“Why, Enkidu, do you curse the harimtu, Shamhat,  
who would feed you with the bread fit for the gods,  
and would have you drink beer that is the drink of kings,  
and would clothe you in great garment,  
and would give you beautiful Gilgamesh as a companion?”

Listen: Gilgamesh, your beloved friend, your blood brother,
Will he not lay you out in a great bed?
Not have you lie in a bed of honor?
Place you on the peaceful seat at his left hand?
The kings of the underworld will kiss your feet.

He will have the people of Uruk weep for you,
cause them to grieve you.
He will have the shamhatu, the whole city, fill up with sorrow for your sake,
and afterward he will carry the signs of grief on his own body,
putting on the skin of the Labbu and roaming the wilderness.” (7.134-47)

Hearing this, Enkidu’s heart grows quiet (agga libbašu inūh) (7.149-50).

The “rage” (aggu) in his heart and his “anger” (uzzu) are quieted when Enkidu receives a revelation from the sun god, Shamash. One of the four lines describing Enkidu’s response is quite clear; a second has been reconstructed; the third and fourth are missing. But Enkidu, who has angrily cursed the woman who transformed him into a civilized man, responds to Shamash’s words by blessing her. The curse (7.100-129) is a version, in a different key, of Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar. (The shamhatu was, after all, one of the women in Ishtar’s service.) The blessing (7.151-61) does not erase the curse; rather, it establishes that both will be the fate of such women.

Similarly, the calm that breaks Enkidu’s rage does not fill him with joy. As he approaches his death, immediately after blessing the shamhatu, he lay “sick at heart” (marsatu karassu) and “lonely” (edanushshu). (George translates the first phrase as “his mind was troubled” [59]). He tells his “friend” Gilgamesh about a terrible dream he has had, a vision of the underworld where he will soon be heading.

The mysterious illness worsens through the next twelve days. Sadly, the last thirty-some lines of Tablet 7 are still missing, so we do not know if the bitterness he feels about dying in bed rather than on the battlefield (7.266-72) is mollified in any way. The missing lines surely narrate his death. Tablet 8 opens with Gilgamesh’s magnificent lament for his friend.

One detail in Shamash’s depiction of Enkidu’s good life and honored death, however, points to a final, lasting calm for Enkidu: Gilgamesh will, in the underworld (where he will be a judge and king, according to some Gilgamesh traditions), seat Enkidu in the place of honor, next to him in a shubta nēhta. The term, nēhta, “peaceful,” is of course picked up in the phrase, pashāhu and nāhu, that characterizes the calming of Enkidu’s heart after Shamash completes his speech. It may also, possibly, point to a peace that descends upon Enkidu in his last moments—even though Gilgamesh’s response will increasingly move in the opposite direction.

This should be kept in mind in listening to the treatment of the prostitute at Enkidu’s death. The West still staggers under the burden of the violent biblical denunciation of the “Queen of Heaven” and the “Whore of Babylon.” Not surprisingly, the biblical prophets denounce ‘whoredom’ when they mean idolatry and false religion. Especially when
Gnostic tendencies to see the body as the enemy and as evil are strong, the prostitute is likely to symbolize depravity at the center of man's existence.

Against this Gnostic tendency in the West is what is often described as temple prostitution in Mesopotamia.1608 The temple women (not all of whom actually practiced prostitution, it appears) in the service of the great goddess were seen as women who had “knowledge” that could indeed be dangerous. A Sumerian proverb warns against marrying one, since she knows so many men. As Enkidu’s curse of the prostitute shows, she is in the nightmare vision of the world beyond. (The “sister” of the goddess of life, Ishtar, is the goddess of the netherworld, the terrifying Allatu/Ereshkigal.)

In mythic terms, Enkidu’s curse of the harimtu establishes her destiny. She becomes (i.e., is) what he says she is. So too with the “blessing” which follows:

“May governors and noblemen love you.
Even at a great distance men will strike their thighs in anticipation.
Even farther away they will shake out their hair.
No soldier will hesitate to drop his belt for you.
He’ll give you obsidian, lapis lazuli and gold.
He’ll give you earrings and jewelry.
Ishtar,...of the, gods will let you enter
The home of a man well established, with full granaries.
For you even the mother of seven will be forsaken.” (7.152-61)

Certainly Mesopotamia saw in the feminine the great dualities Erich Neumann has brought to our attention: the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother, the Witch and the Virgin.1609 That the response to this complex on the part of the two “sick” heroes, Enkidu rejects the woman and the n accepts her--is a reconciliation that “postmodern” thinking strives to do too, against the background of a single-minded anti-feminism.

**Enkidu’s Dream of the Underworld**

In a very lengthy and detailed vision (7.162-253), Enkidu provides a portrait of the world of the dead. It is a terrible place where the inhabitants are entirely deprived of life and are reduced to eating clay—even though the underworld is also a kind of place where keepers of the temple and deities dwell.

Immediately after cursing and blessing of the harimtu Enkidu's mind is again troubled. He tells Gilgamesh of his dream. In a vision reminiscent of Gilgamesh's dreams earlier, Enkidu describes a man like a “Thunderbird”--Andrew George calls him the Angel of Death—who seizes him and the two fight. Finally he is crushed as if by a “mighty wild bull.” He is turned into a dove, and his arms, like wings, are bound. He is led into the House of Darkness, also called the House of Dust.

Enkidu begins to describe the underworld the way he will in Tablet 12 of *Gilgamesh* and the way it is described in the “descent” poems: a place of dust and silence. But it takes a turn that suggests a somewhat different aspect of the place, the way Gilgamesh sees it in “The Death of Gilgamesh.” He sees rulers of the past who had served roast and baked
bread to the gods Anu and Enlil and had poured them cool water. The scene reminds us that for all its terror, the underworld was not a place of punishment like the Christian Hell. In addition to the “crowned heads” Enkidu sees the respectable keepers of the temple: the _en_, the _lagāru_, _ishippu_, _lumahhu_ and the _gudapsû_ (7.199-201).

Such figures are identified by the roles they played on earth and now, it appears, in the underworld. Enkidu also sees the famous Etana, a shepherd who ascended to the heavens on an eagle. Two prominent gods are mentioned: Shakkan, whom we have seen in the description of Enkidu in the wilderness; and Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld. Before Ereshkigal is a scribe who holds a tablet and is reading aloud in the presence of the goddess. She is named Bēlet-sêri. She seems surprised to see Enkidu in the underworld and asks who brought him there. Unfortunately, the next forty-some lines are missing, and we do not know if the vision provides more of the positive aspects or the more terrifying aspects of the underworld, such as Enkidu describes in Tablet 12. The concluding statement has Enkidu asking Gilgamesh to remember him, since they had endured such hardships together. The line recalls the First Prologue, which emphasizes the hardships Gilgamesh had endured; and it also underscores the importance in Mesopotamian thought of leaving a loved one behind to care for the dead.

Gilgamesh has only one line in response to the dream: Enkidu’s vision is one that will never be equaled.

**The Death of Enkidu**

Enkidu falls ill to some undetermined ailment. His condition worsens over many days. The thirty some lines at the end of Tablet 7 (7.268-300?) are missing, but they probably continue the slow passage of an illness that lasts twelve days and causes Enkidu to lament the most bitter part of his fate: he will die, not in battle, where he would win his name, and immortality of a sort, but because a god has acted against him.

**The Great Elegy: Tablet 8, Lines 1-58**

At dawn Gilgamesh begins the mourn Enkidu with a long and moving elegy. He sees Enkidu as a child and force of nature, whose mother is a gazelle and whose father is a wild donkey. Trees and wild animals, a river in the East (in Elam) and a river in Sumer (the Euphrates) will mourn him. The young men of Uruk who witnessed the battle against The Bull of Heaven, plowmen, shepherds, and Ishtar’s women will mourn the loss. Gilgamesh himself will wail like a woman, a professional mourner. He describes his friend as “the ax” at his side, the knife in his belt, his shield—but also in imagery of urban festivals, with Enkidu as his “festive garment” and his “belt of pleasure.” He recalls their great victories over The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. Then he touches the body and feels no heartbeat.

Gilgamesh’s long lament contains many elements of the Western pastoral elegy. Like the epic, the pastoral elegy enjoyed very high status among poets and an educated audience that could see conventions that went back into the Greco-Roman literary tradition at least to Moschus’s lament for Bion. In the Renaissance completing a pastoral elegy in
imitation of the Classics was considered a first step in a poetic career that would, the poet hoped, lead to the highest genres, the epic and tragedy. John Milton pursued such a poetic career consciously and was able to produce both of the highest “kinds,” *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Not surprisingly, his pastoral elegy, “Lycidas,” is considered the finest example of its kind in English.

As the genre designation implies the setting of a pastoral elegy is the world of nature, as mediated by the shepherd. It would be hard to find a setting more fitted to the subject than Uruk. Of the many conventional features, the “pathetic fallacy” is the most prominent. As in Gilgamesh’s elegy, the poet/shepherd addresses nature as if it could feel emotions humans feel.

Let the river Ulay, the holy one (*qadishtu*), mourn,
whose banks we walked proudly.
Let the pure (*ellu*) Euphrates mourn,
whose water we poured in waterskins. (8.17-20)

The first line, which may contain puns on the women in the service of Ishtar—who will be the professional mourners for Enkidu, mentions a river in Elam; the second line mentions the familiar Euphrates, which provided Uruk with its irrigation system. Both are personified. Mentioning the Ulay is a clue to the theory mentioned earlier that the Humbaba story was originally set in the east of Uruk, not in the northwest.

The sheer length of the elegy is remarkable in a poem where episodes are constructed with such small bricks of text. Like the lamentations of the *gala* Gilgamesh’s elegy develops intense pathos in the audience, the effect that is aimed at by pastoral elegies.

One difference between the Western pastoral elegy and Gilgamesh’s poem is that (in the Christian poets at least) the elegy brings relief from the suffering of the mourners, what literary critics call a “pattern of consolation.” Milton’s “Lycidas” laments the death of a promising young man, but provides the reader (and poet) with consolation in a far different afterlife than Enkidu could expect.

Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more,
For *Lycidas* your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watry floar,
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled Ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So *Lycidas* sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walk’d the waves
Where other groves, and other streams along,
With *Nectar* pure his oozy Lock’s he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song,
In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.\(^{1613}\)
Where Milton anticipates a resurrection and a “nuptial Song” (so fine that it cannot be expressed in human language, hence “unexpressive”) for the soul in its union with God, we already know from Enkidu’s dream what awaits him. It is worth noting that Milton employs the by-then familiar simile of the Sun like the Son. Lycidas is not really dead, though like Shamash, he travels below the “watry floar” of the physical cosmos; he will rise like Shamash, with the “day-star” that is identified with the Jesus who walked the waves. Such a consolation Gilgamesh, for all his worship of Shamash, cannot provide Enkidu (or the audience).

After the Great Elegy *Gilgamesh* returns to the very terse style that characterizes much of the poem. Gilgamesh reacts to the death of Enkidu in ways that reflect traditional mourning rituals, but with a difference.

**A Day of Mourning**

In a brief (eight line) but powerful response, Gilgamesh covers the face of Enkidu “like a bride” and then circles the body “like an eagle.” He acts like a lioness that has lost her cubs, pacing this way and that. He tears out clumps of hair and throws away his clothes, as if it were taboo (8.59-64).

The lines have prompted a great deal of commentary, mainly because of its crossing of traditional gender lines. Enkidu is seen as a “bride” (*kallatu*), an eagle (*arû*), and a *nēshtu*, the feminine form of “lion.” Gilgamesh the lioness acts like a mother who has lost her cubs. The lines help to define the intimate relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Noteworthy is the likening of the powerful hero to female roles, where in some cultures the lesser partner is likened to the female.

Combine these lines with previous metaphors and similes Gilgamesh employed in the elegy (8.44-49). There he recalls the manly adventures when they fought Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven. Enkidu was the “axe” at Gilgamesh’s side, the “knife” at his belt, and the “shield” that protected his face. But Enkidu was also the *lubar isinna*, the clothing a man would wear to the festival, and a sash (*nēbuhu*) of *lalû*, a kind of intense pleasure that earlier in *Gilgamesh* was associated with enjoyment of the charms and *kuzbu* of the *harimtu* Shamhat. Not surprisingly in that context Gilgamesh likens himself to the professional mourners, the women, *lallarīti*, the other role of women in the service of Ishtar.

**A Second Day of Mourning**

At dawn Gilgamesh calls for the craftsmen to fashion a statue of Enkidu in precious jewels and gold. In words that recall Shamash’s prophetic speech to the dying Enkidu, Gilgamesh promises to lay Enkidu out on a magnificent bed, then to place him next to him in a seat where the rulers of the underworld will kiss his feet. The people of Uruk will mourn while Gilgamesh himself, with matted hair and clothed in the skin of a lion, will wander the wilderness.
A Third Day of Mourning
At dawn Gilgamesh opens his treasury and provides an immense number of precious goods for Enkidu to present to the inhabitants of the underworld. The gifts are then identified in a long list of items and the gods who will receive them. The list begins, apparently, with Shamash and Ishtar, then identifies the deities (like Ereshkigal, the “sister” of Ishtar and the ruler of the underworld) associated in one way or another with the world of the dead. Dumuzi (Tammuz) the shepherd, lover of Ishtar, is one of them; later in the list Dumuzi of the Abzu, called literally the “scapegoat” of the underworld, is also mentioned. All of this wealth is displayed before the Sun God.

A Fourth (?) Day of Mourning
Gilgamesh completes ritual acts, again at dawn and before the Sun God. One line, about the idea of damming a river, suggests that Enkidu may be buried in a tomb like the one describes in “The Death of Gilgamesh,” a Sumerian poem. The last thirty or so lines of Tablet 8 are missing. Presumably they complete the public mourning for Enkidu.

Mourning and Melancholia: The Quest for “Life” (balāṭu)
The quiet of Enkidu becomes the renewed restlessness of Gilgamesh. From my point of view, the most moving segment of Gilgamesh begins in the illness and death of Enkidu. So great is his grief at the loss of his friend that Gilgamesh becomes Enkidu, Enkidu of the wilderness. He roams the wilderness. Only a skin protects him. His hair is matted like an animal. He wanders the world desperately in search of the meaning of death.

Not surprisingly, Akkadian uses terms for “healing” and “curing” that are extensions of “living,” balāṭu, “to live,” the equivalent of Sumerian TI.(LA). To cure a patient is ana bullūṭišu. “Cures” are bulṭi. The medical texts indicate that the patient will recover with the verb iballūṭı.¹⁶¹⁴

The beautiful lament Gilgamesh sings for Enkidu runs to some 56 lines. While his lament assumes that his friend is dead, the end of the poem includes a remarkable personal recognition of that fact.

“Now what is this sleep that has seized upon you?
You have grown dark, you cannot hear me.”
And he—he does not lift his head.
He touched his heart, it does not beat.
He covered the face of the friend like a bride.
Like an eagle he circled over him.
Like a lioness whose cubs are lost
he paces back and forth.
He tears out his hair and roughs it up,
rips off and throws down the fine clothes like something taboo.
(8.55-62)

¹⁶¹⁴
Gilgamesh’s response is a mixture of the expected and the unexpected. Tearing his hair and ripping his clothes are traditional rituals of mourning. Covering Enkidu’s face “like a bride” and pacing back and forth like a lioness bereft of her cubs adds a complexity to the relationship between the hero and his “friend,” motifs emphasized by Susan Ackerman in her study of “the ambiguity of eros” in the stories of Gilgamesh and David. In addition to traditional behavioral expressions of grief Gilgamesh’s acts are intensely personal, intimate, and gender-complex. (First Enkidu is imaged as the female partner, then Gilgamesh is feminized, likened to a wild animal responding to the loss of her babies.) Gary A. Anderson makes a good case that Gilgamesh’s response is excessive. The rituals of grief were intense, but public and limited in time; at the proper moment, the mourner was expected to reverse the rituals, to bathe, comb the hair, and adopt clean clothes for a return to the community. In these lines we see that Gilgamesh has begun to step across the line. Sara Mandell and Susan Ackerman emphasize the “liminal” character of Gilgamesh. Here we see him “betwixt and between,” losing the balance that is expected to tie the individual to his community. (I would argue that his grief is the other side of the “joy” that characterized Gilgamesh when we first see him, the “joy” raised to its greatest intensity in the celebration of victory over the Bull of Heaven—and Ishtar. One could argue that Gilgamesh never restores the balance. As we shall see, this is the crux of most interpretations of the story.)

Everywhere he goes--to the scorpion-people who guard the entrance to the mountain, to the garden of the gods, to the dwelling of the bar-owner, Siduri--he hears the same answer. His search is futile. The Scorpion-man notices that the one who has come has the “flesh of the gods” (shīr ilāni) (9.49; also recognized by Siduri in 10.7). The journey is troublesome. There is pain in his belly. His face burns in heat and cold. He asks the impossible: to go where no human had gone, to see the only man who had escaped the fate of humankind, who dwells in “the faraway” enjoying the life “like the gods,” the wise Utnapishtim.

Gilgamesh’s condition is repeatedly called his nissatu, as we have seen. The “grief, worry, depression,” the term closest to the West’s melancholia, Gilgamesh’s nissatu is mentioned early (1.106), at the center (7.76), and no fewer than 13 times in the hero’s wandering in the wilderness (9.4, 125; 10.8, 49, 115, 122, 215, 222, 256, 262, 267, 299; 11.125). The use of exact repetition, which tends to violate the canons of modern English poetry (though not of song, note), is characteristic of Sumerian poetry far more than it is even of Akkadian poetry. For me, the intense iteration of Gilgamesh’s condition is the most moving element of the poem. It turns the story of Gilgamesh from one of admiration of a hero to empathy for a human being who has a condition familiar to us, but in extreme form. For me, the poetic expression of Gilgamesh’s “joy” is less successful than the expression of his sorrow, though I am willing to grant the possibility that the original readers of Gilgamesh or the audiences for the retellings of the Gilgamesh stories would have been just as much involved in the triumphs of the hero as in his tragic quest.

Gilgamesh will not listen to the advice he receives along the way. Though he possesses flesh of the gods, he is “dressed in skins” (mashka labish). His face is drawn (in that
wonderful bit of understatement) “like one who goes on a long journey.” Wildly he pushes on, through great deprivation, in great agony. He travels even across the Waters of Death, the last to do so as he was the first.

**Gifts to the Gods of the Underworld**

Andrew George commends W. G. Lambert, Egbert von Weiher, and Irvin Finkel for recognizing new textual materials that allowed him to put together the magnificent edition of *Gilgamesh* that is standard today. Among the new finds is a Late Babylonian tablet that restores more than sixty lines of Tablet 8.1618

After Gilgamesh delivers his eloquent elegy for Enkidu, he opens the treasury and takes out what appears to be an immense amount of precious stones and metals for craftsmen (?) to construct objects “provided for his friend.” Sadly, this part of the text is still too fragmentary to read clearly. What follows, however, is pretty clear. Valuable objects are brought out and shown publicly—displayed “to the Sun God”—to be given to the gods. Many of the gods are obscure figures, some are very well known, and all have some connection to the underworld. The purpose, as in the long list of offerings to the gods in “The Death of Gilgamesh,” is presumably to benefit Enkidu as he descends into the world of the dead.

We discover that the Queen of the Underworld, Ereshkigal, maintains a retinue such as one finds in Mesopotamian temples. There is a steward (the goddess Hushbisha), a sweeper, a cleaner, and a butcher (Bibbu). “Butcher” may seem to suggest a violent role, but Mesopotamian temples made good use of butchers for quite ordinary and obvious reasons, the preparation of meals for the gods and the keepers of the temple. Butchers and brewers were distinguished figures in the temple and are known to have participated in solemn public processions.

Several of the figures receiving offerings are worth mentioning. The first to be given a gift, a throwstick of “gleaming wood,” is the Great Queen Ishtar (8:134-38). The poem maintains a distinction between two Dumuzis. One is the Tammuz of *Gilgamesh* Tablet 6, the shepherd, lover of Ishtar. The second is Dumuzi of the Abzu, the lesser known Dumuzi, who is called the mash-hal-tap-pe-e of the underworld. The Akkadian mashhaltappû (or mashhulduppû) is transparently a borrowing of a Sumerian term, mash-huldubba, George translates properly as a “scapegoat.” The English scapegoat, well-known as the goat sent into the wilderness for the demon Azazel in the Bible (Leviticus 16:8-26). The Sumerian would seem to mean the “goat that keeps evil away.” The first Dumuzi is given a carnelian flute. The scapegoat is given something with a “back of alabaster.”

The remainder of the tablet is fragmentary, and the last thirty some lines are still lost. They constitute, though, the last clear signs of rational control on the part of Gilgamesh. One fragmentary line provides an intriguing possibility of support for my theory that the death of Enkidu is a projection and displacement of the much older story of the death of Gilgamesh. There text refers to a “damming of the river” (8:212). “The Death of
Gilgamesh” makes much of Gilgamesh’s decision to hide the magnificent tomb he has constructed for himself (and his retinue). He therefore dams the river at Uruk to be undammed when the burial takes place.

From Sacrifice to Healing

The West retains memories of ancient sacrifices and the substitutions they entail: a ram for a son; bread for flesh; wine for blood. Extensive sacrificial rituals were performed by priests in the Temple. The argument here is that the death of Enkidu and the illness that leads up to it can be clarified by the principle of substitution that was so important to Mesopotamian thought: here Enkidu for Gilgamesh much as Dumuzi is a substitute for Inanna.

Biblical scholar Martin J. Selman defines sacrifice, as understood in Mesopotamia, as offerings given specifically to gods as opposed to offerings made to the temple, which was the case in the Jerusalem temple. Such sacrifices did not require an altar. Selman includes the care and feeding of the gods as well as rituals and incantations in Mesopotamian sacrifice. The rituals have three distinctive modes: sympathetic or symbolic magic, such as one sees in the Ea rituals in Shurpu, used to remove evil; substitution or transfer, when a person was ill or under a curse of death; and direct exorcism, where a spirit is sent to a particular place. Most striking is the contrast with familiar biblical sacrifices, where blood rituals were far more important than they were in Mesopotamia.

The death of Enkidu may represent a kind of “sacrifice” for Gilgamesh. The “healing” of Enkidu, Gilgamesh, and perhaps even Enlil and Ishtar, on the other hand, makes the distinctions we have become familiar with in the modern West hard to maintain. Myth, literature, rituals, songs, performances that are expected to exchange “joy” for anger and depression (in gods, fictional characters, and audiences) suggest something more like Aristotle’s “tragic pleasure” than sacrifices in the Judeo-Christian traditions. Genres are blurred. To move from ideas we have become comfortable with to the complexities of Mesopotamian traditions takes us through many unexpected twists and turns.

Thoughts on Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East

Sacrifice is a part of almost all religious systems the world over, sophisticated or primitive, and exhibits a great variety of expression and meaning. The Hebrew Bible describes the presentation of animals or grains on the altar as the principal act of offering in the Israelite cult. In Mesopotamia we perceive the situation as more complicated, because of the great number and variety of texts available.

One starts in a search for a meaning of this most basic of religious areas by the old idea of “giving so that you may get,” but the advanced thinking of the ancient Near East goes beyond that. There we find the additional idea of a communal meal at which the god is a participant; however, the further concept that the deity is a part of the food consumed is not found in the Ancient Near East. The gift is to be something of one’s own, so that it is not just an object that is given up, but a part of one’s self.
In fact, the gift of one’s own life is the ultimate gift, but the deity is satisfied with a substitute. This can be an animal, or one’s own property, and again an ultimate would be the gift of one’s own offspring, usually a son. But the god is satisfied with a substitute, such as an animal. This gift must be done in the right spirit, or else it is not a sacrifice. When it is given in the appropriate spirit, accompanied by symbolic ritual acts, a mystic power comes over the ceremony, and it has efficacy. Otherwise it is a mere mechanical act, which could be done by a hired performer.

The sacrifice as a gift, then, has gone beyond the mere idea of paying the god what is owed, or buying benefits from the deity. The giver both gives and receives, so both god and man participate. This giving is the power of life itself, a part of the life of the giver being transferred to the recipient, to add to the potency. Human interaction and human-deity interaction work in analogous ways.

The sacrifice is done because it has always been done, it is deep in the heart of humankind, but at the same time it is done consciously in order to remove risk, to overpower what demonic powers there be, to remove sin impeding the flowing of the stream of life. The sacrifice becomes, then, an atonement, itself subject to various explanations or none, but an idea which is deep in the human psyche.

Humans know this in their atavistic being, and they know that by this action they are taking part in their own salvation, they are doing something rather than waiting passively for the fates to close in on them. They may think that they are doing this on command alone, but they are more profoundly following the stream of tradition that has come down to them over thousands of years.

In particular, for the areas in which we are interested, in the Hebrew cult the sacrifice was made only at the altar. Indeed, the Hebrew root for the words “altar” and the usual word for “sacrifice” is the same. Its purpose was mostly ethical or ritualistic, an offering for sin or a praise of Yahweh. In one type of offering the animal was completely burned, so that the dimension of scent was added in order to communicate with the god.

The code for the sacrifice of animals, birds and grains on the altar is given in its most advanced form by Leviticus, Chaps 1-7. It was done by the kohen. Only general aspects of the ritual pre presented. A confusing (inconsistent?) panoply of terms for the offering is used. Both communion sacrifices (Lev 7) and expiatory sacrifices (Lev 4, 5, 6 passim) take up most of the text.

The Psalms show a more sensitive path of the worshiper towards the altar. Only the one with clean hands and a pure heart will receive a blessing (Pss 24:3ff., 26:6). The sacrifice is a joyful thing to do (Pss 27:6, 42:4, 43:4, 95:2). Praise is given to the accompaniment of a variety of musical instruments (Ps 33:2ff., 98:5, 150:3-5). The temple brings thoughts of the hesed of the Lord (Ps 48:9). The sacrifice must be with genuine thanksgiving and not merely mechanical (Ps 50:8-14). It must be accompanied with the right spirit and heart, or else it is unacceptable (Ps 51:16.19). The recalling of God’s terrifying deeds bring the worshiper into the temple so that he may offer sacrifice (Ps 66).
There are processions of singers and maidens into the temple (Ps 68:24-26). Though the psalmist is an “I,” the worship is done with the congregation in the temple (116:17-19). In Mesopotamia, the sacrifice was made on many occasions: upon the building of a house, to avert an unfavorable omen, to obtain success in battle, after a lion hunt, but especially as a (usually) twice daily feeding of the image of the deity. (Our information in the last instance comes from Uruk in a very late period, the Seleucid period.) Strangely, the cult image, before whom the food was placed, was in another room, or behind curtains, when the food was “eaten.” The sacrificial animal could provide the exta (internal organs) which the diviner could then read to determine the future or to answer a question. Some Assyrian kings were privileged in obtaining the “leftovers” from the deity’s meal in recognition of their status.

Not only are the ritual acts (as reported in the texts) more complex in Mesopotamia than we read about in Israel, but the offering material is more varied. Bread and beer (often mentioned together), water, milk, incense, fish, fine oil, sesame, mead, Bergrauschtrank, dates, swine and other game. The blood of the animal was not as important as it was in Hebrew ritual life. Singing, as we have seen, was used on many occasions, especially in the canonical laments, which were done in a dialect of Sumerian called emesal, though why it was used we do not quite understand. The gala were known for singing such laments.

The vast number of divination, magical, and healing texts are often found side-by-side with those of the more central ritual actions, making us suspect that they were done in conjunction with one another. They often use the same language and are done for the same purposes, that of release from sin, as the official sacrifices.

Finally, deep in the Mesopotamian religious life was the concept of the sexual, which has been discussed in a number of ways already. Women functioned as priests in Mesopotamia in great numbers and often in the most important priestly roles, whereas in Hebrew life the officiants were all male. In another significant contrast, Mesopotamia used images all over, but Hebrew texts oppose the use of icons, at least in theory. (This would seem to belie the large number of clay figurines found in excavations from all periods. The question will be discussed below.)

As we cautiously attempt to list the elements common to Mesopotamia and Hebrew life, we should also mention the use of the altar in each cult, with an officiant standing in front of it, uttering prayers for well-being. At least some of the clergy in each society were anointed into office. Their heads were dressed in a special garb. The priests would be paid partly from the offerings of the people. Each of the two societies had feast-days on which were performed special ceremonies. Each sacrificed animals. Each used a peculiarly simple language to describe the temple, simply the word “house.” There are hints in the liturgies that each involved a drama. Each used the word “service” to refer to the worship. The king had a role as chief priest in both, in Mesopotamia especially from Old Babylonian times until the fall of Assyria and Babylonia.
Two Modern Views of Sacrifice

“Sacrifice” is the most transparent and yet the most puzzling of religious terms, largely because of developments in the modern West. Ancient literature, Greek and Hebrew especially, seems to take the sacrifice of animals and grains as a matter of course. The Homeric epics, for example, abound in such ritual acts. Biblical texts provide details of rituals to be carried out in the temple, and prophets inveigh against the dependence on such rituals. When even a hint of human sacrifice enters ancient literature, though, the tone changes. The story of Abraham and his first-born, Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), is often considered both the ultimate test of faith and a protest against human sacrifice in general.1625 The extension of sacrifice to “self-sacrifice,” on the other hand, is often considered the noblest of religious and ethical principles, a submission to a higher power or to a principle higher than the individual’s self-interest. Once understood as submission, however, it could carry another, less desirable meaning, a pathological condition William James called “morbid-mindedness,” a sort of “psychic neuralgia” that was the very opposite of the “healthy-mindedness” that characterized the best of religious experience.1626 For those today who have little reason to value even the sacrifice of the saintly, the term is more likely to point to ideological constraint, the “mind-forged manacles” that bind and oppress, as William Blake phrased it in “London” (1794).

Since the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem, kohen and lewi, hereditary offices, had as their primary duty the offering of sacrifices,1627 and the vast majority of Israelites (who were not priests) had contact with the temple primarily in providing “gifts” of foodstuffs, usually the meat of domestic animals and the roasted grain, bread, oil, salt, wine and frankincense,1628 two meanings of the word “sacrifice” have long existed together in English.1629 The primary meaning, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is the slaughter of an animal as an offering to a deity. It is attested in English as early as 1300 CE. The wider sense of any “surrender to God or a deity, for the purpose of propitiation or home, of some object of possession” appears somewhat later, in the Renaissance. (The first citation in the OED for the term in the meaning, “the destruction or surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having, or regarded as having, a higher or a more pressing claim; the loss entailed by devotion to some other interest; also, the thing so devoted or surrendered,” is Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet.) The offering of something valued is perhaps best captured in the compound, “self-sacrifice.”

The identification of the sacrifice and the sacrificer is a peculiarity in English that derived from theological interpretation of the crucifixion of Christ as a voluntary sacrifice.1630 The OED notes this use as early as 1375 CE. Its connection to the Eucharistic celebration is also pre-Shakespearean, from the early 16th century. The concept itself is much earlier. The New Testament “The Letter to the Hebrews” argues that Christ is the “supreme high priest” (4.14) and at the same time the perfect sacrifice for sin. “To suit us, the ideal high priest would have to be holy, innocent and uncontaminated, beyond the influence of sinners, and raised up above the heavens; one who would not need to offer sacrifices every day, as the other high priest do for their own sins and then for those of the people, because he has done this once and for all by, offering himself. The Law appoints high priests who
are men subject to weakness; but the promise on oath, which came after the Law, appointed the Son who is made perfect for ever” (7.26-28).

From antiquity, then, we can see the roots of our familiar English terms. Thinking of priests as, primarily, sacrificers can, however, lead us astray in this study of Mesopotamian temple officers. The Mesopotamian temples did include sacrifice, from a very early period; but as we will see, the “keepers of the sacred house” had a great many functions to perform, only one of which was the offering of grains and meats to the gods. On the other hand, we now shy away from the term that comes closest to “self-sacrifice” in a society that did not develop, as we have, a distinctly modern and Western notion of the self. That term is “slave.” Akkadian borrowed a term from West Semitic, abdu (CAD 1.1.51), that is close to the Hebrew ‘ebed, a male slave. The songs of the ‘ebed of Yahweh in Second Isaiah (Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 53) are doubtless the most exalted use of the term in Judeo-Christian tradition. Islam, on the other hand, still honors the “slave” of God in the popular names for men that begin with abd, Abdullah, Abdullatif and the like. Much more familiar in Mesopotamia, however, was the Akkadian term ardu, close to the Sumerian word arad. In Akkadian the primary meaning is “slave,” but ardu also designates an official, a servant, a subordinate, a retainer, follower, soldier and, important for our purposes, the subject of a king and a worshiper of a deity (CAD 1.ii.243-51).

It is not only that we wince at the ancient institution of slavery in view of our own sad history in the modern world; the very notion of such utter submission is problematic. Again, Islam underscores the “submission” to the will of God that is at the very heart of the religion. But others largely prefer a softened form like “servant,” or “service,” terms that do not appear to cancel out the voluntary act of an individual. In this regard it is well to return to the religious use of “sacrifice” in the modern sense of “self-sacrifice.” The main contours of our problem with “self-sacrifice” have been traced by Debora Kuller Shuger in The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity. While she concentrates on the period roughly between 1450 and 1650 CE and the radical changes in the Bible came to be viewed by European scholars, theologians and laypersons, the “scholarship” part of her title, she connects the “sacrifice” part to modern “subjectivity” in a most striking way. Not surprisingly (in view of the OED citation for “sacrifice”) Shuger sees a shift in the representation of the self and human existence, from what may be considered a “religious” understanding to a “literary” one, in Shakespeare’s plays. In the 16th century CE, Shuger claims, the art of the period became fascinated with cruelty, and cruelty became the very “essence of evil,” in contrast to “humanity.” What became problematic in the representation of cruelty—especially in the presentation of Christ’s passion—was that the viewer or reader had to identify with the torturer, and the viewing self then became “unstable, divided.”

Gone was the medieval image that Shuger calls the ideal of “maternal manhood,” the “celibate, unarmed, cenobitic male” best seen in the obedient servant, the monk, and in the gentle Jesus, the victim. Instead, an ambivalent and contradictory male image appears, not simply the other dominant image in medieval thought, the old chivalric ideal of the aristocratic warrior or the maternal monk. The new, highly problematic image
internalizes the whole drama of the Crucifixion, making of the self the torturing audience of the Crucifixion and the tortured victim at the same time. Shuger describes this as an image of “confictional, decentered, and chimerial manhood.”

Christ’s Passion becomes conflated with another motif that is suggested in scripture—and may go back to Sumerian “City Laments”—the destruction of Jerusalem. Shuger thinks that the now familiar stories of “urban apocalypse,” which are popular in 20th century movies, can be seen in the Renaissance conflation of Passion and city lament. The city, imaged as a seductive woman, combines the beauty and decadence of the city, its very economic prosperity connected with effeminacy and brutality. The Elizabethans saw their London as the city, of course, as we see New York as the archetypal modern city. The biblical precedents, where Jerusalem is seen as the “wanton wife of God,” in Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s telling phrase, have now been traced.

Shuger’s major example is the strange work by Shakespeare’s contemporary, Thomas Nashe, Christ’s Tears over Jerusalem (1593). On one level it is a satire that exposes anxiety about cities, the shift from agrarian to urban society. London, at once seductive and decadent, will suffer the fate of Jerusalem. The shocking images in Nashe point to the failure of redemption and the necessary destruction of the corrupt city, with Christ combining cruelty and caritas much in the way Othello does in his murder of Desdemona. In Nashe’s Jerusalem, as it falls, a woman cannibalizes her only son, a grim comparison with the Crucifixion as the sacrifice of the Son.

A new way of looking at the Bible, and a new sense of self, Shuger contends, are related. “Biblical interpretation thus germinates, in the form of myth, the two obsessive themes of the postmedieval West: psychological fragmentation and socioeconomic decadence, themes heavy with gendered anxieties about violence and weakness.” Favorite figures in this new regime are tragic victims like Jephthah’s only child and virgin daughter (Judges 11:1-12), a sacrificial victim of her father’s vow to Yahweh, the subject of an important play in imitation of Classical tragedy; and Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene becomes “an exemplary figure but in a curious way: she is not the goal of the quest but is lost in the forest along with everyone else. That is, she supplies a model of suffering, solitary, forsaken humanity. She is neither Madonna nor Whore but a figure for all that is marginalized, powerless, solitary, unhappy.” Shuger claims that Renaissance biblical interpretation came to exclude the role of emotions and sexuality in religion, such as one might find in the tragic figures the came to be treated in plays, stories, poems, and the visual arts. Literature took on the task of representing the self and human existence. (For Shuger, Shakespeare is an exemplary figure in this modern turn.) The exploration of suffering humanity and the complex, divided subjectivity that we see especially in the novel as it develops in the West is now so well established that we rarely question its appropriateness. Now we look for such a concern for the “subject” in the Bible and in biblical interpretation.

In the construction of a distinctly “modern” subject or self, the sacrificial victim became both fascinating and horrifying. Perhaps the most complete example is Gustav Flaubert’s
highly popular novel, *Salamnibô* (1862). The story is set in ancient Carthage. The main characters, the heroic barbarian Mâtho and the virgin priestess Salammbô, are both sacrificial victims in a society fairly dripping with the blood of victims, including the innocent infants sacrificed to Moloch. The story, a rebellion of mercenaries against Carthage, is filled with violent acts of every description, but it is, as we have come to expect in modern fiction, usually filled with the close analysis of interior struggles and the psychological complexities of the characters from antiquity. Virtually the entire modern fascination with and horror at the savagery of sacrifice—animal, human, erotic and emotional—can be read in Flaubert’s Orientalist narrative.

The image of Moloch sacrifices, rituals in which the most valued infants are passed through the fire, was already a lurid condemnation of Canaanite religion in biblical texts. Works like *Salambô* and Eugène Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) before it, a massive painting that shows a jaded Assyrian king passively looking on while one of his concubines hangs herself and another, his favorite, is stabbed by a slave, developed and exploited the image of “barbaric” sacrifice.

Sardanapalus, an Assyrian king, developed an image in Greco-Roman antiquity as a voluptuary. Ctesias in the 4th century BCE was apparently the earliest to write of the 7th century king’s depravity. Alexander the Great is said to have found this epitaph on Sardanapalus’s tomb: “I have eaten, drunk and amused myself, and I have always considered everything worth no more than a fillip.” Aristotle responded to such self-indulgence with the judgment that it was worthier a pig than a man. The Christian tradition found in him an example of debauchery and effeminacy. Byron turned Sardanapalus into a Romantic—tragic—figure. *Sardanapalus* (1821) depicted the king at the moment when he had lost his empire, making a suicide pact with his favorite concubine, Myrrha. He has an enormous pyre built under his tomb, and the play ends with Myrrha firing the pyre and leaping into her lover’s arms.

The scandal Delacroix introduced into the legend was the world-weariness that informs the scene, an orgy that turns into slaughter, with the king looking on passively while his lovers, concubines, and slaves destroy themselves. Jack J. Spector interprets Delacroix’s work psychologically, a reflection not so much of the moral tradition as of Delacroix’s own opposed impulses of passion and asceticism.

More telling is his ambivalent feelings for women. Spector claims that “his most impressive images of women have to do not with tenderness and maternal warmth but rather with their being objects of sadistic torment and death or themselves the murderers of their own children.”

Delacroix’s sexual fantasies, like Flaubert’s, helped perpetuate a romantic view of the Oriental despot that persists even today. The Oriental despot is the West’s image of the debauched and sadistic authority, the terrible father who turns everyone in the kingdom into his subjects. The unlimited power of the ultimate tyrant corrupts not only the underlings who depend upon him, but all other institutions in society. The harem, with its veiled and enslaved women, is the perfect image of a servitude that weakens all,
including the despot himself, who ironically is rendered effeminate in the process. If the Western myth of the autonomous self, with its exaggerated valuation of individual freedom, accounts for the “subjectivity” so important to the modern West, it is ironically also responsible for the dread of subjection, of dependence upon the other.

The Orientalism of Delacroix and Flaubert, not to mention a host of lesser artists and authors, still colors the West’s image of the East. Edward Said has traced its early history back to ancient Greece. The earliest Greek tragedy that has been preserved, Aeschylus’s *The Persians*, already presents the Oriental despot in his full power and corruption. What is most important for the history of the West is the role the Oriental despot plays in the construction of a “Western” identity. In Aeschylus the Greeks are already imaged as the tough, well-disciplined freedom-loving people of the West in contrast to the wealthy and powerful but corrupt Asians. As recently as 1942 the distinguished Classicist Edith Hamilton was still claiming that

The ancient world, in so far as we can reconstruct it, bears everywhere the same stamp. In Egypt, in Crete, in Mesopotamia, wherever we can read bits of the story, we find the same conditions: a despot enthroned, whose whims and passions are the determining factor in the state; a wretched, subjugated populace; a great priestly organization to which is handed over the domain of the intellect. This is what we know as the Oriental world to-day. It has persisted down from the ancient world through thousands of years, never changing in any essential. Only in the last hundred years—less than that—it has shown a semblance of change, made a gesture of outward conformity with the demands of the modern world. But the spirit that informs it is the spirit of the East that never changes. It has remained the same through all the ages down from the antique world, forever aloof from all that is modern. This state and this spirit were alien to the Greeks. None of the great civilizations that preceded them and surrounded them served them as model. With them something completely new came into the world. They were the first Westerners; the spirit of the West, the modern spirit, is a Greek discovery and the place of the Greeks is in the modern world.

During the long period in which a Roman imperium provided the model for both church and state—from late antiquity to the early modern period—the Greek model was driven largely underground; but in the emergence of the modern autonomous self and its challenges to all forms of authority, the Greeks came to be considered a “modern” culture surrounded by barbarian Asiatics.

In positive ways, then, the modern Western image of a self or subject, bounded by the experience in a body, what Clifford Geertz has called an atomistic view of the person, made subjectivity respectable—but sacrifice problematic. Every kind of subjection has made oppressed peoples wary of appeals to self-sacrifice. The once exalted religious idea of the “slave” of God was softened into “service,” “submission” into an individual’s voluntary act of faith. As Marxist and feminist social critiques then made even the modern individual subject to bourgeois and patriarchal forces, and Freud found the self divided against itself, the whole regime of sacrifice has been called into question.
Sacrifice, whether of the older religious (largely “external”) type, where one sacrificed a valued object—and the priest was the sacrificer—or the psychologized (and largely secularized) modern equivalent, the voluntary giving up to or giving into the other, has made it difficult for us to understand ancient religion.

**Human Sacrifice in Ancient Mesopotamia**

Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* popularized the notion of human sacrifice as a religious ritual. The remarkable passage with which that singularly influential work opens lays down the groundwork of the theory of priest-kings, the King of the Wood, slain by their successors.1648

Who does not know Turner’s picture of the Golden Bough? The scene, suffused with the golden glow of imagination in which the divine mind of Turner steeped and transfigured even the fairest natural landscape, is a dream-like vision of the little woodland lake of Nemi—“Diana’s Mirror,” as it was called by the ancients. No one who has seen that calm water, lapped in a green hollow of the Alban hills, can ever forget it. The two characteristic Italian villages which slumber on its banks, and the equally Italian palace whose terraced gardens descend steeply to the lake, hardly break the stillness and even the solitariness of the scene. Diana herself might still linger by this lonely shore, still haunt these woodlands wild. In antiquity this sylvan landscape was the scene of a strange and recurring tragedy.1649

Frazer, with relatively little evidence before him, thought that the Babylonians annually sacrificed a prisoner who was dressed in the king’s robes, “seated on the king’s throne, allowed to issue whatever commands he pleased, to eat, drink, and enjoy himself, and to lie with the king’s concubines. But at the end of the five days he was stripped of his royal robes, scourged, and hanged or impaled.”1650 The custom, if it did exist at all, was perhaps Persian.1651 And it did not, apparently, involve the stripping, scourging, and killing of the substitute king.

Human sacrifice was, in fact, very rare in Mesopotamia. A Substitute King ritual did exist, but it was employed only in the most extreme circumstances, when omens indicated that the king was in grave danger. Usually the substitute used for a king in dire situations was an animal. In one well-known instance, an Assyrian king, Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE), a king who suffered from many medical disorders and kept in close contact with the exorcists and astrologers of his realm, resorted to the Substitute King ritual at least four times during his reign.1652 A. Leo Oppenheim confirmed that in “at least one instance” in Assyria “where a fatal prediction was counteracted by the stratagem of making another person kind (called shar pūhi, “the king’s substitute”) for one hundred days and then killing and duly burying him so that the omen should be fulfilled but fate cheated and the true king kept alive.”1653 Esarhaddon’s son Assurbanipal also resorted to the Substitute King ritual at least once in his reign.

The only other instance of human sacrifice comes from a much earlier period, where at Ur and Kish the so-called Royal Tombs, in which a consort was buried along with the king.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

It is possible that even there the elaborate tomb was not a royal tomb but a tomb for the substitute king and the consort which was provided him during his brief “rule.” (The Assyrian king did not actually yield his power to the substitute, who assumed the dress, sat on the throne, ate well and was provided with a concubine; the king took on the title of “farmer” during the ritual, but actually continued to exercise power as usual.1654) “The Death of Gilgamesh” suggests that many others in his retinue will be buried with him.

The practice of the Substitute King ritual, then, seems to have been very restricted through the long history of Mesopotamia. The principle of the substitute, on the other hand, is more basic and more widespread, as we have already suggested. The shar pūhi, was a variant of the pūhi amēli (“human substitute”). Mesopotamian healing rituals often involve a substitution. In Shurpu, one example deals with a person whose ama Inanna, his mother (literally his “Inanna-mother” or goddess) has left him, and a dreaded “evil curse like a gal-la demon” has attacked him, leaving him with an “unwholesome dumbness” and “daze.” The incantation that is pronounced over him claims that the evil curse can be peeled off the man like an onion, stripped off like a date, and unraveled like matting. In the Ritual Tablet of Shurpu, explicit instructions are given for the priest. When the incantation is recited, the priest is to wipe off the sick person and place in his hand an onion, dates, and matting. The patient then peels the onion, strips the dates, and unravels the matting. All are thrown into a fire.1655 Dumuzi/Tammuz is a favorite substitute for the seriously ill person, who is considered as approaching the underworld. Dumuzi, the substitute for Inanna in the underworld, is made present by an image that is then consigned to the flames. Dumuzi is the pūhi amēli par excellence.1656

Far more frequent in Mesopotamian religion is the use of animal sacrifice. In the earliest sacred house so far discovered, in the city the Sumerians considered the first city, Eridu, very near the Arabian Gulf, fish sacrifices were very evident.1657 (The blood in animals sacrifices seems to be much less a concern than in later, especially Semitic traditions.) The best products of fields and gardens, and herds of sheep, goats, and cattle were sent to the temple, where they were used as rations or income for the administrators and workers, stored or converted into export goods, and—most importantly—used as food for the image of the gods in a daily ritual that involved two meals a day.1658 Besides the care and feeding of the gods, animal sacrifices were used to provide food for the deceased, the “human-substitute” mentioned above, and for building rites.1659

Geshtinanna’s Gift: Self-Sacrifice

It is difficult to know what the ancient Near East thought of the self or “subject.” A. Leo Oppenheim developed a “Mesopotamian psychology” based on the language of prayer. He found that the sense of well-being, not to mention health, depended upon the presence in the person of certain features we would certainly consider “external” to the individual, the ilu (god), ishtaru (goddess, a term related to the goddess Ishtar, the closest Mesopotamia approached the concept of divinity itself, a concept important in the Flood story of Tablet 11), lamassu and shēdu (protective deities, female and male, rather like angels). Upon these four aspects of the soul the “fate” (shīmtu) of the person
With such an externalized sense of the self, it is difficult to see something like the problematics of modern “self-sacrifice,” problematic in the sense that it could be seen as pathological. On the other hand, humans see themselves positively as “slaves” of their masters, the gods; and the internalized subjectivity so prized in modern thought is problematic in the opposite way for the ancient Near East. The gods, as portrayed in art and literature, were distinguished from one another, but even they lack the “depth” of individual subjectivity we have come to expect in both the visual arts and in fiction.

There is, however, one figure in Sumerian myth that illustrates the purest—and one might argue, the highest--form of self-sacrifice, the voluntary offering of the self to death for the sake of the other. The figure is Geshtinanna.1661

In Sumerian myths, Geshtinanna is the sister of Dumuzi. She rarely appears in her own right, outside the context of sacrifice, especially human sacrifice. Dumuzi, important as he is in the stories and rituals where he is paired with the great goddess Inanna, is rarely portrayed in Mesopotamian art. One Sumerologist, Thorkild Jacobsen, has gone so far as to claim that Dumuzi is the best example of a pre-anthropomorphic, “intransitive” concept of the gods. More a force of nature—Jacobsen sees Dumuzi as the power of the date palm, a plant of great importance to southern Mesopotamia, as we have already noted, especially in Uruk—than a personal being, Dumuzi is the most famous of the “dying gods of fertility,” the “worship of powers of fertility and yield, of the powers in nature ensuring human survival.”1662

In Sumerian myths and rituals, however, Dumuzi is clearly a mortal man who dies as a substitute for Inanna. The different stories of Dumuzi’s death are inconsistent, if not contradictory.1663 He is one of the few exceptional figures in Mesopotamian myth to have escaped the ordinary condition of humankind, which requires death. His mother, his sister, and his wife mourn his death. The last is ironic, if not paradoxical, because his wife, Inanna, is usually responsible for Dumuzi’s death in the first place. In one of the lesser-known Dumuzi myths, BM 100046, the purpose of Dumuzi’s death is made explicit. “Queen” Inanna required him as her substitute (gar) so that she could return to earth after she had been trapped in the world of the dead.

On that [day] the queen did not save his life,
   she [gave him over] to the Land of No Return [as her substitute],
The spouse of Ushumgalanna did not save his life,
   she [gave him over] as her substitute.1664

In the better known version of Dumuzi’s death, Dumuzi argues that he should not be subject to the fate of ordinary men.1665 “I am the spouse [dam-dingir-ra] of a goddess, I am not a mortal [lú nu-me-en].”1666 For many years the end of “Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World” was not known. Samuel Noah Kramer was finally able to recover the ending, and it was then clear that Dumuzi died but would be renewed annually, thanks to his sister.
Dumuzi is weeping—
My queen (?) came up to him, took him by the hand (saying):
“Now, alas, you and your sister—
You—half the year, your sister—half the year,
The day you are asked for, that day you will be seized,
The day your sister is asked for, that day you will be set free.” (Lines 125-131)\textsuperscript{1667}

The last line of the poem provides the consolation for Dumuzi: “Holy Inanna places Dumuzi among the eternal” (\textit{sag-bi-sè-[ê-a] bi-in-sì-mu}) (Line 131).\textsuperscript{1668}

Dumuzi, then, is the mortal whose life is offered as a substitute for Inanna. Even if the final lines of the poem provide a certain consolation for Dumuzi, though, his bitter laments and his desperate attempts to avoid his fate make it clear that he is not a voluntary victim. In making Dumuzi her spouse, Inanna gives him eternal life, although it is not exactly the life of the gods, and it is for only half the year.

For Geshtinanna, on the other hand, the giving of her life is in every way selfless.

In “Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World,” Geshtinanna protects her brother while he is hiding from his pursuers, the demonic \textit{galla}. Even when the \textit{galla} torture her unmercifully, she refuses to reveal his whereabouts.\textsuperscript{1669} In “Dumuzi’s Dream,” she reveals her honesty as well as her loyalty. Dumuzi has a dream prophetic of his death, and his sister interprets it item by item. The dream is unfavorable and presents in a vivid way how the “evil ones” will seize and torment him.\textsuperscript{1670} Dumuzi calls her his “tablet-knowing scribe,” a singer “who knows many songs,” a woman who “knows the meaning of words,” and a “wise woman who knows the meaning of dreams.”\textsuperscript{1671} Tikva Frymer-Kensky points out that the singing of laments, in the family and in public, was an important activity for women (and goddesses) in Mesopotamia. Geshtinanna is much like the goddess Nisaba, the wise goddess who is writer, architect, accountant and surveyor.\textsuperscript{1672}

Inanna, who in “Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World” fastened the “eye of death” on her spouse, in another poem called by Diana Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer “The Return, weeps bitterly upon his death.\textsuperscript{1673} Dumuzi’s mother, Sirtur, also laments his death. But Geshtinanna goes beyond that, wandering about the city, lamenting

“The day that dawns for you will also dawn for me.
The day that you will see I will also see.’

I would find my brother! I would comfort him!
I would share his fate!”\textsuperscript{1674}

Jacobsen argues that, as Dumuzi is the power of the date palm, whose death is actually the power of the grain and in the beer brewed from it, Geshtinanna is the “power of the
grape and the wine made from it.” Beer and wine were the two principal intoxicating drinks of the Sumerians. “Both died, mythopoetically speaking, at harvest time, and both descended into the earth for underground storage. But they did not do so at the same time of year.” Grain was harvested in the spring, while the grape was harvested in the autumn. For Jacobsen the natural cycle thus explains the six months in the underworld for the two mythic figures who divide the year.

Such a reading would account for the relative facelessness of Dumuzi and Geshtinanna, especially the sister. So far she appears in Mesopotamian texts only as the sister of Dumuzi, not in her own right. The Ur III period kings identified with Dumuzi to the extent that they considered themselves married to Inanna—and thus brothers to Geshtinanna. She appears in the literature that deals with the courtship of Dumuzi and Inanna, and in one text appears to be sexually initiated by her brother after he allows her to observe the incestuous habits of the sheep in his care. Primarily, Geshtinanna assists her brother in arranging the courtship and marriage of her brother.

If the anthropomorphic Dumuzi and Geshtinanna in any way reflect family relations in the Middle East today, one can see how the triad of mother-sister-spouse in the laments over Dumuzi covers all primary relations between male and female. The most intimate (excepting actual incest) is the brother-sister relationship. Diana Wolkstein noticed that the brother-sister relationship of the humans is paralleled in the intense relationship between the heavenly siblings, Utu and Inanna. Both brothers act as sexual initiators and protectors of their sisters; and the sisters both rely upon and support their brothers.

Still there is little to individualize Geshtinanna. She appears in the myths in relation to the brother, not in her own right.

The texts in which Dumuzi and Geshtinanna appear can be read as nature myths or sociologically as a representations of family relationships. Another possibility is to locate the texts in a very specific historical situation.

In the popular imagination, the Middle East is represented by the camel. A more likely icon is, however, the ubiquitous sheep. Inanna’s city, Uruk, was a city of shepherds (hence, "Uruk of the Sheepfold"). While neighboring areas prospered through fishing, fowling, and farming, the Uruk countryside was well-suited to sheep and goat herding. The “Good Shepherd” is an image seen in Uruk as early as the 4th millennium BCE. A man with a transparent skirt of net-like textile is shown bending vegetation toward two rams.
By the end of the 4th millennium Uruk was more like a corporation, run by the temple, than a kingdom, thanks in large measure by the en and a complex bureaucracy. Lamb was the food most valued by the elite (with beef a second choice and pork eaten largely by rural folk and non-elite urbanites), and it was sacrificed to the gods. But the economic value of sheep was less its food value than its importance in the well-developed textile industry in Uruk. Sheepskin was prepared, wool carded, dyed, and made into clothing. (The storage of grain, another important function of the early temple, was also useful in the development of textiles using flax.) The circulation of goods through the Uruk temple—raw materials in, finished goods out—provided the model for large scale trade, perhaps the world’s earliest—Uruk’s “world system,” as it has been called by Guillermo Algaze.

The shepherds who tended the flocks of sheep and goats were not, however, the owners of the animals, the urban elites who provided the capital for the maintenance of the flocks outside the cultivated lands. The “good shepherd” then was an apt symbol not only of the nurture and care of animals (or, as Western literature would later develop it, the humblest of occupations) but also of the state-managed, temple-centered, corporation itself.

In a story of Inanna’s courtship, she plays off two suitors by weighing the benefits of two textiles, wool and flax, and selected Dumuzi the shepherd over the farmer. In the debate over the merits of the two rivals, Inanna’s brother Utu argues that Dumuzi’s cream and milk are good; but Inanna responds that the shepherd wears coarse and rough wool clothing, while the farmer’s flax is better for her clothes. Dumuzi speaks in defense of his products:

“Why do you speak about the farmer?
Why do you speak about him?
If he gives you black flour,
I will give you black wool.
If he gives you white flour,
I will give you white wool.
If he gives you beer,
I will give you sweet milk.
If he gives you bread,
I will give you honey cheese.
I will give the farmer my leftover cream.
I will give the farmer my leftover milk.
Why do you speak about the farmer?
What does he have more than I do?”

The preservation of “life” is basic to religion. In a very important way, the transformation of perishables to make them last (beer, cheese, and such like), the storage of grain, the preparation of fabrics, and the handling of surpluses became significant functions of the Uruk temple.

The tragic death of Dumuzi is not simply the death of vegetation in the cycle of nature. In the Akkadian version of Inanna’s descent to the nether world, Ishtar’s descent and capture in the world of the dead resulted in the loss of “life” in many analogous situations:

After Ishtar [had gone down to the nether world],
No bull mounted a cow, [no donkey impregnated a jenny],
No young man impregnated a girl in [the street (?)],
The young man slept in his private room,
The girl slept in the company of her friends.
Then Papsukkal, vizier of the great gods, hung his head,
his face [became gloomy];
He wore mourning clothes, his hair was unkempt.

Dumuzi is sacrificed for all the life-giving powers associated with Inanna and lost in her death. (The Sumerian poem assigns the choice of Dumuzi as a substitute to his refusal to acknowledge Inanna’s superiority.) Gesthtinanna sacrifices herself. She is in some ways the equal of her brother; but her part in the stories is very restricted. This literal self-effacement presages what Tikva Frymer-Kensky calls the “marginalization” of goddesses and women in the later days of the ancient Near East.

**Dumuzi’s Dream**

“Dumuzi’s Dream” is another Sumerian poem that came to be included in the Decad curriculum. It relates to the larger narrative, “Inanna’s Descent to the Underworld,” also included in the Decad. In the Sumerian version of the myth, Dumuzi is selected as a substitute for Inanna, who has been killed in the underworld. When he is captured,
Dumuzi is sent to the underworld and Inanna is resurrected. Unexpectedly, Dumuzi’s sister, Geshtinanna, offers to spend half a year for Dumuzi; in essence, Geshtinanna volunteers to substitute for her brother half the time—probably as good an arrangement, certainly for him, that could have been arranged. In any event, she, Dumuzi’s mother, and (again, surprisingly) traditionally annually mourn Dumuzi’s death. Gilgamesh refers to the annual ritual mourning in his rejection of Ishtar’s proposal of marriage.

“Dumuzi’s Dream,” like Enkidu’s dream that opens Tablet 7, foretells his death. The poem focuses on Dumuzi desperate attempts to escape the terrifying figures who are pursuing him. The poem opens with his weeping. He apostrophizes the Countryside, reminding us that Dumuzi is a creature (like Enkidu) of the land outside the city. He asks the Countryside to inform his mother of his impending death. Dumuzi dreams and asks his sister to interpret the dream. The news is not good.

Geshtinanna is another wise woman in the Urukean tradition. Besides being a dream interpreter (like Ninsun), she is literate (a scribe), an expert singer, and savvy. She interprets each dream-image in turn. Note that twin reeds, one of which separates from Dumuzi, refers to Geshtinanna herself. She also sees herself in images of male goats dragging their bears in the dust: “her hair will whirl around in the air like a hurricane” for Dumuzi when he dies. She will lacerate her cheeks with her fingernails in mourning.

For the most part the poem narrates Dumuzi’s escapes. On three occasions he is helped by the Sun God, who transforms the shepherd into a gazelle. He hides where only his sister and his friend know where to find him. Geshtinanna refuses to betray him. The friend does, however, betray Dumuzi’s position. It is at this point that Dumuzi escapes as a gazelle.

His pursuers keep finding him. On two occasions they are tipped off by wise women, Old Woman Belili and Geshtinanna herself. They do not inform the pursuers, but the demons notice the looks on the women’s faces: the women look frightened and scream in fear. The demons know how to interpret looks and gestures.

The final images of the poem are the deserted sheepfold of Geshtinanna and Dumuzi. The demons have destroyed all vestiges of the shepherd’s life, including the shepherd’s stick, a drinking cup, and a “holy churn.”

Dumuzi is dead. The sheepfold is haunted.

**Substitutes for the Goddess**

The fates of the Great Goddess and of her human substitute are of primary interest in the Sumerian and Akkadian poems that tell the story of the goddess’s descent into the world of the dead. Somewhat less attention is paid to the formation of new creatures who allow the goddess to be resurrected. In both the Sumerian and the much shorter Akkadian “Descent” poems, the crafty god Enki/Ea finds a way to bring her back to life. In the poem known to George Smith and incorporated into his *Gilgamesh* translation the creature is
known as an *assînnu*. (A variant has the creature called a *kalû*, a singer of lamentations, a figure well known to Sumerians as a *gala*.)

The goddess who rules the underworld is depicted as a deeply depressed woman. The trick to bring Inanna/Ishtar back to life is to change her mood to one of great joy. When the Queen of the Underworld is enjoying life, she can be persuaded to resurrect the “sister” she had condemned to death.

While the Great Goddess and her substitute, the famous Dumuzi/Tammuz, are mythic figures, the *gala* remains on earth, a familiar “priest” in the temple, especially in the service of Inanna/Ishtar. The *gala*, who by the time when *Gilgamesh* was composed was one of the most learned men in Mesopotamia, was one of several performers who entertained the gods (and, presumably, the audience viewing rituals and processions). The *gala* had to learn a larger number of “sacred” songs in Sumerian and Akkadian. By the period in which *Gilgamesh* was written, Sumerian was no longer a living language. The *gala* had to learn not only the major Sumerian dialect but a second dialect, *eme-sal*, literally a “woman's tongue,” but certainly a dialect used in songs and poems involving the Great Goddess. (We have seen some examples already.)

Since we take Enkidu as a substitute for Gilgamesh and interpret the persistent theme of Enkidu's and especially Gilgamesh's “melancholy” as a “tragic” complication to the story of the two heroes, it may be worthwhile to analyze the way the *gala* turns the anger of the gods into something beneficial. The process always involves a form of tragic sacrifice.

“The Descent of Ishtar” is an Akkadian poem of roughly the same age as *Gilgamesh*.

**“The Descent of Ishtar,” Lines 91-104**

*dEa ina emqi libbi-shu ibtani [zik]ru
ibnima m atsû-shu-namir lu assinu
alka atsû-shu-namir ina bāb ertsit la tari(a) shukun panika
sebum bāb māt la tari(a) lippetū ina panika
dEreshkigal limurkama ina panika lîhdu
ultu libbasha inûhu kabbita ipperiddû
tummishima shum îlāni rabûti
shuqi reshêmesh ka ana kush halziqiqi uzna shukun
e belti suhalziqu litnuni mêmesh ina libbi lûltați

dEreshkigal annita ina shemisha
tamhats sunisha tashshuka ubânsha*
tetershanni erishtum la ereshi
alka atsu-shu-namir lūzirka izra raba
kusāpiₘᵉˢʰ gishepinnimemₘᵉˢʰ āli lu akalka  (Lines 91-104)¹⁶⁹³

“The Descent of Ishtar”: A Creature Formed to Save a Goddess

Ea in his wily heart formed a figure
And created Atsushunamir, the assinnu:

“Up, Atsushunamir, direct your face to the gate of the Land of No Return.
The seven gates of the Land of No Return will be opened before you!
Ereshkigal will see you and take delight in your presence!
When her heart is soothed, her mood bright,
    have her swear the oath of the great gods.
Lift your head, and mark the waterskin:
“No, lady! Have them give me the waterskin.
I’ll drink the water from that!”¹⁶⁹⁴

The Akkadian poem is much shorter than the Sumerian “The Descent of Inanna,” and more compact. The crafty Ea creates the assinnu (alternatively, a kalû, that is, a gala). Stephanie Dalley observes that the figure, a zikru, includes a pun on both “word” and “male.”¹⁶⁹⁵ The pun turns on the traditional understanding that the gala was not really a “man,” that is, a eunuch, as we have seen in the Sumerian proverbs. It is possible that his unusual sexuality makes it possible to enter and leave the Land of No Return where the more ordinary person could not.

The name of the assinnu means something like “His Coming Forth is Brilliant.” Whether the name itself has an effect on his ability to perform before Ereshkigal or not, he does indeed please the sad goddess, who, in an earlier passage, grew dark when she heard that Ishtar was coming to her. She complains that even she drinks muddy water (instead of beer) and eats clay instead of bread. Her time is spent weeping for young men and women torn from their lovers’ side. She weeps as well for the infant who is “expelled before its time.”¹⁶⁹⁶ As in other poems, Ereshkigal is the very archetype of the depressed person.

His performance brightens her mood, and, since she is momentarily calm, she is vulnerable to the gala’s trick. She rewards his performance with a waterskin, with which he will revive the dead Ishtar. Since the loss of Ishtar to the underworld has brought sorrow to the animals as well as the young men and women on earth—all have their libido drained from them—the brighter mood of Ereshkigal and the resurrection of Ishtar will restore joy to the earth.

Ereshkigal, however, sees the trick at once. She has been trapped into complying with the gala’s request. She directs Namtar (“Fate”) to sprinkle the water over Ishtar, and the
Great Goddess escape through the seven gates of the underworld. For the assinnu, though, Ereshkigal decrees a fate with a curse that reads much like Enkidu's curse of the harimtu. The assinnu will end of eating from what is left from the plows and drinking from the city drains. His only place will be in the shadow of a city wall. Drunks and “the thirsty” will slap his face. Once again the poem reinforces the unusual sexuality of the assinnu and what must have been his reputation in some quarters.

“The Descent of Ishtar” does contain a brief but important reference to the ransom, or substitute, that is required for Ishtar. It is, of course, Dumu, “the lover of Ishtar's youth.” Reference is made to the ritual mourning for Dumu. He is to be washed, anointed with oil, clothed in a red robe. Music will be played, and the women in the service of Ishtar will lead the lamentations.

The poem ends with the lament of Dumu’s sister. She is not called Geshtinanna in this version. Rather, she is called Belili, who tears off her jewelry and predicts that Dumu will return. On the day he returns a lapis lazuli pip and a carnelian ring will rise with him; male and female mourners will come up with him; and the dead will come up to “smell the smoke offering.”

The last three lines of the poem are missing. They may possibly have referred to the sister's part in allowing Dumu to return periodically to the land of the living.

The Sumerian version of the story is quite a bit more detailed.

**The Descent of Inanna,” Lines 226-253 (previously 223-247)**

\[a-a\] \$\text{den-ki gala-tur-ra kur-gar-ra gu}_3 \text{mu-na-[de}_2-\text{e]} \\
\text{gen-na-an-ze}_2-\text{en giri}_3 \text{kur-she}_3 \text{nu}_2-\text{ba-an-ze}_2-\text{en} \\
\text{gish ig nim-gin}_7 \text{dal-dal-e-de}_3-\text{en-ze}_2-\text{en} \\
\text{za-ra lil}_2-\text{gin}_7 \text{gur-gur-re-de}_3-\text{en-ze}_2-\text{en} \\
\text{ama gan-e nam dumu-ne-ne-she}_3 \\
\text{d}^\text{d} \text{eresh-ki-gal-la-ke}_4 \text{i-nu}_2-\text{nu}_2-\text{ra-am}_3 \\
\text{mur-kug-ga-na gada nu-um-bur}_2 \\
\text{gaba-ni bur shagan-gin}_7 \text{nu-um-gid}_2 \\
\text{/shu ?| -si-ni urad lub-bi-gin}_7 \text{am}_3-\text{da-gal}_2 \\
\text{siki-ni ga-rashsar-gin}_7 \text{sag-ga}_2-\text{na mu-un-ur}_4-\text{ur}_4-\text{re} \\
\text{u-u}_8-\text{a shag}_4-\text{gu}_4-\text{to dug}_4-\text{ga-ni} \\
\text{kush}_2-\text{u}_3-\text{me-en nin-me a shag}_4-\text{zu [dug}_4]-\text{ga-<zu>-ne-[ne]} \\
\text{[u-u8]-a bar-gu}_4-\text{to dug}_4-\text{ga-ni}
kush₂-u₃-me-en nin-me a bar-zu [dug₄]-ga-<zu>-ne-[ne]
a-ba-am₃ za-e-me-en-ze₂-en
shag₄-gu₁₀-[ta] shag₄-zu-she₂ bar-gu₁₀-ta bar-<zu>-she₃ dug₄-ga-na-ab-ze₂-en
dingir he₂-me-en-ze₂-en inim ga-mu-ra-an-dug₄
lu₂-ulu₃ he₂-me-en-ze₂-en nam-zu-ne he₂-eb-tar-re
zi-an-na zi ki-a-pad₃-de₃-ne-ze₂-na-am₃
ed₃-[阜]-ab-ze₂-en
a id₂-bi ma-ra-ba-e-ne shu nam-[ba]-gid₂-i-en-ze₂-en
a-shag₄ she-ba ma-ra-ba-e-ne shu nam-ba-gid₂-i-en-ze₂-en
uzu nig₂ sag₃-ga ⁴gash⁴gag-ta la₂ shum₂-me-ab dug₄-ga-na-ab-ze₂-en
uzu nig₂ sag₃-ga ga-sha-an-<zu>-ne-ne
nig₂ lugal-me <<en>> he₂-a nig₂ nin-me he₂-a shum₂-ma-ze₂-en dug₄-ga-na-ab-ze₂-en
uzu nig₂ sag₃-ga ⁴gash⁴gag-ta la₂-a im-ma-da-ab-shum₂-mu-ze₂-en
dish-am₃ u₂ nam-til₃-la dish-am₃ a nam-til₃-la ugu-na shub-bu-de₃-en-ze₂-en
dinanna ha-ba-gub ¹⁶₉₈

“The Descent of Inanna,” Lines 226-253

The Father Enki spoke to the gala-turra and the kurgarra:
“Go point your feet toward the underworld.
Around the door take wing like flies;
Around the pivot of the door flutter like phantoms.
The birth-giving mother—because of her children—
Ereshkigal is lying there ill:
Her holy shoulders are not covered by linen cloth;
Her breasts are not full like a shagan-bowl;
Her nails are like a pickaxe on her body;
Her hair is bunched like leeks on her head.
When she says, ‘O, my heart!’
You are to say, ‘You, the one moaning, ‘O, my heart,’ are our lady.’
When she says, ‘O, my body!’
You are to say, ‘You, the one moaning, ‘O, my body,’ are our lady.’
She’ll then say, ‘You—who are you?
From my heart to your heart, from my body to your body!’
She’ll then say, ‘If you are gods, I will speak the good word for you;
If you are human, I will decree a good fate for you.’
Make her swear by heaven and by earth!

….

They will offer you the water of their river. Don’t take it.
They will offer you grain of the field. Don’t take it.
‘The corpse hanging from the nail—give us that,’ tell her.
She’ll say, ‘The corpse—it is your lady’s.’
Tell her: ‘Even if it is our king, even if it is our queen—give it to us!’
She’ll give you the corpse hung from the nail.
One of you toss over her the food of life, the other, the water of life.
Inanna will rise.”

From My Heart to Your Heart, From My Body to Your Body

Suddenly we find ourselves in a contest. The role of the two creatures, the gala-turra and the kurgarra, will be Enki’s plan to bring the Great Goddess, Inanna, back to life. At the center of the plan is a trick to use Ereshkigal’s words (and her troubled emotional and physical state) against her. Her word, once uttered, cannot be recalled. Offered food and drink of the underworld, the two creatures are to refuse the offers. Instead, in a gruesome irony, they are to demand the corpse hanging on a nail—Inanna herself. They brush off the startled Ereshkigal, who will point out that the corpse is of their dead gashan (“lady”). They are to persist: even if it were their lugal (king) or nin (queen?), they are to demand the body. Of course, Enki’s design is not to have the corpse eaten. The two creatures will “throw” (shub), that is, sprinkle the “food of life” and the “water of life” upon the unfortunate Inanna. She will rise from the dead.

Significantly, the form of Enki’s speech is as important as its contents. Although the piece includes description, narrative, and dialogue, the shape of the speech is given it by the form of the incantation.

In the incantations of the “Marduk/Ea” type (“Divine Dialogues”), as we have seen, Enki speaks to his son Asalluhi or Marduk, and begins his instructions with the formulaic genna, “Go,...” Here he sends the creatures, who have been formed by the dirt under his fingernails, through the “door” of the underworld. At the end of the piece, on the other hand, the precative, ha-ba-gub, is used to give force to what must happen, once Ereshkigal will pronounce the closing formula, “Swear by an (“the Above”) and ki (“the Below”). Inanna will arise.

The narrative continues with, as expected, the creatures doing exactly as they were instructed. Ereshkigal plays out her role just as Enki had arranged it. This is powerful magic indeed.

The frame and studding of Enki’s speech is strongly reminiscent of other Divine Dialogues. His speech also “quotes” another literary work, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld,” which finds its way into Gilgamesh, as the controversial Tablet 12. The lines describing the ruler of the underworld, Ereshkigal, suffering, groaning, her “holy shoulders” not covered with a linen cloth. Her breasts likened an empty bur-shagan
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

That is, she is unable to suckle the children, who are in some unstated way the cause of her suffering. A line that is difficult to read (because the first word is problematic) appears to describe a desperate situation: Ereshkigal tearing herself with fingernails “like a pickaxe.” Her hair is bunched on her head “like leeks.” Similarities with other texts suggest a traditional lamentation, called in *Gilgamesh* 12 the “cry” or lament of the underworld.

Clearly, Ereshkigal is troubled. She utters a woeful, *u-u-a shag-gu*, “O, my heart” (or “insides”), and *u-u-a bar-gu*, “O, my body” (her “outside”). The lament resonates in the “woe” of the “joy/woe” man, Gilgamesh. The creatures are to show that they understand her suffering. “You are troubled, my *nin*, kush-u-me-en nin-me, in heart and body.

The two creatures are performers of rituals in Uruk, the *gala* and the *kurgarra*. (My guess is that, like “The Fashioning of the *gala*,” in which that role is invented in order to bring relief to an angry Inanna, this is a myth of the origins of these unusual human performers. The *gala-turra* may indicate that he is the original *gala*, “small” like an apprentice learning his role.) The *gala* sings and chants ritual texts like the *ershemma*, accompanying his singing with the *shem*-drum. The *kurgarra*, with his unique ability to go in and out of the dreaded underworld, performs in rituals involving dangerous weapons—perhaps like the ecstasies in Morocco and Iran today who sometimes slash and beat themselves in sympathy with tragic saints of the past.

The creatures are to relieve the suffering of Ereshkigal, and she will in turn (though forced to do so) bring the dead goddess back to life. Even then Ereshkigal will try to trick them into using the water from the river and the grain from the land offered by the ruler of the underworld. Instead, they will sprinkle the water of life and the plant of life over the corpse and Inanna will rise again.

For our purposes, the key line in Enki’s instruction could be said to encapsulate the whole therapeutic of Mesopotamian magic and medicine: “from my heart to your heart, from my body to your body.” The transfer of Ereshkigal’s troubles, what we would call psychosomatic, relieves her through a substitution, much as a figurine representing Dumuzi is passed along the body of the sick person (or his condition is called into Dumuzi), then to have the figurine consumed in a fire.

Ereshkigal will not know if the two creatures are gods or mortals. Like other liminal figures in the service of Inanna, they may have been considered both.

Instructions from Father Enki in the “Divine Dialogues” are normally given, by way of the Son Asalluhi, to the magician/therapist. In this literary transformation, the *gala* and *kurgarra* are instruments through which Ereshkigal in a sense heals herself. The *gala*, like the *mash-mash*, is a healer. Through the two creatures Enki forms from the dirt under his fingernails—a symbol both of their relatively low status in relation to the high god and also the exalted status a creature made of dirt, i.e., mortal, can still possess. Ereshkigal is healed through their performance, and Inanna, who had been reduced to the status of the “dead gods,” is resurrected.
Anne Draffkorn Kilmer provides another dimension to what she sees is a clever trick invented by Enki. Getting the creatures into the underworld is one thing; having them use their talents to please the angry Ereshkigal is another. What is still required is that she give over the body of Inanna so that the goddess may be revived. Kilmer reads the phrase that describes what Inanna has been transformed into, uzu-nig-sig-ga (266), literally as a “pounded piece of meat.” Ereshkigal is so taken by the pleasant performance of the two creatures that she falls for their clever line that initiates a response to hospitality. Ereshkigal responds by accepting her role as host—to offer food and drink. When she does that, the goddess of the underworld is trapped. She offers them food and drink, and they hold out for the cut of meat. Once sprinkled with the food of life and the water of life, Inanna arises.

The rest of the poem follows Dumuzi’s fated death and our galatur and kurgarra disappear from the scene. The story involves the death of the great goddess and her resurrection. The key figures in the story are mostly divine or semidivine. The two humans who are sent to their deaths, Dumuzi and Geshtinanna, achieve a divine status, though a position that requires ritual pain in the time they must spend in the underworld. Since we often think of ancient myth as the domain of the gods, finding humans in the great cosmic dramas is itself remarkable. The gala and his companion, the kurgarra, like the gala a performer in religious rituals, remain on the earth to play their roles in the cultic calendar of Mesopotamia for many centuries.

They please even the terrible and despondent goddess of the underworld. Their performance indicates something like the paradox St. Augustine, for one, thought remarkable in the sublime pleasure the audience feels in watching tragedy played out on stage before it. The same would seem to hold for the singing of lamentations that please the angry goddess.

As in “The Uruk Lament” singers, musicians, and actors brighten the mood of a deity through the performance of a tragic lament.

**Songs of the Gala: Pulu in Trouble**

Sometime in the 7th century BCE a certain lamentation priest named Pulu in the Assyrian city of Calah sent letters to the Assyrian king. Three of his letters have survived. One is too broken to determine what prompted the letter. The two others report on regular offerings of sheep set before the god Nabû in the city’s main temple. Clearly something was wrong in both cases. There would be no reason to alert the king if the offering were normal. Pulu reported in the first case that the left kidney of the sheep was small; in the second case the right kidney was missing. The small left kidney was sealed up and forwarded to the king so that the king’s scholars could inspect it. The second sheep was kept in storage pending the king’s decision about what to do with it.

Pulu’s letters reveal the extent to which the Assyrians worried about ominous messages from the gods “written” on the internal organs of sacrificed animals. An array of scholars consulted documents to determine the meaning of any anomaly that might be observed.
Quite unlike the laconic documents of earlier times—lists of all sorts and invoices—the letters sent to Assyrian kings often provide glimpses into the personal lives of individuals. Pūlu, for example, must have held an important position in the Temple of Nabû in Calah if he had the authority to witness the sacrifice and report directly to the king. (The importance of Nabû, patron of scribes and sages, a god of magic and secrets, will occupy us later; but his prominence—and thus the prominence of high officials who served him—is worth noting here.)

Pūlu’s first letter provides hints about his personality—or at least his position vis-à-vis the king. Three times in the short missive he complains that, if he had not sent the kidney to the king, the king would demand, “Why did he not send it to the palace?” Pūlu was certainly apprehensive, probably for good reason. He ends the letter worrying that the king would have placed the blame on him if Pūlu had not acted in this matter.

It turns out that Pūlu had something to be worried about. A much longer letter sent to the king by another high official complains about a whole series of suspicious activities taken by Pūlu in the temple of Nabû. He is accused of acting arbitrarily, without the permission of the king. Obviously Pūlu acted as if he had the authority to do so.

His accuser claims that he tore out doorposts of the temple and put up new ones. He removed old work in a golden table and set a goldsmith to replace it. He made sketches of the dragons upon which the god Nabû stood, and though he was observed doing it, no action was taken to correct Pūlu for his action. The accuser grumbles that “No one has authority, and no one says (anything) to him.”

The list of accusations continues. Pūlu, it seems, appointed officials of his own choosing. He also changed certain golden bottles of wine—with the royal images on them—that were to be placed before the statues of the high gods. The wine was to go to the palace, but Pūlu stopped that. Now he himself measures the wine and carries it into the temple. He supervises the beer to be sent to the “house of eunuchs;” controls the treasuries; he even enters the ritual bath house of the gods—where twice a year “the loins of Bel [Marduk] and Nabû are ungirded.” Moreover—and this seems to be the underlying complaint against Pūlu—he has changed a number of important rituals. “No one can do (anything); there is an order to remain silent. But they have changed the old rites!” Even a lighting ceremony for the goddess Tashmetu, which had been the work of a woman, has been taken over the ubiquitous Pūlu. The accuser hints darkly that something has happened to the woman. “Nobody with him sees (her), neither the deputy priest, nor the temple steward, nor the king’s official....”

Who was this Pūlu, who seemed to have taken charge of so many temple practices? We know one thing about him: he was identified as a “lamentation priest” (LŪ.UŠ.KU in line 5), a temple office that went back at least to Ur III times. He was a gala, whom speakers of Akkadian called kalû. As a singer, with considerable prestige, the gala may be compared with the famous countertenors of the Early Modern Period.
Pūlu is not the only gala to appear in these Neo-Assyrian letters to the king. A certain Nabû-erîba is implicated in two suspicious affairs. One of King Esarhaddon’s officials in Babylonia, Shuma-iddin, reported on a situation that had placed him in some danger, since he had arrested a number of persons, but unlike relatives and insiders to the palace—those who had people they could rely on—Shuma-iddin worried that, “I, however, have no one in the palace of the king, my lord, except the king, my lord. I pray to Marduk and Sheru’a for the sake of the life of the king, my lord.”

The case is complicated and difficult to follow. Two eunuchs had apparently been shielded by some persons in high places, and the eunuchs escaped. One eunuch (one of the two mentioned earlier?) was captured. Three persons who were implicated in the murky events included a chief votary, a “farmer” of the Bel-Marduk, and our gala, Nabû-erîba (148). That the three were under suspicion is suggested by the comment that they invoked the right of appeal to the king. The three are also identified as “grooms of the royal delegate.”

In a separate case, our gala stands accused of a serious crime. Here the accusation is clear and direct. Nabû-erîba and one of the temple guards named Galul stripped silver bands from the walls of a temple. The king is asked to investigate the crime. Others may be involved in the thefts. The exasperated letter-writer wonders how many are involved. “The have been taught (a lesson), but (still) they don’t keep their hands off the temple.” He reminds the king that when his father was king, people who could not keep their hands off the temple were killed. Clearly the same fate should await these malefactors. But the letter ends on a dispirited note. “I am alone; there is no one to take care of the case.” We do not know what happened to our Nabû-erîba.

Yet another gala shows up in a complaint to the king, this time from the city of Arbela. Nabû-epush peeled off gold from a massive offering table in front of the goddess Ishtar. A temple guard caught him red-handed. That would seem to be enough, but the author of the letter has more to say. Before his time, Nabû-epush, a priest of the god Ea (Sumerian Enki), had stolen from the temple, but “they” (presumably the temple officials) had covered up the crime. Moreover, there had been a series of thefts that had been covered up before the king’s representative had come onto the scene. Like other royal officials in the letters that have survived, this one complains that he speaks but the people do not listen to him. He adds a note at the end of the letter. The guilty party, our gala Nabû-epush, is “not to ascend the dais.” Since access to the temple was a privilege of rank, this may have been a significant punishment for the theft.

The point of these doleful letters is not that there is anything wrong with galas generally. Among the duties of royal officials problems, including certain crimes, were to be reported. It just happens that in some instances the culprits were galas. None of the letters report on what a gala did normally, performing certain kinds of lamentations. There would be no reason for the officials to point out the obvious. What is significant about these reports is the importance of these galas. They are supervising rituals and reporting the results to the king. Even when accused of crimes, it is clear that the gala
had ready access to the temple and enough clout with other officials that their crimes were sometimes covered up. The royal officials seem isolated and helpless on their own to remedy the situations. In the 1st millennium BCE the ancient rank of gala, already at least two thousand years old, must still have carried power and prestige. This, far from the Sumerian heartland in the south.

The Day of the Gala
Coinciding with—and prompted by (?)—the great shift of power from southern sites, Uruk, but also Ur and Larsa [and Isin?], to the north—to Babylon is a proliferation of laments. The five City Laments, such as “The Uruk Lament,” give voice to the terror facing Sumerian cities. The enemies are great natural forces, Floods, and monsters. They are identified as tribal and nomadic peoples. Ultimately the gods are responsible for the destruction of the cities that were, after all, their homes. The rage of Enlil and Inanna, especially, explains their withdrawal from their cities. Strikingly unlike biblical lamentations, which emphasize the sins of the people, the City Laments do not identify specific failures of the citizens. They emphasize, rather, the devastation that occurs when the gods withdraw their protection from the cities. Like a vacuum filled with every sort of agents of chaos, the cities collapse.

Suddenly a host of other laments appear. They are written in an unusual and still not well understood dialect of Sumerian called eme-sal, which seems to mean “woman’s tongue,” that is, a language or dialect spoken by women. A specific group of people perform the laments, known as er-shemmas. A few women have been identified among the performers. But by the end of the Old Babylonian period, such women, like other prestigious religious specialists, disappear from the ranks. Thereafter the performers, the gala, are men. Most scholars consider them eunuchs. Like Renaissance counter-tenors they sing and chant the laments in falsetto and employ the “woman’s tongue.” They also accompany their songs with a variety of drums.

How far back the gala tradition goes has not been determined. Possibly it reaches back into deep prehistory. What is clear is that the songs of the gala continue as long as classical Urukean religious culture continues; until, that is, through the Hellenistic and into Roman times. Many of the songs have been preserved.

Several myths actually tell of the creation of the gala. Such tales, that explain the existence of a decidedly human (if odd) creature, is striking enough. The gala is formed by the crafty creator-god, Enki, and the gala has a clear purpose in life. The songs may tell of destruction and pain, but the purpose is to soothe the angry heart of a goddess, either Inanna or her underworld twin, Ereshkigal. They are the artists par excellence of Mesopotamia.

Who Were the Gala?
The gala (USH.KU), in Akkadian kalû, were main actors among the singers, musicians and dancers of Mesopotamia. Reference to the chief gala (gala-mah) go back as far as 3rd Millennium Lagash, where one is a witness to a real estate transaction. Even in that
early period there is evidence that the *gala* sings in the *eme-sal* dialect of Sumerian. The *gala* plays a variety of musical instruments and is sometimes accompanied by another singer, the *nar*. In a song where Inanna sings to her own vulva, lines are sung alternately by the *gala* and the *nar*. As we have seen, in the early period the *gala* could be female. They are listed among the “wailing women” in an Ur III text.

Like the *Galloi* of ancient Greece (the *Galli* of Rome), the *gala* were frequently accused of irregular sexuality. Among other things, they were associated with *harimtu*, temple women who may have been involved in prostitution. The question if the male *gala* was a eunuch like the “Asiatic” priests of the Mother Goddess who became so prominent in Greece and Rome is difficult to decide. Although there were anecdotes and proverbs that suggest irregular sexuality, there is no question that the *gala* was a prestigious rank. In Ur III, for example, men holding quite important offices are seen as entering into the office of the *gala*.

And they were found in good numbers in a variety of localities in Sumer. One text from Ur III Lagash lists 62 of them in that province alone.

As we have seen, a regular duty of the *gala* was to sing and perform laments with the purpose of soothing the angry heart of a deity, primarily Inanna. There is a good deal of evidence that the *gala*, often in association with other important religious officials, performed many different activities for the temple. And, as the *gala* was thought to have been formed by the god of wisdom himself, Enki, it is not surprising that a series of Neo-Assyrian texts that identify the god himself as authoring the series of “secrets” of the primordial sages; the series is of *gala*-ship (*kalûtu*). Often the *gala* is paired with the exorcist. With others the *gala* performs a ritual killing of a slave-woman who is said to have slept with Dumuzi. The ritual killing is done at the order of Inanna. Among other duties, the *gala* pours beer, wine and milk in a ritual that also involves singing an *er-shemma* and purifying the city. In 1st Millennium texts, when Uruk’s god An/Anu was increasingly prominent—evident in the building of gigantic new temples and an immense ziggurat, the largest religious structures in Mesopotamian history-- the *gala* is identified as Anu’s scribe. In Seleucid times the *gala* is a scribe whose texts describe the *gala*’s own rite—but is also responsible for the most significant intellectual and scientific work of the age, the astronomical series *Enuma Anu Enlil*.

In short, the *gala* performed many functions beyond the musicianship and singing that were essential to the office. Reports over the centuries have them officiating over a number of rituals, making offerings, fumigating the temple, cleansing the city, even opening a canal.

After the Old Babylonian period, it would appear that all *galas* were male, perhaps eunuchs. Like a number of other important temple offices that had been held by women in Sumerian times, the office of the *gala* became an exclusively male role. If anything, the prestige of the office expands through the 2nd and 1st millennia. In those eras the *gala* could hold multiple offices, not only as scribe but as the highly important administrative posts of *šangû* and *ērib bīti*. 
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

One of the best documented festivals in Mesopotamian history comes from early 2nd Millennium BCE Larsa, where a seven\textsuperscript{1719} (or eight) day ritual was performed at the moment in the month of *shabaṭu* when it was important to determine if Inanna/Ishtar was visible or had disappeared in the night sky. The *gala* is mentioned twice in the text (that gives us a good sense of the many religious specialists that were involved in the ritual but very little on the actual activities of the persons on the list). The *gala* is one of four male and female singers who participated in the events.\textsuperscript{1720}

**The Gala in Mesopotamian Myths**

A number of literary and scientific compositions were attributed in antiquity to certain *galas*. In a tradition that does not often mention authors by name, the names of some *galas* have survived. Among them are two who were identified as descendents of Uruk’s most famous author, Sin-leqi-unnini,\textsuperscript{1721} who composed at least one version of *Gilgamesh*.

But what makes the *gala* quite unique is that several compositions tell of the origin of the rank. The Sumerian *The Descent of Inanna to the Underworld* and its shorter Akkadian equivalent, *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld*, place the special creation of the *gala* by Enki/Ea in order to liberate the great goddess who has been killed in the underworld.

As early as the Old Babylonian period a *balag* composition, to which Sumerologist Samuel Noah Kramer gave the title, “The Fashioning of the *gala,*” tells a rather different story, but one that once again points to the performance of a tragic lament to bring joy to a deity.\textsuperscript{1722}

About half of the approximately 74-line poem has been recovered. In the very fragmentary second half a “sick son” wanders about, and scattered words that have been recovered give an impression of overwhelming grief. Possibly the “sick son” is Dumuzi.\textsuperscript{1723}

The first 37 lines of the poem are quite well established, and, fortunately, they tell us of the formation of the *gala*. Enki creates the *gala* very specifically to soothe the angry heart of Inanna. More than any other single feature of the *gala*, the ability to drive out Inanna’s rage defines the *gala*’s role in the cosmos.

What caused Inanna’s heart to be so troubled? As in most Sumerian poems, where parallelism is a most conspicuous feature, the question is raised again and again in slight different phrases. Fully sixteen lines repeat the question, providing us with a litany of titles for Inanna. All but one of the epithets begins with the *eme-sal* word for *nin*, usually translated as “queen” (taken as a feminine equivalent of the title *en*). She is the *gashan* heaven, of the Eanna temple, of the *gipar*. She is the *gashan* of two or three Sumerian cities (if Kullab is to be separated from Uruk itself). The third Sumerian city is Zabalam. (Interestingly, the poem also calls her *gashan* of the northern city of Nineveh). Most of the titles are conventional in the Inanna literature. Kramer was impressed that a number of them were unusual. In those lines (9-13) Inanna is the *gashan* of “the sleeping-robe,” the “multi-colored robe,” the “reed hut,” and the “stretched out net.”
The first of Inanna’s titles are interesting. She is called ama, “mother,” and mugib, the eme-sal equivalent of the title held by Inanna and very high-ranking women, nu-gig. Kramer translates it as “holy one.” Referring to Inanna as “mother” is unusual in the sense that she is rarely seen in that role. Possibly ama here is an archaic equivalent of en. At the end of the list she is the queen of battle and combat—and of the palace, where the warlord resides.

However many times the question—what caused Inanna’s rage—is asked, it is never answered. The anger of the Mesopotamian gods is such a frequent motif that it may suggest a fundamental theological principle. What prompts the anger of the gods is not made clear. Nor do such texts suggest an examination of conscience to discover the cause. Rather, the problem is presumably solved by the performances of rites. Here it is the performance of the newly-formed gala.

Enki, located in the Great Below (ki-gal) discovers the problem, takes counsel within himself and fashions the gala, “him of the heart-soothing laments.” Enki arranges for the gala’s “mournful laments of supplication,” and he places two of the gala’s drums, ub and lilis in the performers hands.

What follows in this part of the poem is an address to the great goddess assuring her she will receive the proper respect she deserves. The goddess Ninkasi will fill her mouth with “sweet aromatics mixed in a pit.” Inanna’s faithful messenger, Ninshubur, will soothe her heart. And her lover, Ama-Ushumgalanna, awaits her in Uruk. The lines are just broken enough to make it difficult to tell who is speaking and exactly what role the speaker plays in the restoration of Inanna’s heart. The segment ends with assurance that Enki will play his part from his residence in Eridu. Presumably it involves dressing her body in a clear robe. The poem at this point shares a number of motifs with the ending of the myth, “Inanna and Enki,” where Inanna returns triumphantly to Uruk and is reconciled with Enki, who gave her the precious me and then tried to wrest them from her. The me are not mentioned directly in this poem, but their equivalents, the gish-hur and garza (l. 28), are arranged for her.

The speaker in this section of the poem, whether in his own voice or in the voice of another, is the gala. The restoration of the great goddess to her throne in Uruk is, we think, the very lament for which the gala was formed.

Kramer noted that incipit of the poem, sha-zu ta-am-ir, appears in a catalogue of compositions designated as balag compositions (after the musical instrument the gala used in the performance of these songs). Mark E. Cohen identified the minimum schedule of religious activities for the gala in the 2nd millennium as (1) the recitation of compositions at funerals; (2) the recitation of incantation hymns on the occasion of a journey or a dedication of sacred buildings and objects; (3) the recitation of lamentations “during the razing of dilapidated buildings in order to assuage the anger of the gods at seeing their holy shrines being dismantled” (14); and (4) the recitation of lamentations on a cyclical basis on certain days each month. “This served,” Cohen observes, “as a constant vigil to prevent the anger of the god over acts unknowingly committed by the city
or king” (14). Along with ershemma, ershahunga, the balag were part of the gala's repertory of songs in Sumerian eme-sal.

“The Fashioning of the gala,” then, provides a mythological basis for one of the mainstays of Sumerian religion, perhaps originally in Uruk for Inanna but spread widely over Sumer and the north. By the 1st millennium, as we have seen, the gala was performing a number of important functions for the Assyrians in the north as well as in the old Sumerian south.

**Backformations**

It is possible that the many pieces of narrative and poetic lines that make up the “series” Gilgamesh cannot be built up into a unified construction. “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” offers a possible though by no means certain interpretative key to such a unified Gilgamesh. A number of displacements and substitutions, some of which we have already seen, point in that direction. Fronting the Old Babylonian prologue with the First Prologue to Gilgamesh is the earliest example.

Enkidu's cursing and blessing of the harimtu is another example. It points forward to the Flood story and backward to Gilgamesh's eloquent, if haughty, refusal of marriage to the model of the harimtu, Ishtar. The hymn to Amaushumgalanna points back to Dumuzi and other early ens in Urukean tradition—and forward to Gilgamesh. Killing The Bull of Heaven opens that hymn, and, as I suppose leads eventually to the hero's search for the Tree of Life, the gish-ti, which he actually receives but then, as we will see in Gilgamesh, almost immediately loses.

Suppose that the episode of The Bull of Heaven, killed by Amaushumgalanna (later by Gilgamesh with the help of Enkidu), sealed the hero's fate. The Council of the High Gods in Tablet 7 suggests that the Humbaba story was added to The Bull of Heaven, and then greatly expanded as an episode that took place before the killing of The Bull of Heaven. The Humbaba story, originally independent, is brought in to, among other things, provide a foundation for the most shorter story, one that clarifies motives (especially the participation of The Sun God in both stories) behind the action.

The development of a coherent life story of Enkidu is a backformation of Gilgamesh stories and gains in importance as Gilgamesh is alone and suffering. Consider Enkidu's “very human” lashing out at the harimtu. Shamash will correct his thinking, and Enkidu's angry heart is calmed—enough to allow him time to bless the woman who has given him so much. The compensation of a rich life with Gilgamesh is not entirely proportionate to the suffering he now experiences (and Gilgamesh will experience in losing Enkidu). Displacements and substitutions in Gilgamesh are rarely proportionate to the things they replace.

Not to give away too much of my interpretation of Gilgamesh, but I see the reconciliation with Ishtar as a parallel to the blessing of the harimtu. Gilgamesh will have to learn what, it turns out, Ishtar herself has had to learn. Gilgamesh will suffer through an agonizing search for “life” in order to discover that the Ishtar he has insulted (and Enkidu insulted in a very crude manner) has herself learned from experience. All interpreters of
Gilgamesh have had to wrestle with the insertion of a Flood narrative into the story. For now, it is important only to note that Gilgamesh hears an old story, one that took place sometime in the past. His eloquent dismissal of a fickle Ishtar has more in it that Gilgamesh knew (and the reader picks up at the time). Only in retrospect can the image of Ishtar be corrected.

The reader follows the mourning rituals and the terrible journey of Gilgamesh and suffers with him. Even when matters are resolved, though, the principle applies: a rich life does not compensate for loss.

The Tragic Turn

As Gilgamesh moves from heroic adventures to something that may be called tragedy, we are already beginning to see what critic Northrop Frye called the progressive isolation of the tragic hero.1727

Enkidu as a substitute for Gilgamesh has the narratological value of increasing the reader’s empathy, for both Enkidu (here) and later for Gilgamesh.1728 Until this point the interiority of Enkidu has been described somewhat, as he becomes humanized and then civilized.1729 Enkidu’s depression at becoming a shirku and his (reasonable) fears of approaching Humbaba are described, if only briefly. The feelings of both Enkidu and Gilgamesh through the middle of the poem are largely “public,” externalized, manifested in the dreams of Gilgamesh on the road to Humbaba. But once Enkidu weakens, his curses are largely monologues (and a hint of soliloquy before he speak to Gilgamesh), and he too dreams (of the underworld). The reader is drawn into his suffering—and can understand the “peace” that he feels when Shamash reasons with him.1730

The displacement of Gilgamesh’s anxiety over his own death in the Sumerian “The Death of Gilgamesh” to Enkidu has an even more significant impact on the story, since Enkidu’s suffering is seen in terms of Gilgamesh’s response to the suffering and death of his beloved friend. At first the long public elegy, the building of a statue, an image of Enkidu, and ritual mourning gives way to Gilgamesh’s collapse into something like the madness of Herakles, which we see from the inside.

Just as the very ancient mourning rituals for Dumuzi carry the paradox: Inanna has picked her substitute, but then joins Mother and Sister in mourning his death, Enkidu’s death as a substitute for Gilgamesh is a sacrifice. Thus the connection felt by the earliest modern scholars between Gilgamesh and “Ishtar’s Descent” (and suggested by Thorkild Jacobsen’s sense of a double strain in Gilgamesh between hero and eros, whose archetype is Dumuzi), though it turned out not to be an actual part of Gilgamesh is there as a displacement. Where the hero is alone in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” the evolution of his role in the Gilgamesh stories leads to this, that we are drawn into the pain of the Hero’s Dilemma—and can appreciate any healing that may take place.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

Mountain and Labyrinth

As Gilgamesh is set to embark on his terrible journey, which takes him, literally up and down through an increasingly exotic landscape, it is worth noting a symbolic landscape in Uruk itself. Gilgamesh will travel through mountains, a tunnel, an enchanted grove of trees, and across dangerous waters. The immense brickwork mountain constructed in the Eanna complex was, apparently, the first of its kind. (The Bible recalls such ziggurats in the Tower of Babel, that is, Babylon, episode in Genesis.) Next to it, set up below ground, was a puzzling structure. If Krystyna Szarzyńska is right, the structure was a labyrinth. At its heart was a “hole” covered with reeds: apparently an entrance to the underworld such as is mentioned in the 12th tablet of *Gilgamesh*. We have seen that in the myth, “Inanna and Enki,” Inanna cleverly obtains the divine me that had been in the possession of Enki. She takes the me with her to Uruk. Among them are the powers to “descend” kur and “ascend” kur. The term kur can mean “land,” but it usually means “mountain,” and may reflect the notion of a cosmic mountain with its foot in the underworld and peak in the heavens. It thus allowed for the world of the dead to be situated in kur. The performer of bloody rituals, the kurgarra, was associated with the possibility of descending and returning from kur, as of course, Inanna and Ishtar were famous for.

We have already seen many connections between Inanna, Uruk and mountains, though the city was situated on the flat floodplain. It has been speculated that the building of the ziggurat was a reminder to the Sumerians that their origin was in mountainous territory. For Inanna, the connection is more specific (and different): she robbed heaven itself of the house Eanna. In one version of the story she takes the house to earth with the help of a bull. Perhaps the sanctuary “built for the bull” in the Temple Hymn for Uruk's Eanna reflects that tradition. (The Bull of Heaven in Tablet 6, recall, had to be brought down from Anu's, that is, the highest heaven.) Another version has Enmerkar helping with the task of bringing down Eanna, and Enmerkar is credited with building Uruk. Finally, the contest that brings Inanna from her mountain temple in Aratta to Uruk, “Enmerkar and the En of Aratta,” is decided by the wily Enmerkar, and the move involves a transfer from the high ground to the floodplain.

The gods were sometimes thought of as living, like the Olympian gods, on a dul-ku, a pure place where mountain meets the heavens. Ascent to the heavens is a curiously scarce mythological theme in Mesopotamia. Etana is taken into the heavens, and returns. Adapa is brought to the gate of heaven, but is tricked into losing his chance for eternal life. Shulgi is said to have visited the heavens upon his death. His stay there was brief. Again it is important to emphasize that, quite unlike the Christian tradition reflected in Milton’s “Lycidas,” eternal life was not an option for humans—except in special cases where a special fate awaits the hero's arrival in the underworld. Dumuzi and Ningishzida sometimes guard the gate of heaven; more frequently they are judges, as Gilgamesh can hope to be, in the underworld.

The travels of Gilgamesh will take him to the Great Exception, the wise man and his wife who enjoy a unique form of eternal life.
Climbing the ziggurat in the Eanna complex may have been a ritual. The earliest modern observer of the ruins of Uruk noticed a structure at the very apex of the ziggurat. There, some have speculated, a “sacred marriage” may have taken place, a ritual that brought divine and human together in an intimate embrace.

**Tragic Pleasure and Ethics**

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur locates *Gilgamesh* within myths of “primordial chaos.” When “evil” is symbolized as coextensive with the universe itself, there can be little concern with the sins or crimes of humanity. The theogonic myth that sees the origins of the universe in the wild and unruly waters, Tiamat and Apsû, does not develop a “tragic” vision, let alone the “Adamic myth” and its “Eschatological” vision of history (the one more authentic than the others in Ricoeur’s view). He is particularly interested in the Flood story inserted into Tablet 11. The motives of the Flood are not entirely clear. The “hearts” of the gods prompted them to order the Flood. Enlil in particular is responsible. There is a hint that human fault may have led to the gods’s wrath, but mainly it is the anger of Enlil that accounts for the Flood. The same is true of the Flood story in *Atrahasis*. “It is evident that an ethical motive has not yet succeeded in breaking through, even though men are held responsible. It is not the holiness of God that is offended.” In *Atrahasis*, as we shall see later, the “noise” of humanity causes the Enlil to bring about the Flood.

For Ricoeur, then, the “quest of Gilgamesh has nothing to do with sin, but only with death, completely stripped of any ethical significance, and with the desire for immortality.” Mortality is simply the fate of humanity. “Evil is death.”

Ricoeur does, however, devote some analysis to the reasons why the gods condemn Enkidu. The “jealousy of the gods” is responsible, even though the heroes have killed The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. For Ricoeur, the “murders do not imply any guilt.” He follows the story of Gilgamesh weeping for Enkidu and embarking on his “passionate and vain quest.” Gilgamesh is repeatedly told that his quest is futile. The loss of the plant makes the story even more “distressing and absurd.” Gilgamesh has only his return to Uruk, to “toil and care.”

It seems to me, then, that the absence of a genuine myth of the fall in the Sumero-Babylonian culture is the counterpart of the vision of the world set forth in their myths of creation. Where evil is primordial and primordially involved in the very coming-to-be of the gods, the problem that might be resolved by a myth of the fall is already resolved.”
Ricoeur’s reading of *Gilgamesh* is shared by many. He offers only the slightest hint of tragedy in *Gilgamesh*, important because tragedy is a major and clearly prestigious myth in the cycle of myths he discusses. When Gilgamesh finally realizes that he, too, will die like Enkidu (in Tablet 9), the story approaches tragedy. In a note Ricoeur points to the potential for tragedy: Shamash’s objection to Enlil’s order that Enkidu die because Shamash had commanded the slaying of The Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. “Nevertheless,” Ricoeur writes, “the tragic theme is not complete; there lacks the blinding of man by the god; here the interplay of innocence and fault is still incidental to the theogonic conflict.”1737

It should be clear that I give greater weight to these elements of *Gilgamesh* than Ricoeur does. His subtle analyses of ancient myths have much to commend them, especially as he sees the centrality of tragedy (even while seeing its inadequacy before a more satisfying “Adamic” myth). His note to the Council of the Gods in *Gilgamesh* 7, however, provides an opening to a larger role for tragedy in the story. He finds *Gilgamesh* lacking the complexity of “innocence” and “fault,” but alludes to the key element in tragedy: “the blinding of man by the god.” This is certainly a reference to the dramatic tragedy Aristotle had found the very model of the tragic myth: the punishment of Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Since Aristotle’s admiration for Sophocles’ play extends to his famous identification of the “tragic pleasure” as a mixture of “terror” (phobos) and “pity” or “ruth” (eleos)1738 the veiled reference to Oedipus can now be filled out by what we know of Shamash and the killing of Humbaba (and The Bull of Heaven).1739 The tragic emotions are purged (catharsis) in viewing the performance.1740 In the Poetics, Aristotle famously pointed to Oedipus, a model tragic hero in that he is “neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness, nor is it though wickedness and vice that he falls into misfortune, but through some hamartia.” While hamartia was for many years translated as a tragic “flaw,” Walter Kaufmann argues that it is more like a “mistake,”1741 as it was for Oedipus. For Gilgamesh it might also be said that his problem was complicated by the urging and protection of Shamash against the protection of Humbaba by Enlil (and The Bull of Heaven by Anu?) The punishment falls, though, on Enkidu. In condemning Enkidu, however, the suffering of Gilgamesh is all the greater. The hero’s empathy for his beloved friend drives Gilgamesh into a terrible, mad quest. The audience for this story, hearing it or reading it, is not only moved by the fate of Enkidu but to an even greater degree by the fate of the one who has apparently escaped punishment. This doubling and intensifying of the “tragic pleasure” is the genius of Gilgamesh.

“Modern” Melancholics

*Hamlet (1600-1601)*

That most famous of modern melancholics, Hamlet, in what is possibly the best-known play of the modern West, illustrates the bipolarity of melancholia considered in Aristotle and revived in recent medical research on the mental condition. Aristotle found a
correlation between melancholia and certain particularly brilliant thinkers, artists, and
statesmen. Today it might be considered an element of a manic phase. (The common
term “depression” largely overlooks this dimension.) The Renaissance knew this as
“inspired,” “creative” or “religious” melancholy. Melancholy was thought to liberate
the imagination from “reason.” The results could, of course, be self-destructive. In the
religious context that encouraged an almost obsessive self-examination and at the same
time considered despair as the only unforgivable sin, the melancholic was in a particularly
difficult situation. Imagining one’s own faults could take as extreme a form as one’s most
inspired, creative play.

Exactly at the center of Hamlet (III.iii) Hamlet accidentally comes across his enemy, King
Claudius. He has only one chance before the end of the play to take vengeance upon
Claudius for the murder of Hamlet’s father (which Hamlet knows from a ghost, which
might be a demon in disguise or an all too vivid imagination). The scene in which he
encounters Claudius is so striking in its simplicity and power that it has been discussed
perhaps more than any scene in modern drama.

Hamlet enters behind a kneeling Claudius. The audience knows what Hamlet cannot
know, that Claudius, in a soliloquy, has revealed that he is guilty of his brother’s murder.
The audience also knows that Claudius is struggling with that guilt. This is the one
moment in the play that we see him in such agony. Hamlet has one chance to kill him,
but he draws back his sword and departs. The audience then discovers that Claudius can
no longer pray. He cannot give up the kingship and his marriage to Hamlet’s mother, so
he cannot repent. When he rises, having made his decision, he will never again doubt
himself. He becomes the villain that Hamlet had only imagined.

Hamlet, between the two soliloquies of Claudius, comes up with the most diabolical and
imaginative scheme to exact revenge imaginable: he will destroy the soul of his enemy,
not just his body. Samuel Johnson was so disturbed by this plan that he called it inhuman.

Hamlet. Now might I do it pat, now a is a-praying,
And now I’ll do’t. And so a goes to heaven,
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned.
A villain kills my father, and for that
I, his sole son, do this same villain send
To heaven.
Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.
A took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;
And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
’Tis heavy with him; and am I then revenged,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?
No.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent.
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At game a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in’t—
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days. (III.iii.73-96)\textsuperscript{1742}

The Fifth Act Leap
The end of the play provides Hamlet’s second chance to go after Claudius, and in the chaos of a crowded scene, Hamlet is able, almost by accident, to accomplish exactly what he imagined in Act III: to kill Claudius while the uncle is about a damnable sin and crime. Before that happens (in Act V.ii), we see one of those remarkable leaps of imagination Shakespeare is capable of making—and it involves a leap by his most famous character.

Hamlet acts out his problems in a most desperate and visually shocking way. He leaps into the grave of his beloved Ophelia, whose suicide is at least in part caused by Hamlet himself (V.i). There he fights with Ophelia’s brother, the avenger of a father’s death in a way that Hamlet cannot bring himself to be. London’s Globe theatre contained a trapdoor, which was undoubtedly used in the gruesome scene.

The fight precipitates the final scene of the play, where Hamlet is once again matched against Ophelia’s brother, Laertes. With all the mayhem and amid the dead bodies on stage at the end, Hamlet’s final line, “The rest is silence” (V.ii.347),\textsuperscript{1743} does not sound like a man whose problems have been solved. It is not clear if Hamlet is resigned to his fate, though he speaks rather coherently in the chaotic scene that brings about his death (and many others).

The leap into the grave is quite memorable, so much so that I invented a term to capture a very peculiar feature of Shakespeare’s many tragedies (and many of his comedies and romances): the “fifth act leap.” It refers to an unexpected insight we gain into a character who has been developed before us, whose “character” is largely known by the middle of the play, where a crisis inevitably turns the play around. Shakespeare gives us a new insight into the character at a particular moment before the final scene.

It is not so much the leap itself, the most memorable part of the scene, that led me to this odd piece of Shakespearean theatre, but the effect of the leap on Hamlet himself. All the craziness of Hamlet comes to a head in the famous Graveyard Scene. What is not so often noticed is that when he returns, literally, from the grave, Hamlet speaks in a rational way—in a way that we had not heard before (throughout V.ii). He heads into the confrontation that will lead to his death, but also to the clarification of motives and conflicting claims. Although I have never cared whether Denmark’s political scene became more orderly after Hamlet’s death, certainly there is a symbolic cleaning up of the rottenness that has characterized the scene until the very end of the play.
Hamlet toggles back and forth between madness, which he sometimes thinks he feigns, and reason—the very common Renaissance idea that Shakespeare’s contemporary, Ben Jonson, captured in his pair of plays, *Every Man in His Humour* and *Every Man out of His Humour*. Melancholy was one of the four “humours” that were thought, since antiquity, to determine temperament. If we think of the humours as hormones, we may be able to see why the theory had so many adherents. The one that captured the Renaissance was melancholy.

What continued to interest people, artists especially but also mental health advocates, about melancholy was something that seems to be missing in the discussions about depression. Hamlet is deeply disturbed, of course, mourning (probably excessively) the death of the father he idolized, and disgusted that his mother is marrying the hated uncle. His world is falling apart, and he projects his unhealthy views on the world at large, at least the kingdom of Denmark. He is both paralyzed to act and incessantly, obsessively thinking. I think we have forgotten what made this condition so strangely attractive, especially in the period that recovered the philosophical—and medical—texts of the Greeks. Hamlet’s condition is a nearly perfect illustration of the intimate association of melancholy with genius.

As is often the case, the discussion began in a dialogue between Plato and Aristotle. Plato’s divine *furor* or inspired madness was taken up in one of famous Problems (III,i) that was attributed to Aristotle. There we find the statement that, “Those, however, in whom the black bile’s excessive heat is relaxed toward a mean, are melancholy, but they are more rational and less eccentric and in many ways superior to others in culture or in the arts or in statesmanship.” This notion led to the Renaissance view of “heroic” melancholy. It was also particularly important for the Reformation, with its emphasis on an often obsessive interest in—and worry over—the inner life of the individual. The melancholic found as much within himself to grieve over as he or she found in the mad world outside the self.

The brilliant but much disturbed Hamlet descends, like the heroes of old, into the underworld. In the Abyss he finds a secret, a new perspective, though probably not the one he expected to find. It enables him to go on.

I think this is what Lois J. Parker is after when, influenced by Akhter Ahsen, she writes about “the experience of story at the actional level” in life or in literature. She writes about “the pivotal point of experience,” and cites, like Ahsen, the Sufi experience of a “point sublime.” Revision—the point of “mythopoesis,” which often brings out the “unknown qualities of a story” and depends on the Hidden Actors in myth—“becomes re-vision through a change of perception.”

I have long been an advocate of what Parker calls “the experience of story at the actional level.” I think Aristotle was on to this when he analyzed not only the narrative features of the plays he enjoyed watching—plot, character and the like—but also what could be experienced in watching the plays. The reader of *Gilgamesh*—or one who heard the story
told—experiences, especially in the Hamlet-like (or Herakles-like) furor of Gilgamesh’s mad quest, the agony and the release that follows upon a return from the Abyss.

That is why I think that the clarity marked by Gilgamesh’s description of the walls and the interior of Uruk, where Ishtar dwells, at the end of Tablet 11, is the return of sanity that we may have been expecting if we had paid attention to the opening lines of Tablet 1, where we read, or heard, that Gilgamesh returned from his arduous journey, “cut his works into a stone tablet,” and remains aniḫ u šupšuh, “calm, and at peace.”

Artists of all stripes in the Renaissance represented themselves as melancholics (largely because Aristotle had detected a correlation between melancholia and genius), but everyone understood that the great danger to the melancholia was despair leading to suicide, the “unforgivable sin.” Hamlet develops the contrast between Hamlet, who takes pleasure in his suicidal thoughts, and his beloved Ophelia, whose suicide impels the play to its bloody resolution. Hamlet, as is well known, is the most discussed tragedy of the modern era. Less well known, I think, is that Ophelia influenced not only artists in many media, but also the scientific study of melancholia. Elaine Showalter, in an article titled “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,” traces the history of Ophelia’s representation, and demonstrates that there was a “two-way transaction between psychiatric theory and cultural representation. As one medical historian has observed, we could provide a manual of female insanity by chronicling the illustrations of Ophelia; this is so because the illustrations of Ophelia have played a major role in the theoretical construction of female insanity.”

Showalter illustrates her thesis not only with literary works and paintings (especially of actresses playing Ophelia), but also Victorian photographs taken in the 1870s by Jean-Martin Charcot in a Paris hospital. The hospital coached women to perform for the camera by wearing special robes and sticking weeds and flowers in their hair to recall Ophelia.

A similar case might be made for representations over the centuries of the wife and mother of Oedipus. The play that provided Aristotle with the model of Greek tragedy also developed, we may recall, a contrast between the tragic hero who punished himself with blinding and Jocasta, who could not face the horror of her actions and immediately killed herself upon discovering the truth. It may also be worth remembering that Sophocles returned to the Oedipus story late in the playwright’s career. Not only had Oedipus not killed himself; in his long and agonizing journey, he had become not only wise but something of a healer, and finally disappeared like Utnapishtim and his wife into a godlike state. (Berossus may have been drawing on a Greek tradition when he indicated a similar fate for the hero of the Flood.)

**Samson Agonistes (1671)**

The ancient story of the hero Samson, found in Judges 13-16, contains a line that has puzzled many commentators. Weakened when the seven locks of hair are shaved, Samson is captured by the Philistines, who gouge out his eyes. He is forced to labor for his enemies
until his hair grows in again. This part of the tale takes exactly three biblical verses to complete. When he is forced to entertain the Philistines, he asks the Lord God to strengthen him in one last act of revenge ( Judges 16:28). The problem for commentators comes in the last statement Samson makes before he successfully brings down the three thousand Philistines: “Let me die with the Philistines” (16:30).

_The New Oxford Study Bible_, to give but one modern comment, gives this simple gloss: “Samson’s final words and deeds portray an honorable death.” Others are not so sure. John Milton’s reworking of the story as a Greek tragedy wrestles with the implications of Samson’s final words.

Milton’s Samson does not utter those fateful words. The brief but powerful speech to the Chorus makes clear that he intends no dishonor to “Our Law” or his Nazarite vows.

```
Samson. Be of good courage, I begin to feel
Some rouzing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.
I with this Messenger will go along,
Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour
Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite.
If there be aught of presage in the mind,
This day will be remarkable in my life
By some great act, or of my days the last.
```

As he thought appropriate to Greek tragedy, Milton does not show the heroic actions directly and has characters other than Samson tell the story. The advantage to the narrative is that Samson’s death needs to be _interpreted_ for us, and this is accomplished through a dialogue between a Messenger and Samson’s father, who has sought to ransom his son. The father is distraught because he immediately thinks Samson has killed himself (lines 1583-92). The Chorus eventually clarifies the situation. Samson was among those slain, “self-kill’d/ Not willingly, but tangl’d in the fold,/ Of dire necessity” (1664-66). A Semichorus explains the transformation in Samson, who is likened, in a dazzling epic simile, to the mythical bird of rebirth, the phoenix.

```
Semichorus. But he though blind of sight,
Despis’d and thought extinguish’t quite,
With inward eyes illuminated
His fierie vertue rouz’d
From under ashes into sudden flame,
And as an ev’ning Dragon came,
Assailant on the perched roosts,
And nest in order rang’d
Of tame villatic Fowl; but as an Eagle
His cloudless thunder bolted on thir heads.
So vertue giv’n for lost,
Deprest, and overthrown, as seem’d,
```
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

Like that self-begotte’n bird
In the Arabian woods embost,
That no second knows nor third,
And lay e’re while a Holocaust,
From out her asbie womb now teem’d,
Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
When most unactive deem’d,
And though her body die, her fame survives,
A secular bird ages of lives. (1687–1707)

What Milton accomplishes here is a description of the inner life of Samson, a quality that is almost entirely missing in the biblical narrative.1749

The play ends with a choral reminder of Aristotle’s notion of catharsis that is effected by witnessing tragedy. Though the Chorus speaks of those around Samson who experienced the event, it extends to the audience, or in this case, the reader of the tragedy.

Chorus. All is best, though we oft doubt,
What th’unsearchable dispose
Of highest wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Of he seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns
And to his faithful Champion hath in place
Bore witness glorious; whence Gaza mounrs
And all that band them to resist
His uncontroulable intent,
His servants he with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event
With peace and consolation hath dismist,
And calm of mind all passion spent. (1745–1758)

We, like those around the hero, and the hero himself, experience “peace,” “consolation,” and “calm of mind” as “all passion”—the tragic passions of pity and fear—are “spent.”

Needless to say, the succinct biblical narrative contains no such explicit conclusion. In order to drive the point home, the 1671 edition of *Samson Agonistes* carries on its title page, in Greek and in a Latin translation, the definition of tragedy offered in Chapter 6 of Aristotle’s *Poetics*.1750 Milton then went on to preface the poem with a discussion “Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call’d Tragedy.” He opens the preface with Aristotle’s observation that tragedy has the power to raise pity and fear, “to purge the mind of those and such like passions (799). Nature itself, Milton argues, provides a naturalistic grounding of the phenomenon: “things of melancholic hue and quality are us’d against melancholy, sowr against sowr, slat to remove salt humours” (799).

The Greek theory of humors holds little credence today. If one wanted to find an analogy today for the theory of four fluids that largely affected temperament, one might consider
the effect of hormones. For our purpose, though, it is useful to see Milton in the mode of Renaissance writers and artists struggling to describe inner experience. More specifically, it is noteworthy that his first example would be the process where melancholy drives out melancholy. Quite unlike the biblical Samson, who shows none of the obvious symptoms of melancholia, Milton’s Samson experiences an ever intensifying depression, only to discover at his lowest point the “rousing emotions” (coming from within or without), which leads him to a striking turnabout and leads us to the kind of healing ancient literature can often produce.

The Samson story is a good example of one narrative influencing another. The ancient Mesopotamian Gilgamesh stories provide another example. Lois Parker prefers the term story-making for these and other similar narratives that adjust themselves to different situations, historical periods, and cultures. Following M. H. Abrams, Stephen Bertman and others, Parker identifies the factors of work, narrator, and audience along with the “sensibilities and experiences” of authors and audience and the “social issues and events of the day” that interact in a process that is as true of literary production as it is of psychotherapy (57-58). The healing practices of ancient Mesopotamia, similarly, provide an insight into the increasing concern in the Gilgamesh stories for the depiction of the inwardness of Gilgamesh’s thoughts and, consequently, a way for us to think of healing in the characters of the story and in the audience, then and now.

**Modern Views of Melancholia**

Freud’s paper, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), is still of interest to psychoanalysis, where it “occupies a central position for both individual and group psychology.” In that work, developed during World War I, Freud introduced the notion of “identification” and developed, as the title suggests, comparison and contrast with the normal affect of mourning.

Sophiede Mijolla-Mellor stresses Freud’s broad definition of mourning to include not only the loss of a loved one but reaction of “any substituted abstraction (father-land, freedom, ideal),” which adds a sociopolitical dimension to mourning. Of course we do not know if Mesopotamian healers actually developed rituals after observing mourning and melancholy, both of which states presumably occurred in ancient times as frequently as today. If there were a theoretical model it may have the “withdrawal” of the loved one or object similar to the withdrawal of a personal god or a deity like Ishtar from the house or city.

In any event Freud observed the subject’s loss of interest in the outside world in both mourning and melancholia. But the melancholic suffers from an apparently unjustified loss of self-esteem. As Mijolla-Mellor puts it, in “mourning the world has become impoverished and empty,” while in melancholia, “it is the ego itself.” This melancholic “self-depreciation” is, as depth psychology would have it, actually directed at the “love object itself.” The initial choice of a loved object is narcissistic and at the same time ambivalent. This would account for one of the most interesting of Freud’s observations, the sadistic impulse of the melancholic that can assume masochistic form.
In recent attempts to resurrect melancholia rather than continue with the general term depression, mania is also an important feature. Mijolla-Mellor explains the reversion to mania as “a sudden release from the psychic charge maintained by melancholia.”

The melancholic, from this perspective, can be released when, as in mourning, the subject finishes with the object, by “degrading or declaring it dead.”

More recently, psychiatrists, without dealing with depth psychology, largely have reduced melancholia to depression. At least one attempt has been made to reintroduce the old term, and that may open up possibilities of detecting what the ancients did to treat melancholia.

One of the difficulties in dealing with Mesopotamian thinking on mental distress is that no case study has been discovered. Diagnosis and cures have to be inferred from the narratives and images used by their experts, the *ashipu*.

Michael Alan Taylor and Max Fink, who, we have seen, are now attempting to “resurrect” melancholia after its disappearance from the DSM-III, include many patient vignettes in their *Melancholia: The Diagnosis, Pathophysiology, and Treatment of Depressive Illness* (2006). Two of the examples vividly recall the “crises of conscience” in Elizabethan times, when Puritans especially worried that their sense of unworthiness was an indication that they were not among the “elect,” and therefore damned. Here is one of the vignettes Taylor and Fink provide.

Unmarried woman, age 39. Independent. Very strict Calvinist religious training. History of several minor attacks of depression. Had become very depressed with onset of early menopausal symptoms associated with anxiety and some agitation; much obsessed by ideas of dereliction of duty, questions of conscience and religious salvation. On various occasions wrote: “I am not ungrateful for all the help you have given me; but there is nothing but blankness and darkness and less strength to meet it with. I wish I could end it all, but the fear of death and eternity would be still worse.”...After several attacks of profound depression following quickly one on the other without definite recovery this patient returned to normality.

A second case is that of a man of the cloth.

A middle-aged clergyman. Crisis of depression; melancholia, “suicidal feelings.” There was a history of some two years increasing mental depression. The present crisis arose because he had suddenly left home and traveled a long way to relatives with the object of “obtaining peace.” Described himself as “an agonized atom through an utterly incomprehensible and torturing universe.” There was some improvement under treatment [suggestion] and a few days later patient said he felt “like a person who has crawled out of a morass and is lying on the brink.”...He appeared much brighter and better. He came to see me unaccompanied...but instead of going home he went to a station and took a train to--., where he wandered about and eventually gave himself up to the police. He had sent postcards to his friend and one to me which read: “I am tormented by
evil spirits and must flee them. You will never see me again. Your most unfortunate patient.” However, he was brought back by friends and found to be depressed. Recovery was slow.1756

Among other important claims, Taylor and Fink find unipolar and bipolar disorders within a single category of melancholia.1757 They provide the following example.

A typical cyclical psychosis in a married woman aged about 55, with alternating phases of melancholia and excitement lasting approximately six months over a number of years. The story was always the same; after six months occupation in “having a really good time” which included an endless round of social engagements and great popularity, patient suddenly “felt ill” and then within a few days became “livery” and depressed. The crisis intensified and the patient complains of indigestions and burning pains above the epigastrium, easily nauseated. Very depressed, especially in the mornings. Much worried about her “inside”...slow motion very conspicuous.1758

Symptoms of melancholia appear frequently in Mesopotamian and Greek observations about the “Sacred Disease,” epilepsy. Taylor and Fink note that “about 40% of epileptic patients become depressed.”1759 They provide the following vignette.

A middle-aged man became profoundly gloomy and pessimistic, and unable to work. He whined and tearlessly cried, pleading for help, and needed constant reassurance. He was anxious and paced continuously. He made several serious suicide attempts. The depressive episodes typically began suddenly in the late afternoon and slowly resolved by evening. They occurred daily. On several occasions a depressive episode lasted for a week or more. Because of the unusual timing and duration of the moods a seizure disorder was suspected and confirmed. His depressive episodes ended when seizure control was achieved.1760

The particular connection between epilepsy and melancholia has been studied in considerable detail by Assyriologist Marten Stol.1761 Along with anxiety and fear, nissatu, the key to Gilgamesh’s condition,1762 is prominent among the symptoms. It appears to be a condition like “heart-break” (hip libbi) that derives from the “heart” (rather than the head, lungs, or kidneys).1763 Among the cures Stol found leather bags filled with pharmaceuticals, stag’s horn, blood, fumigation, and amulets. Magical rites are used as well.

One of the rituals is particularly interesting for its use of images. The patient, a male, is married to a pig. To be more accurate, a puppet is made to substitute for the patient. Pieces of the puppet’s garment are cut, presumably symbolizing a “divorce” from the patient. Once separated from the patient, the puppet is married to a pig. The choice of a pig appears to be prompted by the belief that, like the black dog, the pig was considered unclean, and it would absorb any evil or contamination that was transferred to it.1764

**Ritual Treatment for Mental Distress**

Sumerians and Akkadians (the major linguistic groups in ancient Mesopotamia) were careful investigators of nature, as is evident in their development of astronomy and
mathematics. Because it never breaks free of magical symbolism and healing words, though, Sumero-Akkadian medicine seemed incapable of advancing as it would in the West, especially since the Renaissance. Clay models of the liver, for example, are careful and detailed. One that has survived is inscribed over most of its surface with omens and magical formulae.

Consider a case from the collection of ritual texts called Šurpu (“Burning”), composed in Sumerian and Akkadian.

Healing Neurosis: Šurpu, Myth and Ritual
The purported author of Gilgamesh was a mashmashu (or āshipu). He would have had to know the bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian incantations that by the time of Gilgamesh had been collected in standardized anthologies. A large number of these were found in the same libraries of Assurbanipal where the main texts of the standard Gilgamesh were found. We have a tendency to separate “literary” texts from medical texts and medical texts from magical texts, but in at least one major source of Mesopotamian healing rituals, these distinctions collapse. The most conspicuous examples also have the richest history: one form can be traced back to the earliest literary texts in the mid-3rd millennium BCE.

Anthropologists have gleaned a great deal of information about diseases in antiquity, where those diseases have left traces especially on the bones found by archaeologists. The human genome project is already uncovering the viruses that affected humans in prehistory. It is, of course, more difficult to find traces of mental diseases. A major study of Diseases in Antiquity fewer than fifty pages to “Mental Abnormality” in antiquity in a volume of 755 pages. The Assyriologist who contributed “Mental Diseases of Ancient Mesopotamia,” J.V. Kinnier Wilson, packed much material into ten pages in that volume. A recent survey of Mesopotamian medicine by Robert D. Biggs, mentioned the topic in a single, brief paragraph and cited only Kinnier Wilson in his bibliography. Kinnier Wilson proposed, though, that we can distinguish, through the rituals used to bring healing, texts dealing with psychoses and those that dealt with neurosis and psychopathic states. The 170+ items dealing with māmîtu, or obsessions, provides us, Kinnier Wilson thinks, with humankind’s “first attempt at the classification of ‘compulsive’ behavior.” The list is found in Tablet III of Šurpu.

Šurpu Tablet IV.84-85 contains a short list of related symptoms that, I hope to show, find their reflection in Gilgamesh. The two lines tie together headache, restlessness, gloom, bad health, woe and lament, sleeplessness, worry, and weariness. Although Erica Reiner translates a key term in this list—key, because it is repeated in each line—others translate nissatu as grief, worry, and depression, even melancholy.

The seventh tablet of Šurpu contains a similar list, but provides a great deal more context than the list in Tablet IV. In Tablet VII.11-16 young and old are wailing and beating their breasts. Something is binding the young man and young girl with “despair” (yet another way of translating nissatu) and “raining down” disease in heaven and on earth “like a thundercloud,” causing šāṭānu, “epilepsy” (Reiner) or “vertigo” (CAD 16.171).
elsewhere, the condition it associated with depression or melancholy. Other symptoms follow: paralysis, scabbing, coughing. A man so troubled roams around day and night and wails bitterly.

The first line of Tablet VII points to the cause (or related causes) of this desperate condition: dimītu. (Actually, dimītu arises from the abyss; māmītu, in the case above, “oath,” or as Kinnier Wilson interprets it, “obsession,” from the heavens; and ahhazu, a disease whose major symptom is jaundice and the demon that causes it, breaking through the ground like weed.) The complicated mix of the physical, mental, and demonic in this vivid introduction makes it difficult to tell what dimītu may be. Epilepsy is one symptom. When these disease-demons discover a man “from whom his god had withdrawn,” they cover him like a cloak.

They pounce upon him and fill him with venom,
tie his hands, paralyze his feet,
cover his body with scabs, and sprinkle gall on him.
“Invocation” and “oath” inflame him;
cough and phlegm weakens his chest;
his mouth is filled with spittle and foam;
dumbness and daze have come upon this man, he becomes feeble;
he roams around day and night and wails bitterly. (VII.21-36)

An epidemic disease, perhaps malaria, has been suggested.

The great city god of Babylon, head of the pantheon, notices the man's condition, but even a god as powerful as he is incapable of helping. Marduk goes, then, to the house of his father, the god Ea. Ea, the healing-god of the Šurpu collection, advises this:

Take seven loaves of pure coarse flour,/ string (them) on a bronze skewer,/ cap them with a bead of carnelian,/ wipe (with it) this man, son of his god, whom an "oath" had seized,/ have him spit upon (the dirt) wiped off him,/cast the spell of Eridu (upon it),/ take it out to the plain, the pure place,/put it down at the base of a thorn-bush,/ drive out from his body the (disease) which has overcome him,/entrust his “oath” (to) the Lady of the plain and the fields. (ll. 54-68)

Other gods are to be called upon in the process, and the man will become "pure, clean, resplendent,” "scoured clean like a jar for butter."

Or consider the case of sexual dysfunction. A collection called ŠA.ZI.GA is devoted entirely to the problem of a man incapable of getting and maintaining an erection sufficient for sexual intercourse. The need to produce children made the problem easily as terrifying in ancient Mesopotamia as it is for us. The collection offers a series of incantations and rituals to accompany the priest-physician's words. One of the rituals, for example, calls for the priest-physician to crush magnetic iron ore, mix in pūru-oil, recite an incantation three times, and then anoint both the man's penis and the woman's vagina. He will be sexually potent.
In another part of the collection, the priest-physician is to set up an altar for the great goddess, Ishtar, sacrifice a sheep, set up a censer of juniper, libate beer, and offer the shoulder, fatty tissue and the roast to Ishtar. Then he is to make two figurines each of tallow, wax, bitumen, gypsum, dough, and cedar. The figurines are to be burned while the priest-physician recites this:

Bright one of the heavens, wise Ishtar,  
Mistress of the gods, whose “yes” is indeed “yes,”  
Proud one among the gods, whose command is supreme,  
Mistress of heaven and earth, who rules all towns—  
Ishtar, (at) your name all lords are bowed down.  
I, NN, son of NN, have bowed down before you.  
(I) against whom magic has been performed,  
figures of whom have been laid in the ground--  
May my body be purified like lapis lazuli!  
May (my) features be bright like alabaster!  
Like shining silver and reddish gold may I not be dull!1775

The incantation also mentions seven plants that are to be strung on a linen cord and tied around the patient’s neck. The priest-physician then ties a ram at the head of the patient’s bed, and he ties a weaned sheep at the foot of the bed. Finally, wool is to be pulled from the forehead of the sheep and the ram, the wool spun and tied around the patient’s waist. He will have potency.

Astrology played its part in Mesopotamian medicine. One observation was that the constellations of Taurus and Orion (TE.GUD-AN and TE.SIB) in conjunction with the planets Mars and Saturn exercise influence over certain types of muscular afflictions. Epilepsy in the astronomical texts is called “daughter of the god Anu.”1776 The great goddess is sometimes considered the “daughter of Anu,” as we have seen in Gilgamesh, when she calls upon her father to send down the "Bull of Heaven" (GUD.AN.NA) to destroy the in her city of Uruk. Ishtar has a celestial aspect as the Morning Star and Evening Star. It is likely, though, that the “daughter of Anu” in the astronomical text refers to the demon called Lamaštu. How much the correspondences reflect mythological and ritual traditions is not known. But figures we have seen in the ritual texts (like the Ahhāzu-demon, māmītu-"oath" and Ishtar) are involved in astronomical medicine; and the Ishtar of the ŠÀ.ZI.GA text above was "Ishtar-of-the-Stars," that is, Ishtar as the planet Venus.

Since the causes of disease are imaged as the actions of gods and demons, cures are as often as not related to symbols of the disease, the god or the demon involved. ("Demon" in this sense is not far from "contagion" or a popular concept today of a "germ" causing disease.) In Šurpu, an incantation accompanying a ritual with an onion purifies the body of "dumbness" and "daze:"

Like this onion he peels and throws into the fire,  
--the fire consumes it entirely--  
which will not be grown in a plant-bed,  
which will not be close to a ditchbank or canal,
whose roots will not take hold in the soil,
whose shoot will not sprout, and will not see the sun,
that will not be used for the meal of god or king,
(so) invocation, oath, retaliation, questioning,
the pain of my hardship, sin, transgression, crime, error,
the sickness that is in my body, my flesh, my veins,
may be peeled off like this onion,
may the fire consume it entirely today,
may the oath leave so that I may see the light! (V-VI.60-72)\textsuperscript{1777}

Notice that the problem (elsewhere called evil curse, oath, and headache) combines physical, psychological, moral and spiritual categories that we have learned to distinguish finely.

Another incantation, against toothache, contains a mythological history of toothache. The "worm" (which was thought to suck the blood of the tooth) complains that it has nothing to eat. The worm itself is seen in the process that had created heaven and earth, rivers, canals, and marshes:

After Anu (had created heaven),
Heaven had created (the earth),
The earth had created the rivers,
The rivers had created the canals,
The canals had created the marsh,
(And) the marsh had created the worm--
The worm went, weeping, before Shamash,
His tears flowing before Ea. (ll. 1-8)\textsuperscript{1778}

The worm calls upon the gods, and they try to satisfy his claim by giving the worm the ripe fig and the apricot. The worm, though, desires to dwell among the teeth and gums. The incantation turns it around:

Fix the pin and seize its foot.
Because thou hast said this, O worm,
May Ea smite thee with the might
Of his hand! (11.20-23)

The tendency to run together cases of possession, disease, sin, and bad luck makes it very difficult for the modern interpreter to isolate psychopathological problems in the Mesopotamian texts. One Assyriologist has laid the groundwork for such a study, though, J.V. Kinnier Wilson.\textsuperscript{1779} Kinnier Wilson has detected a great deal of interest in psychological problems in the ancient texts. Šurpu, for example, contains the portrait of the Babylonian psychopath. In nearly one hundred lines describing the behavior of the sick man, we read a sequence:

He us(ed) an untrue balance, (but) (did not use) (the true balance.)
He took money that was not due to him, (but) (did not take) money (due to him).
He disinherited the legitimated son (and he did not establish) the legitimated son.
He set up an untrue boundary, (but) did not set up the true boundary.
He removed the mark, frontier and boundary.
He entered his neighbor's house, had intercourse with his neighbor's wife, shed his neighbor's blood,
took away his neighbor's clothes, (and) did not clothe a young man when he was naked.
He ousted a well-to-do young man from his family, scattered a gathered clan....
(When) his mouth (says) "yes," his heart (says) "no," altogether he speaks untrue words.
He...shakes and trembles (in rage), destroys, expels, drives to flight, accuses and convicts, spreads gossip, wrongs, robs and incites to rob, sets his hand to evil.... (II.42-62)

Obsessions, phobias, compulsive behavior (māmītu), and aphasia are among the afflictions the Babylonian "psychiatrist" knew about and dealt with, according to Kinnier Wilson.

Kinnier Wilson's observations lead him to reconsider a rather well-known literary work, *Ludul bēl nēmeqi* ("Let us praise the lord of wisdom"). The poem has been conventionally seen as a kind of Job-poem; usually it is called "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer." Kinnier Wilson, on the other hand, calls the work "the autobiography of a paranoid schizophrenic." The poem advances in four stages. The speaker believes he has gone blind, deaf, dumb and lame. He is persecuted, suspicious of everyone. Even "my own slave cursed me in the assembly." The patient withdraws from society. In his resentment he see the loss of his personal gods, and also behind that is a "plan" of the god Marduk. Kinnier Wilson also finds evidence of delusions of grandeur in the poem. There is even wit, of which the speaker is not, of course, conscious:

My grave was waiting, and my funerary paraphernalia ready, Before I had died lamentation for me was finished. (II.114-15)

Kinnier Wilson is interested in exhibiting the symptoms of the patient in *Ludul bēl nēmeqi*. Thus he does not concern himself with the healing process, which occupies Tablets III and IV of the poem. In those tablets the speaker tells of three dreams that came to him. In one, a “remarkable young man of outstanding physique, Massive in his body, clothed in new garments” appears to him and delivers a message (which is, alas, very broken). In a second dream, another young man appears, “holding in his hand a tamarisk rod of purification,” with a message, with cleansing water, a life-giving incantation, and a body-rub. In the third dream, “a young woman of shining countenance” like a goddess appears. She assures him he will be delivered. In the same dream an incantation priest,
“a bearded young man with his turban on his head,” appears. Marduk has heard the lament. Soon the symptoms fall away. The patient has been “rescued from the pit.” “I (who went) down to the grave have returned to the ‘Gate of the (Sun Rise).’”

What may be more important for our purposes is that Tablet VII of Shurpu provides a very clear, well-developed and coherent example of a “Marduk/Ea” incantation. (Since it appears first in Sumerian and Tablet VII presents the text in Sumerian with an Akkadian gloss, I prefer to call “Enki/Asalluhi” incantations, the most prominent examples of what are now called Divine Dialogues.) These incantations follow a very specific formula. First, a condition is described, usually in the context of a vivid, mythological narrative; here, thirty-six lines are devoted to something that attacks a population from the threefold Mesopotamian world view: humans on earth at the center, earth separating the cosmic dyad of the Above (AN) and Below (KI), the split that occurred at the beginning of creation.

The second part provides the tip-off that this is a “Marduk/Ea” incantation. The young god, whose Akkadian name Marduk, in what appears to a folk etymology, may mean “The Good Son,” sees the terrible situation and, unable to deal with it himself, turns to his father, the great god Ea (or Enki in Sumerian). Enki is the god par excellence of esoteric wisdom, and he transfers his advice to his son in language that is repeated in ritual after ritual. The Father tells the Son what to do. In this case, the incantation priest, the āshipu, acting for the Son, is told to take seven loaves of pure coarse flour, string them on a bronze skewer, cap them with a bead of carnelian, and wipe the man—said to be the “son” of his personal god—with the skewer. The āshipu is then to spit on what was wiped off of the man, to cast the “Spell of Eridu” (which is known from other sources) upon it, take it out to the plain and place it at the base of a thorn-bush. That will drive the disease out of the man’s body. (I think it is worth knowing that a demonic cause is likened to our germ theory of disease, but the demons are not killed off: they are returned to their “natural” place.)

With this performed, the text turns to what we usually think is the incantation proper, what the Son (i.e., his proxy, the āshipu) is supposed to say. In some twenty lines of text, the magus calls upon a series of deities to remove the illness, and revive him. Ninkilim, “lord of the animals,” will transfer the illness to vermin of the earth; Damu, the “great conjuror,” will speak words of good omen for the man; Gula, who is the goddess most often identified as a healer herself, will revive him as she revives the dead, by stroking him with her hands. The incantation even calls upon Marduk himself, the “merciful lord” who loves to revive the dead, to loosen the man’s bond through a life-giving spell. The man may be washed clean, scoured “like a jar for butter,” and entrusted to the sun god, Shamash.

The Good Son, Marduk, was considered by the Babylonians like Enlil of the Sumerians, the King of the Gods. Shamash, the sun god, was considered by the Babylonians the major god of the city of Sippar in the north, who was in many ways assimilated to the Sumerian god of the sun in the southern city of Larsa. The Assyrians who held these Shurpu tablets,
would have replaced Marduk with the Assyrian high god, Assur, but they would have had little problem with Shamash.

We have seen that Shamash has a most important role to play in *Gilgamesh*, especially in the first half of the story. It is usually assumed that rituals of the type in Tablet VII would be available only to the elites of the society. The ritual involves quite a bit of preparation, cost and effort in completing the complex operation.

**Healing Psychosis: The Ershahunga**

Marduk/Ea incantations are impressive and complicated in the way that they combine rituals and spells in a narrative that begins in chaos, finds a solution to the problem, and ends in the hope of order—the kind of relief that comes when the person becomes whole again. The attack upon the integrity of the person comes from outside, as an enemy would attack the walls of the city or the walls of a person’s house.

A lesser known ritual is called the ẹr-shà-hungá, considered not a narrative but a “cult lyric.” Most of the surviving lyrics, which are all attempts to soothe the heart of an angry deity, were found in the libraries of Assurbanipal (and one in Uruk). They were spoken (not sung) by another cultic official, the gala or kalû. This is not the place to deal with the gender-bending of gala, but they recited the poems in a curious dialect of the Sumerian language (many centuries after Sumerian had died out) known as eme-sal (possibly “woman’s tongue”). Exactly what Emesal was is still debated, but I think it is important to note that it was almost always employed in situations involving the goddess Inanna, the Ishtar of *Gilgamesh*.

The gods, male or female, were usually angry, and soothing their anger was of course important. There are Ershahunga addressed to a very wide variety of the high gods of Mesopotamia. I will mention here only one Ershahunga, and I mention it at all because J. V. Kinnier Wilson considers the Ershahunga, like the shà-zi-ga incantations, whose “heart-rising” was meant to revive the one who had lost libido, as an important part of Mesopotamian healing of mental distress. Since the idea that a “god” is “angry” with me is either a projection or a delusion, according to Kinnier Wilson, a ritual is employed to deal with the problem.

The recitation of the Ershahunga was accompanied with a special drum, the lilis. In one of four that were addressed to Inanna/Ishtar, the lyric consists of some 19 segments that do little more than ask for release from the many sins that have made the goddess angry. Inanna is addressed as he gashan or great goddess of heaven, and then as goddess of the southern and northern cities, especially her foremost temple, the Eanna, in Uruk, her city of Zabalam, and her city of Tin tir, or Babylon. The poem addresses then goddesses who are either extensions of Inanna or figures who have a special relation to her. Nanaya is one, a goddess who embodies the sexuality of Inanna. Of particular interest is the inclusion of the goddess Aruru, whom we will see as the mother goddess who forms Enkidu in *Gilgamesh*. As we shall see, Inanna/Ishtar is rarely, if ever, seen as a mother goddess, though the Assyrians consider her closely related to the motherly function.
Seeing Aruru, one of the Sumerian names of the mother goddess, in this Ershahunga, is perhaps a reflection of this Assyrian tendency.

**Healing Images: The Substitute**

A good indicator of the hold mythology and imagery had upon Mesopotamian medicine is the substitution rituals (pūhu) involving the divine lover of Ishtar, Dumuzi or Tammuz. A Sumerian myth, “The Descent of Inanna to the Netherworld,” tells of the great goddess (her Sumerian name, Inanna) descending into the world of the dead, where she too dies.1786 Inanna’s aide secures help from the god Ea (Sumerian: Enki), and Inanna is revived. In order for her to leave the Netherworld, though, she must secure a substitute. Alone among the gods she visits in looking for a substitute, her lover Dumuzi refuses to honor her. Dumuzi thus becomes the archetypal substitute. The narrative ends after Dumuzi, who frantically resists his fate, is captured and killed—only to have his sister, Geshtinanna, offer herself as a substitute for Dumuzi. She volunteers to enter the Netherworld for six months of the year while her brother returns to earth.

For the sick man, too, Dumuzi/Tammuz is the substitute *par excellence*.1787 Should a man fall victim to an utukku-demon or suffer from paralysis of the throat muscles, in addition to prayers to Tammuz and Ishtar and offerings, the demon or disease would be drawn off by substitution. In one case, for example, a funeral couch is prepared for Tammuz. The sick man stands before the couch and covers his head to indicate that he, the patient, has died. The priest strikes him seven times with a reed. The sick man’s personality (ramānšu) is changed—that is, exchanged for Tammuz. The sick man symbolically dies and rises with the god, freed of the evil spirit.

The ritual we have seen earlier, where a puppet substitutes for the patient and the puppet removes contagion from the patient and transfers it, by marriage, to a pig, would seem to reflect the “Sacred Marriage” of Inanna/Ishtar to her lover.

**Healing Love Sickness**

The Divine Dialogue ritual of the Enki/Asalluhi type even extends to the specific psychological problem, apparently universal, of love sickness. Dante dissected the problem in philosophical terms in his *Vita nuova*, Petrarch’s sonnet sequence was multiplied by the hundreds, and Chaucer’s “lover’s malady of heroes” (with a pun on hero/eros) extended the condition to something like epic proportions. For English-speaking peoples *Romeo and Juliet* remains the classic in this field, though some viewers or readers may forget that Romeo suffered from the disease since he is healed instantly when his true love, Juliet, comes on the scene.

M. J. Geller has provided a plausible explanation of the way magic rituals may have worked, at least in the case of love sickness.1788 A Sumerian incantation in the form of a Divine Dialogue between Father Enki and his son, Asalluhi, first states the problem in a form that will be familiar to many today. A man sees a “nice girl” standing in the street. The man is instantly aroused (šā-ki-āg), and exactly half of the incantation is devoted to the fantasy of this beautiful and sexy “nice girl.” His problem, then, is exactly opposite of
impotence, which was treated by the “rising heart” rituals (shà-zì-ga). (An example of the latter is given above in the Preface.)

Geller points to a description of love sickness in Akkadian diagnostic omens.

If a man is always forgetful and words fail him, or he always mutters to himself and laughs without cause, he suffers from love sickness, and it is the same for either a man or a woman. If depression befalls him and he keeps turning himself around, he eats food and drinks beer but he gains no weight, he exclaims, “O my heart” and he groans, that man suffers from love sickness, and it is the same for either a man or woman.

The Sumerian Divine Dialogue suggests the intensity of the man’s arousal in an extended praise of the “nice girl’s” attractive features. She is an “abundant cow”—“the cow being the abundant vulva of Inanna”—and also a blossoming apple-orchard, and a shady cedar branch. Standing, sitting, or lying down she causes arousal in him. (As an apple-orchard, when she lies down, “a shadow is created in her joyous canal,” an image that requires little explication in terms of Mesopotamian agricultural practices.) Her hair, her hand, her foot, haunches, hips (of lapis lazuli) all affect him. Arousal oppresses him “from above like the wall of a ziggurat.”

The elaborate portrait of the lady begins and ends with images Geller considers key to his interpretation of the problem and its solution. The “nice girl” (ki-sikil) in the first line is immediately associated with one of Inanna’s women (a kar-kid, the Sumerian equivalent of the harimtu in Gilgamesh) in the tavern. The final line of the portrait sums up the power of the images upon the young man (a gurush): she strikes his chest as if she were striking him with a reed.

Geller makes the important point that the young man is turning the girl in fantasy into the most seductive prostitute. When Asalluhi explains the problem to Enki, the Son does not know what to do to calm the man down (line 22). Enki provides a remedy—mainly butter of a pure cow applied to the girl’s breasts (!)—but it does not appear that Enki actually wants to calm the man down. When the butter is applied to the girl, the effect will be that she will not lock the man “out of the open door” or comfort her “crying child.” The young man will proclaim, “She will run after me!”

The solution to the man’s problem, it seems, is to have the nice girl satisfy him. Rituals to gain the love of a man or a woman are still common around the world, and are certainly to be found in the modern Middle East. Here the man is suffering from love sickness, and the remedy is in having the woman give herself to him.

What Geller suggests, though, is that the efficacy of the ritual actually depends on a psychological turn in the man himself. Geller cites Alfred Adler’s notion of the inferiority complex and Freud’s notion of the libido to explain the young man’s plight. Freud’s idea that the libido has two “currents,” one of affection, the other sensual. Because a child cannot focus on the parents as objects of libido (because of the incest taboo), he turns away from the affectionate side deriving from the parents and toward a debasement of
the sexual object. The key, then, in this Sumerian ritual is not, then, smearing the girl’s breasts with butter but fantasy of the prostitute in the tavern.

Geller concludes with the thought that Freud would agree: the ritual would help, not to get the girl, but to bring about a resolution of an unconscious dilemma. “The very realization of the fantasy, the acknowledgement that the “nice” girl in the subject’s fantasies is a “whore,” may not make her any less desirable but it may help our young chap express the dilemmas of his own unconscious mind.”

In dealing with the psychology of Love Magic, Geller cites Classicist John Winckler to explain what looks like projection of the love-sickness upon the other, in this case the “nice girl,” the magic is actually addressed to the one who is in torment. It is the lovesick client who is helped by the therapist. The clue to the therapist is put in the mouth of the wise Son Asalluhi, who looks for something that will calm the man down (ba-ni-ib-gi4-gi4). The therapist in such cases is the āshipu, an “exorcist” or learned physician like the author of Gilgamesh.

**The Joy/Woe Man**

Mesopotamian healing employed every sort of preventive and curative action, from herbs and drugs to dreams, magical words and symbolic behavior. The very inability (or refusal) to discriminate between causes of physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual problems-which philosopher Paul Ricoeur has described well in his treatment of “defilement” resulted in a richly symbolic complex that, to say the least, blurs the distinctions between medicine and literature. One can, of course, wonder what the rate of success may have been.

We have already seen the poetic miniature that anticipates Gilgamesh’s distress.

When the Stalker, the ḫābilu-amēlu, saw Enkidu, something, nissatu, entered his belly: grief, worry, depression, sadness. He face “grew dark.” The Stalker’s face, recall, “was like that of one who travels a long road.” It is a line that will be repeated again and again to describe Gilgamesh in his mad roaming of the wilderness. He recognizes his nissatu, the sorrow in his belly, as soon as he begins his search and enters the wilderness (Tablet 9, lines.4-5).

The line is repeated again and again as Gilgamesh searches for the meaning of life. When he encounters the tavern owner, Siduri, she recognizes the signs in him, the sorrow in the belly and “his face like that of a man who goes on a long journey” (10.8-9). She uses the same couplet when she questions him (10.43-44). She provides him with advice on dealing with his condition. He responds in the same language. He presses on. Twice he uses the line when he encounters the figure who will take him across the dangerous waters, including the Waters of Death, the boatman Urshanabi (10.117-18, 124-25). At the end of the line, Utnapishtim, the Noah-figure, sees Gilgamesh approaching and uses the same language to describe him (10.216-17). (Appropriately, Utnapishtim, whose epithet is “the faraway,”sees him while he is still a distance away.) Gilgamesh yet again (10.223-24).
It may well be that the quest of Gilgamesh, with all its emphasis on the *nissatu* of the grieving Gilgamesh, affected people in period when the Standard *Gilgamesh* was available. Recall the Assyrian prophetess named Dunnasha-amur, who identified “herself with Gilgamesh roaming the desert in search of eternal life, implying that ascetic denial of the body...played an important part in her own life.”\(^{1793}\) Like other Assyrian prophets, Dunnasha-amur received her inspired words from Ishtar.

Many interpretations of *Gilgamesh* turn on the ending of Tablet 11, as we have noted already. In Tablet 11 his search for “life” ends when Utnapishtim tells him the story of the Flood, which has a far more ambiguous ending than its close counterpart in the Bible. Gilgamesh is finally able to sleep, but Utnapishtim makes it into a contest, which Gilgamesh loses. At the urging of Utnapishtim’s wife, one of the most important Hidden Actors in the story, Gilgamesh is given the very thing he had sought, or at least a version of it, the Plant of Rejuvenation. As you already know, Gilgamesh is happy to have found this plant, a “secret” of the gods. He plans to return to Uruk, have an elder taste it and test it himself, so that he can return to his youth (*ana shá šāhriāma*, 11.282). His hope—and joy—are crushed when a serpent snatches the plant while Gilgamesh bathes. He weeps, and laments that his efforts have gained nothing except for a kind of immortality for the serpent.

The end of Tablet 11 is ambiguous in another way. In the beginning of the story, we read that Gilgamesh, after his arduous journey, returned to the city, “calm, and at peace,” *aniih u shupshuh* (1.7). The word for “calm” could by itself be interpreted as “weary” or “exhausted.” Interpretations of *Gilgamesh* turn on the importance of the “peace” that he has achieved.\(^{1794}\) At any rate, the final lines of Tablet 11 repeat only the description of Uruk, not the line that would make explicit that he was healed. Perhaps the ending leaves open the possibility that Gilgamesh has been healed in the process. There is no further mention of the woe in his belly. The end of Tablet 11 certainly fits the First Prologue. While there is no evidence that he has flipped to the other pole and found the kind of “joy” he had experienced in defeating The Bull of Heaven, he is able to act, at least to the extent that he can write about his experiences.

**Relief for Gilgamesh and Enkidu?**

Recall from the First Prologue,

> urha rüqta illikamma aniih u shupshuh (1.7)

> “From his long journey he returned, calm, and at peace,” and he “cut his hardships into a stone tablet” (1.8).\(^{1795}\)

The Mesopotamian gods are often, perhaps mainly, without the peace (their angry hearts *ul iniih ul ipshah*) that Gilgamesh achieves after his agonizing search for the meaning of life. Two Akkadian terms found together here, *aniih u shupshuh*, are frequently combined: *nāhu* and *pashāhu*. 
When Gilgamesh is described as the “joy/woe man” (hadi‘u-ùa amēlu, 1.234), he is so filled with energy that he does not sleep day or night (la šalilu, 1.239). In that remarkable (and unprecedented) phrase, the “joy/woe man,” we get as close as Akkadian gets to a diagnosis of a schizoid, perhaps even bipolar, human. That is what he is at the beginning of the story. He and his friend Enkidu are shown sleeping on ly once (6.190ff.), after celebrating their great victory over The Bull of Heaven. And, ironically, Enkidu is immediately having terrible dreams, dreams that will seal their fate and drive Gilgamesh to despair.

The sleeplessness becomes a repeated theme in the story.

The embittered Enkidu, who received the dream while he sleeps, curses the harimtu for making him human and civilized. Before he dies, though, Enkidu’s angry heart is calmed ([ipshah] agga libbashu inuh/ ...uzzashu inuh in 7.150-51), as we have seen.

The question remains if the calming of the heart of Gilgamesh is consistent with the episodes that follow Enkidu’s death. Before going into the details it is worth noting that two deities, Ishtar and Enlil, like other deities seem to be perpetually angry, come to be seen as having their fury calmed and soothed.

The two Akkadian terms, nâhu and pashāhu, share a range of meanings that allow them to be combined. They are both found frequently in literary works, but I think it is important to note that they are not particularly “literary.” There is a special vocabulary of Akkadian (and possibly Sumerian) terms that are found almost exclusively in “epic” and “hymnic” literature, but that is not the case here. The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (Volume 11 for nâhu and Volume12 for pashāhu) provide rich documentation for both terms.) The verb nâhu has a range from being slow and still; become peaceful, pacified; to abate, subside; have an abatement from an illness; to die down; to take a rest; to calm furor; pacify a country, quiet a child, extinguish a fire; put someone’s mind at rest; and to find relief. For pashāhu the range is similar: to be at rest; to act benevolently; to calm, soothe, heal, lie fallow and the like. For our purpose it may be useful to note that the terms not only in ordinary activities like sleeping but in finding relief from illnesses such as fevers, night sweats, and epilepsy (which was associated with melancholy) (nâhu). Similarly, pashāhu is used for soothing wounds, relaxing muscles and tendons, as well as calming moods. (It also describes the rest after sexual gratifications, lands that lay fallow, the flow of water, and, sadly, the rest of the dead as well as the weary and the ill.)

Notes to Chapter Seven


1597 George Smith, The Chaldean Account of Genesis, 236.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

1598 Smith, The Chaldean Account of Genesis, 235-251. Sayce expresses some doubt, but continues Smith's reconstruction by expanding the association of Tammuz with Adonis, 238.

1599 For the colophon at the end of Tablet 6, see Parpola, The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, 93. Parpola not only restores the opening lines of Tablet 7 from the Hittite but translates the Hittite into Akkadian, 95. George, The Epic of Gilgamesh, A New Translation, provides a translation of the Hittite, 55; Foster, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 53, refers the reader to Gary Beckman's translation, 163.

1600 Bernard F. Batto offers a way out of the problem. He sees sleep as a “metaphor of divine sovereignty,” as especially in Atrahasis, Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in The Biblical Tradition (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 28-34. As a Sleeping God An/Anu is too remote from human concerns to be more than a passive factor in human life.

1601 Gary Beckman, 163.

1602 Stephanie Dalley, Myths from Mesopotamia, 15.

1603 Dalley, Myths from Mesopotamia, 261.


1605 I have dealt elsewhere with what I consider the significance of Shamash's calming words, in the Appendix, “Translating Gilgamesh,” to Gardner and Maier, 275-90, reprinted, with additions, in Gilgamesh, A Reader, 6-20.

1606 The lament includes lines critical to Susan Ackerman's analysis of the intimate relationship between the two men, 48-73. Gilgamesh proclaims that he will mourn for Enkidu “like a professional mourner” (kimallari, 71.44), a woman, just as mourners are today in the Arab-Muslim world; while Enkidu was the “axe” (hasassinnu, per Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, “A Note on an Overlooked Word-Play in the Akkadian Gilgamesh,” ZIKIR ŠUMIM: Assyriological Studies, eds. G. van Driel, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 128-32; Gilgamesh covers the face of Enkidu, “like a bride (kallatu),” and paces around the body the way a lioness would.

1607 This is the argument in Maier, “A Mesopotamian Hero for a Melancholy Age,” The Healing Power of Ancient Literature, ed. Stephen Bertman and Lois Parker (Newcastle upon Tyne: CSP, 2009), 23-44.

1608 For this very controversial question, see Henshaw, 191-218.


1610 Black and Green, 78.

1611 Black and Green point out that the god is given offerings in “The Death of Gilgamesh,” 172.


Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia


1616 There is a gap in the text of Tablet 9, when Gilgamesh begins his wild journey. Foster, The Epic of Gilgamesh, 66-67, fills the gap with a passage from an older version of the story in which, significantly, Shamash attempts to console Gilgamesh as he calmed Enkidu earlier. At this point Gilgamesh has put on skins, eats the flesh of animals he has killed, digs wells where they were never seen before. In two lines Shamash asks Gilgamesh why he is wandering and tells him that the search for eternal life is futile—the same advice he will receive from others he meets. Gilgamesh responds with an anguished plea and sets off along the sun’s path, but Shamash ceases to be a significant figure in the story at this point. For the path of the sun and the symmetry between the first journey of Gilgamesh (to Humbaba) and the second (to Utnapishtim), see Vanstiphout, “The Craftsmanship of Sin-leqi-unninni, 60.

1617 Michael Ondaatje’s novel, In the Skin of a Lion, follows the life of an anarchist in Canada (New York: Knopf, 1987), and employs two passages from Gilgamesh, one involving Gilgamesh in the skin of a lion, and the other Gilgamesh falling upon lions with his axe and dagger, epigraph and 242.


1620 Selman, 90-95.

1621 Throughout this section I am indebted to Richard A. Henshaw, both in personal communications and in his thorough discussions in Female and Male.


1625 E. A. Speiser, Genesis, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, 144-46.


1628 Van den Born, 2084-85.

1629 For a detailed discussion of the highest officials in the Hebrew Temple Rites, see Henshaw, Female and Male, The Cultic Personnel, 24-26.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia


H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramer, ed. *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953), 14. In Islamic mysticism ‘udubiya is an even stronger term of complete surrender than the more familiar ‘ibada. In the Qur’an, of course, the sacrifice is not Isaac but Ishmael, and he submits to the will of God in an exemplary fashion.


Shuger, 99.

Shuger, 127.


Shuger, 123.

Shuger, 127.

Shuger, 177.


Spector, 47.

Spector, 19.

Spector, 91.

Spector, 92.


Clifford Geertz, “‘From the Native’s Point of View’: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” *Local Knowledge*, 65.


Frazer, 1.

Frazer, 282.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia 766

1651 Frazer’s source was Berossus; Burstein, speculates that Berossus mentioned a Persian substitute king ritual called Sacaea perhaps to “give a Babylonian pedigree to a Persian institution,” 17. The fragment that describes the Sacaea gives a few details, such as the five day custom of slaves ruling their masters, one of slaves putting on the robe of the king, but Berossus does not claim that the slave was tortured and put to death during the festival.


1653 A. Leo Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, Portrait of a Dead Civilization, 100.


1655 Erica Reiner, šurpu, A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations, 36-38, 57. For a discussion of this ritual, see Kramer and Maier, Myths of Enki, The Crafty God, 104-106.


1659 Black and Green, 30, 32-33. The human-substitute is often a goat, though Black and Green emphasize that the goat was used to divert sickness or evil but is not the same as the biblical scapegoat ritual.

1660 Oppenheim, Ancient Mesopotamia, 198-203.

1661 Her emesal name is Mu-ti-an-na, sister of Dumuzi, goddess of wine, and a goddess of the underworld. She is called bêlit tsêri. See Knut Tallqvist, Akkadische Götterepitheta, 311.


1665 See Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought,” 1883-93. Dumuzi’s festival took place annually on 27-29 Du’uzu (June/July). The dead returned every year during the month of Abu (July/August). Individuals possessed a ghost (et emmu), a life-force or “breath” (napištu), and a windlike spirit, zāqīqu. The et emmu and zāqīqu descended to the underworld, but only the et emmu, which was closely associated with the physical remains, was considered dangerous and needed to be fed by the living.


1667 “Sumerian Literature and the British Museum,” 308.

1668 For Kramer’s comment on the reading of this line, see “Sumerian Literature and the British Museum,” 309.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

1669 Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, 120.


1671 Diana Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 75.


1673 *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 85-89.

1674 *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 88.


1677 *The Sacred Marriage Rite*, 102-103.


1679 *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 166.


1684 Oppenheim noted that the wool of sheep is a development of the domestication of the animal, which in the wild had down, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 316-17.

1685 For the history of clothing in the ancient Near East, see Dominique Collon, “Clothing and Grooming in Ancient Western Asia,” 503-516. The importance of clothing as status markers and as images in art and literature is becoming increasingly clear as the development of techniques used in the manufacture of cloth has been mapped. See, e.g., Schmandt-Besserat, “Images of Enship”; M. E. Vogelzang and W. J. van Bekkum, “Meaning and Symbolism of Clothing in Ancient Near Eastern Texts,” 265-84; and Nahum M. Waldman, “The Imagery of Clothing, Covering, and Overpowering,” 161-70.


1687 *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 33-34.


1689 In the Akkadian “The Descent of Ishtar,” the poem ends with the sister’s lament, and may involve her generous self-sacrifice, but the three last lines of the poem, which presumably contained the statement, are missing. The sister’s name in this version is Belili. See Dalley, 160.

1690 Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, Ch. 7.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia

1691 Black, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 302. It is #19 in the Decad. A translation is given, 77-84.

1692 Alternatively, a snake. See *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, 84.


1694 Translation after Kramer and Maier, 117.

1695 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 161. Dalley translates the name as “Good-looks the playboy,” a designation that works perhaps better in British English than American English.


1697 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 161, notes the parallel with Enkidu’s curse of the harimtu, and points out that the Sumerian Descent of Inanna does not contain such a curse.


1700 For the kurgarra, see Henshaw, 289-92.

1701 Steven W. Cole and Peter Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, 100-133.

1702 Cole and Machinist, 101.

1703 Cole and Machinist, 102-104.

1704 Cole and Machinist, 103.

1705 The texts in this collection of letters always clearly differentiate the gala from the LÚ.SAG.MEŠ, the ša-rēši, “eunuch,” as in this letter (#128), which mentions both titles.

1706 Cole and Machinist, 148.

1707 Cole and Machinist, 98-99.

1708 Cole and Machinist, 110.


1710 In addition to the er-shemma, the gala performed other types of cult songs, the balang and possibly the shir-nam-shub, and prayers, the ershahunga and the shu-ila. See Black, “Eme-sal Cult Songs and Prayers,” 23-24.

1711 The Sumerian “The Descent of Inanna to the Underworld” and its Akkadian equivalent, “The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld,” narrate the creation of the gala in order to save the great goddess, who had been trapped in the underworld; see Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna* 52-89, and Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 154-62.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia


1713  For an overview see Henshaw, Female and Male, 88-96 and passim.


1715  Many Assyriologists have been inclined to think of the gala as eunuchs, but Henshaw is skeptical. See 88-89.

1716  While most evidence (including myths) situates the gala with Inanna/Ishtar, in Old Babylonian times a gala-mah was associated not only with Inanna (in the combination An-Inanna), but also with Nanna; Henshaw, 88. 1st millennium texts show galas in the service of Anu, Ea and Nabû as well as the goddesses associated with Inanna/Ishtar.

1717  Henshaw, 94. See Maier, “Gender Differences in the First Millennium: Additions to a Canonical Lamentation,” Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East, ed. Parpola, 345-54.

1718  CAD 8, 91-94.

1719  E. C. Kingsbury, “A Seven Day Ritual in the Old Babylonian Cult at Larsa.” 1-34; Joan Goodnick Westenholz, Eight Days in the Temples of Larsa, 17. Westenholz considers that the final, eight day was devoted to the divine king of Larsa, Sin-Iddinam, 27.

1720  Henshaw, 92-93. One would expect that the gala would be mentioned among the many functionaries listed in the myth, “Inanna and Enki,” especially since the nar, a singer, is listed in a group that deals with language and music (I.v.31 and II.v.55), and the five drums that are traditionally associated with the gala are mentioned near the end of the list of divine me (#100-104 in the list of 110); see Gertrud Farber-Flügge, Der Mythos “Inanna und Enki.” An interesting possibility is that the gala may be one of the missing me (#17-19) in a group that involves the kurgarra and the sagursag, figures associated with Inanna and the gala. In particular, the group in “Inanna and Enki” is involved in descending into and ascending from kur, the underworld. In “The Descent of Inanna to the Underworld,” the newly fashioned kurgarra and galatur are able to enter the underworld, presumably because they are “neither male nor female.” See Wolkstein and Kramer, 64.

1721  CAD 8, 93-94.

1722  Kramer, 1.

1723  Kramer, 7.

1724  Bendt Alster has suggested that the ama in Dumuzi’s title, Amaushumgalanna, is an archaic form of en. He considers the original form a(n)me(n), “Dumuzi,” Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible, ed. van der Toorn, 1572. Amaushumgalanna is found in line 31 of this poem.

1725  Kramer takes the expression, gala-mu-lu-ir-ša-hun-e, l. 21, as a variant of ershahunga, one type of lament performed by the gala, 6.

Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia


1728 Daniel Goleman argues that “emotional intelligence” matters from than IQ in his *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995), and emphasizes the importance of empathy for altruism; see “The Roots of Empathy,” 96-110.


1730 We discussed this in terms of Apollonian and Dionysian phases in Gardner and Maier, 26-34, and 275-290.


1732 Ricoeur, 185-86.

1733 Ricoeur, 186.

1734 Ricoeur, 187.

1735 Ricoeur, 188-89.

1736 Ricoeur, 190-91.

1737 Ricoeur, 189.

1738 After Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, 4-11.


1740 For Aristotle, see Kaufmann, 34-86; on “The Riddle of Oedipus,” 118-58.

1741 Kaufmann, 119.


1745 Parker, 136-41.

Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia


1749 As early as James Holly Hanford Milton scholars have noted the sharp contrast between Milton’s Samson and his biblical predecessor, where the text provides “nothing... to suggest the inwardness of Samson’s thought” (John Milton, Englishman, 1949), cited by Flanagan, 785.

1750 Reproduced in Flanagan, 783.


1754 Michael Alan Taylor and Max Fink include many patient vignettes in their Melancholia: The Diagnosis, Pathophysiology, and Treatment of Depressive Illness.

1755 Taylor and Fink, 17.

1756 Taylor and Fink, 17.

1757 M. Fink and M. A. Taylor, “Resurrecting Melancholia,” 19.

1758 Taylor and Fink, 21-22.

1759 Taylor and Fink, 116.

1760 Taylor and Fink, 116-17.

1761 M. Stol, Epilepsy in Babylonia (Groningen: Styx, 1993), 27-53.

1762 CAD 11.2.274-75 gives the range of meanings for nissatu: 1) grief, worry, depression; 2) song, wailing song (not lamentation priests with linen garments wailing during the lunar eclipse. In Gilgamesh: I:103; VII.76; IX.4,127; X:8,50,117,124,216,223,256,262,267,304; XI:126 (Parpola’s numbering); Gilgamesh I.i.49; VII; IX.i.4, iv.33; X.i.8, iii.4, iii.11, v.29,37 (CAD numbering), all under the meaning “grief, worry, depression.” Lexical texts list the following synonyms for nissatu (as translating the Sumerian A.ŠI) found in Gilgamesh: dîmtu (frequently), bikītu (VI.163, XI.126), tānēhu (IX.129), rimûtu (4x ?), tazzimtu (I.64, 76; XI.27, 46), all related to weeping and lamentation.

1763 Stol, Epilepsy, 27-29.

1764 Stol, Epilepsy, 99-101.

1765 See Ancient Near Eastern Texts, ed. Pritchard, I. illustration 151. Erle Leichty points out that not only was the liver of an animal examined carefully for messages from the gods, but the behavior of the animal before it was killed and the behavior of the “priests” who were involved were closely watched as well. Leichty gives an example of ominous behavior if a sheep farts as the “priest” approaches it. “Ritual, ‘Sacrifice,’ and Divination in Mesopotamia,” Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East, ed. J. Quaegebeur (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 246.

For a detailed account of the MAŠ, MAŠ, āšipu, and AZU (asû), see Henshaw, 143-50; Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 157-68. Graham Cunningham, “Deliver Me From Evil:” *Mesopotamian Incantations 2500-1500 BC*, finds the *gudu*, *mašmašu*, and possibly the āšipu in incantations as early as the Pre-Sargonic period, 13-16. The well known “Plaque for Protection against the female demon Lamashu” (also known as the “Hell Plaque”) now in the Louvre (AO22205), shows what purports to be two āšipu-healers with their patient. They are dressed in fish skins, which suggests that their wisdom (and practice) derives, as in the “Enki/Asalluhi” rituals, from the god of the ABZU, Enki or Ea.


Henshaw considers this interpretation a stretch. For the term, see CAD 10.1.193. The whole of Šurpu from Tablet II on concerns such an “oath.” [Personal Communication]


Biggs, *ŠA.ZI.GA*, 18. See also the example in the Preface.


Graham Cunningham’s “Divine Dialogue” is preferable to both because the exchange between the senior partner (Enki) and the junior partner (Asalluhi) is not invariant. Of incantations discovered from the Pre-Sargonic period, the exchange is usually between Enlil and Ningirim, 16-17. Cunningham first sees Enki and Asalluhi in the Neo-Sumerian period, 77-78, although Enki appears much earlier and increases in importance into the Old Babylonian period, largely at the expense of Enlil, 49.

For Gula/Ninisina, see Avalos, 99-114. Avalos shows that Gula and other healing goddesses were virtually indistinguishable, and her temples were widespread in Mesopotamia, including Uruk. Also known as Ninisina and among other epithets, the “great AZU,” her name may itself have mean “great.” She is envisioned as a dog.
Chapter Seven: Mourning and Melancholia


1785 J. V. Kinnier Wilson, “Mental Diseases of Ancient Mesopotamia,” Diseases in Antiquity, 723-33. Henshaw points out that the anger of the gods is a condition or syndrome, of certain gods, not a projection. [Personal Communication]


1787 S. H. Hooke, Babylonian and Assyrian Religion, 36-38.


1789 Robert Biggs updated his Šazīga study in “The Babylonian Sexual Potency Texts,” Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East, 71-78. Biggs also raises the question about the possible psychological efficacy of the rituals.

1790 Geller, 129.

1791 Geller, 135.


1794 Susan Ackerman deals extensively with this “peace” in the context of reaggregation of Gilgamesh as a liminal figure through a contrast between Old Babylonian and Standard Akkadian versions on Siduri and the return to Uruk, 134-35.

1795 For the most thorough discussion of these questions, see Bernd Jager, “The Gilgamesh Epic: A Phenomenological Exploration,” Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry 12 (1973), 1-43, and below, Chapter Nine.