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Engendering Epic:  
Heroism as Constructed Masculinity in the Epics of Gilgamesh and Beowulf

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Western culture is rife with heroes—and has been for centuries. From the demigods of old to the cinematic action stars of today, there is something that intrigues us about these noble and often solitary saviors. When considering epic heroes such as Gilgamesh and Beowulf, it is readily apparent that these men are products of patriarchal societies, and, consequently, masculinity is an inherent consideration when defining heroism. Recent criticism and re-visioning of ancient heroes has yielded some fascinating commentaries, especially in terms of gender theory. Feminist scholar Elizabeth Minnich states, “Gender, in its broadest sense, is the term feminists use to evoke the conceptual and experiential, individual and systemic, historical and contemporary, cross-cultural and culture-specific, physical and spiritual and political construction of what it means to live in a world that has created them not human, but always woman or man (a division that is not dualism but a hierarchical monism)” (Doty 15). Clearly, gender is not a neutral aspect of the human experience, nor is it uniform across socio-cultural boundaries; rather, individual cultures determine the range of appropriate and desirable behavior for each gender. Thus, the concept of gender is central to every human being, and especially to the epic hero whose masculine achievements shape the course of his tale. Consequently, it is worthwhile to examine the epics of Gilgamesh and Beowulf in order to determine how each hero represents the constructed masculinity of his respective culture. Since an epic presents not the reality but the ideal state of the culture from which it comes, the epic hero is the embodiment of the values that his culture holds dear. Though Gilgamesh and Beowulf come from extremely different times and places, both were written by men and for men, so they are decidedly androcentric in perspective. There are common denominators within the ancient Mesopotamian and Anglo-Saxon constructs of masculinity that contributed to the characteristics of these renowned heroes, and an examination of these attributes reveals that heroism is, essentially,

constructed masculinity.

Before delving too deeply into any discussion of gender, it is useful to actually define the terms “gender” and “sex.” Words like these are frequently thrown around in debates or are sources of debate themselves; they can have multiple—and even contradictory—meanings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), sex is “either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions,” while gender is “the state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as the result of one’s sex.” Thus, sex is biological and gender is social or cultural.

As Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble*, “the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (8). Yet, as Butler argues, if gender is the cultural expression of biological sex and this distinction between gender and sex is taken to its logical conclusion, it suggests “a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (*Gender Trouble* 9). If sex is indeed a stable, biological binary composed of maleness and femaleness, why should the construction of male gender always align with male sex and the construction of female gender always align with female sex? Furthermore, if one accepts the idea that gender is a social and cultural construction, why should that construction limit itself to the mere two forms of male and female? If gender is presumed to be a straightforward binary, this presumption simply retains the idea that gender always mirrors or is restricted by sex. When gender is seen as independent of sex, however, gender becomes “a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and

*masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (*Gender* 9).

If gender is not the cultural expression of biological sex, if gender is truly independent of sex, then what is sex? Is sex as stable and unchanging as it appears? Is it, as Butler asks, natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and “are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests?” (*Gender* 9). Perhaps sex is as culturally constructed as gender. As Butler points out, gender should not be viewed “as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (*Gender* 11). We cannot understand our human bodies—our sex—outside of the context of gender, and gender does not naturally emerge from a sexed body; it is, rather, the lens through which we understand the body. Therefore, sex cannot exist prior to gender since sex must be gendered in order for us to understand it.

Since male and female gender roles are automatically assigned on the basis of sex, gender is a self-fulfilling prophecy, “an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” (*Gender* xv). Butler argues that gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender* 45). Butler refers to this as the concept of performativity. Admittedly, this term can cause confusion, so, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler clarifies that performativity does not mean “one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night” (*Bodies that Matter* x). Gender performativity is not a conscious decision; rather, gendered performances are repeated until they seem natural and

inevitable despite the fact that they are neither. Gender construction is an ongoing process that is never complete and is always dependent on the unquestioned repetition of gender norms.

Performativity should not be understood as “the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies* 2). Butler also clarifies the concept of performativity when she quotes from Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (*Gender* 34).

Since gender intersects with race, class, ethnicity, sex, culture, religion, politics, and a myriad of other factors, it has not been constructed consistently in different historical contexts. Gender is, as Butler says, “a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (*Gender* 14). Interestingly enough, a society without gender distinctions has never existed; gender, no matter what form it takes, has always been constructed, and the different and disparate historical conceptions of what it means to be male or female are proof enough of this construction. The question, then, becomes how and why each culture constructs gender in the manner that it does. In many historical contexts, “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender,” a framework that inherently assumes and strictly enforces a harsh gender binary (*Gender* 30). This is the concept of the Other, and it is especially applicable to the worlds of *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*. The (mostly) silent women of both poems constantly reflect and uphold systems of masculine power; the men of *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*, whether they realize it or not, depend upon the women to be an Other that they can define themselves against. But women are not the only form of Other at work; the hero must also set himself apart from other men. In this way, lesser men—those who do not achieve the masculine

ideal as defined by their culture—also function as Others for exceptional men like Gilgamesh and Beowulf to define themselves against. In some instances, especially in the case of Gilgamesh, the hero is his own Other; he may exhibit a particular undesirable trait at the beginning of his tale that he overcomes by the end of it. But whoever the Other is—woman, man, or self—both epics reveal their culture’s ideal form of masculinity by a system of contrast and opposition. Though *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* were produced at different times by different minds and had no direct influence on each other, both epics present ideal masculinity in a surprisingly similar way. Both cultures emphasize community, lineage, strength, bravery, glory, and honor as important aspects of heroism. A thorough examination first of *Gilgamesh* and then of *Beowulf* reveals both the importance of these virtues as heroic elements and the nature of heroism as constructed masculinity.

### **Heroism as Constructed Masculinity in the Epic of Gilgamesh**

#### *Community*

Whereas Beowulf is community-minded from the start of his epic, Gilgamesh—well, Gilgamesh needs a little work. The prologue tells of a great hero who cares for his people, of a warrior who leads his army into battle and protects his men like “a mighty bank” (I 33)<sup>1</sup>, but this description looks forward to the mature Gilgamesh at the end of the tale and is quite different from the Gilgamesh we meet in the beginning. Instead of caring for his people, Gilgamesh “walks back and forth, / like a wild bull lording it, head held aloft” (I 63-64), and “By day and by night his tyranny grows harsher” (I 69). Instead of protecting his men, “he harries [them] without warrant” (I 67). Instead of being “the shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold” and “the guide of the teeming

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for an explanation of my *Gilgamesh* citation method.

people,” as he should be, he abuses his people and “lets no girl go free to her bridegroom” (I 87-91). Much of Gilgamesh’s tyrannical attitude stems from the fact that he is “powerful, pre-eminent, expert and mighty” (I 90) and “has no equal when his weapons are brandished” (I 82)—and he knows it. In his pride, he lords it over his people and his tyrannical behavior goes unchecked because no one can stand up to him.

As Elizabeth C. Stone points out, the household is the basic unit of organization within Mesopotamian cities; in the early dynastic periods of Mesopotamia, even institutions such as the city’s temple and palace are described as “large households,” a fact that underscores both the importance of the household specifically and of the community in general (145). Typically, a city’s palace is constructed in such a way that it serves the needs of the people first and the needs of the monarch second. The heart of the palace is a large throne room in which the king entertains his advisors and members of the public; thus, the king makes all of his decisions in front of a large audience, which is meant to hold him accountable and ensure fairness (Stone 149). In most Mesopotamian cities, the king is supposedly “chosen by the gods from among the entire (adult male) citizenry of the city,” and the city assembly is “the means by which the gods indicated their choice” of king (Stone 149). The king is responsible for maintaining peace within the city, stabilizing the economy, satisfying the gods, and protecting the weak from the strong (Stone 150)—responsibilities that Gilgamesh initially forsakes. This neglect is especially problematic because Mesopotamian cities were organized according to a strict hierarchy in which each level was dependent on the others. An ancient Mesopotamian text known as the “Standard List of Professions” catalogs all occupations within a city from most to least important; topping the list is a person whose title can be translated as “king” or “priest-king” (Van De Mieroop 27). As Hans J. Nissen and Peter Heine point out, the literal meaning of this

term is unimportant, for “the point is that the title is meant to denote the highest official” who holds the most responsibility in the city (29). If this person fails to fulfill his role and serve his people—as Gilgamesh initially does—then the city’s hierarchy and the city itself are doomed.

Not only does Gilgamesh fail to serve his people, but he also abuses them, and his unopposed tyranny is especially problematic because Mesopotamian society is guided by the *mes*. The exact meaning of the term *me* has been long-debated, but Rivkah Harris provides a common and sensible interpretation: “cultural norms” (243). Among other things, the *mes* include:

the art of lovemaking...

the art of prostitution...

the art of forthright speech...

the art of slanderous speech...

the art of treachery...

the art of straightforwardness...

the plundering of cities...

deceit...

the art of kindness...

fear...

the kindling of strife...

counseling...

heart-soothing. (Wolkstein and Kramer 15-18)

The *mes* is not simply a list of what to do and what not to do; rather, it encompasses a wide spectrum of positive and negative aspects that do not all agree with each other. Thus, antitheses

and contradictions—or, as Harris puts it, “the delicate balancing of order and disorder” (163)—are central to Mesopotamian cultural norms. Gilgamesh’s oppressive rule in which he takes advantage of his people is unopposed and unbalanced; it does not comply with the *mes*.

Therefore, when the women of Uruk voice their troubles to the gods, the gods determine that Aruru, the goddess who first created humanity by sculpting them from the earth, should “create the equal of Gilgamesh, one mighty in strength” who will “vie with [Gilgamesh] so Uruk may be rested” (MB Ni). This “equal of Gilgamesh” is Enkidu, whose confrontation of Gilgamesh does, in fact, bring a new sense of balance to Uruk and satisfy the *mes*.

Before Gilgamesh can understand how to treat his larger community (the city of Uruk), he must first learn how to relate to an individual. Before Enkidu arrives, Gilgamesh’s divine mother Ninsun tells her son:

a mighty comrade will come to you, and be his friend’s savior.

Mightiest in the land, strength he possesses,

his strength is as mighty as a rock from the sky.

Like a wife you’ll love him, caress and embrace him,

he will be mighty, and often will save you. (I 268-72)

Interestingly enough, Ninsun compares the relationship that will form between Gilgamesh and Enkidu to that of a husband and wife. This ambiguity follows the duo throughout the epic since they often demonstrate their intimacy of their relationship by kissing, embracing, and holding hands—activities that seem more likely for lovers rather than friends. So what is the nature of their relationship? Are they friends or lovers? A whole area of *Gilgamesh* scholarship concerned with this subject has cropped up in recent years, and it need not be extensively dealt with here since it is peripheral to the topic at hand. Suffice it to say, *Gilgamesh* may or may not describe

what we today call a homosexual relationship; whether it does or not, the story is clearly concerned with how two men care share human love and relationship. As William Doty puts it, *Gilgamesh* is “a story about masculine feelings and about expressing them, about caring deeply for another and learning to recognize when one is loved by someone else, and, finally, about going on with one’s own life when the beloved (does the gender matter?) is taken away” (79). Thus, *Gilgamesh* could be said to describe the ideal male bond—a bond that Gilgamesh did not know he needed, for after Ninsun describes the friendship that will soon arise between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, her son exclaims, “Let me acquire a friend to counsel me, / a friend to counsel me I will acquire!” (I 296-97). It is as if the thought of companionship had not entered Gilgamesh’s mind prior to that moment, but as soon as it becomes a possibility, he realizes how necessary it is for his wellbeing.

Indeed, the friendship of Enkidu proves invaluable—not only for Gilgamesh, but also for Uruk. When Gilgamesh decides to battle Humbaba, the elders of Uruk speak first to Gilgamesh, advising,

To Uruk’s quay come back in safety,  
do not rely, O Gilgamesh, on your strength alone,  
look long and hard, land a blow you can count on!  
“Who goes in front saves his companion,  
who knows the road protects his friend.”  
Let Enkidu go before you,  
he knows the journey to the Forest of Cedar.  
He is tested in battle and tried in combat,  
he shall guard his friend and keep safe his companion. (II 304 – III 9)

The elders then address Enkidu, saying, “In our assembly we place the King in your care: / you bring him back and replace him in ours!” (III 11-12). This exchange is interesting for several reasons. First, it shows that the city elders (who oppose Gilgamesh’s journey and describe it as needless) care for their king and respect his authority. Though their balancing power is admittedly less than Enkidu’s, it is nevertheless important. The city assembly ranks quite high on the “Standard List of Professions” (Nissen and Heine 29), which suggests the relative importance of their role as an advising body and as an opposing force to the king—both necessary functions according to the *mes*. Also of interest is the fact that the elders apparently quote a well-known Mesopotamian proverb concerning friendship, which suggests the importance of friendship within their society. Finally, the elders address Enkidu in order to formally place Gilgamesh in his care and request that he return him to theirs. This handoff of sorts reveals the importance that Mesopotamians placed on both the city—the larger community—and on the friend—the smaller community. The elders recognize that the smaller community serves a function that the larger community cannot, and vice versa.

The elders’ trust in the friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu proves well founded. Prior to their encounter with Humbaba, Enkidu expresses hesitancy, so Gilgamesh asks him, “Why, my friend, do you speak like a weakling? / With your spineless words you make me despondent” (II 230-33). When Enkidu expresses fear later, Gilgamesh encourages him, saying, “Why, my friend, do we speak like weaklings? / Was it not we [who] crossed all of the mountains? ... Take my hand, friend, and we shall go on together” (IV 244-45; 253). These sentiments prove enough to bolster Enkidu’s courage, and the two continue their journey. When they are on the verge of entering the Cedar Forest, however, it is Gilgamesh, not Enkidu, who becomes afraid. Enkidu encourages his friend thus: “Even a mighty lion two cubs can overcome” (V 77). Gilgamesh

takes heart, only to hesitate once again when they come face-to-face with Humbaba. Enkidu encourages him again, saying, “Why, my friend, do you speak like a weakling? / With your spineless words you make me despondent” (V 99-101). When Gilgamesh hears his own words repeated back to him, he is encouraged indeed, and the pair of friends go on to defeat Humbaba together. The way that Gilgamesh and Enkidu alternately lose heart and encourage each other suggests that friendship is essential to a man’s success. A friend is the person who reminds you of your strength and capability even when you have forgotten them; thus two friends can accomplish more together than any man could accomplish singly.

Of course, Gilgamesh’s community is made up of more than just men. As Harris points out, the women of the poem “act maternally, as women of ancient Mesopotamia were expected to...Only the goddess [Ishtar] acts like a man, proposing marriage to the hero” (xi). As Gilgamesh’s actual mother, Ninsun is the most direct manifestation of this maternal attitude, but other women—such as Shamhat, Shiduri, the scorpion-man’s wife, and Uta-napishti’s wife—also nurture and aid Gilgamesh throughout his quest. In fact, throughout *Gilgamesh*, women are viewed positively only when they behave in a maternal fashion, and they are often defined not by themselves but by their relationship to men. Ninsun is Gilgamesh’s mother; Shamhat is Enkidu’s lover, nurturer, and educator; Shiduri is Gilgamesh’s advisor; the scorpion-man’s wife and Uta-napishti’s wife are simply that—wives. Clearly, *Gilgamesh* is a masculine text that deals with the concerns and activities of men, and within this text women function “as supporting and subsidiary characters in the cast” who embody the “fears, fantasies, and wishes” of men (Harris 120). Ninsun, Shiduri, the scorpion-man’s wife, and Uta-napishti’s wife fall under the wishes category; Shamhat falls under the fantasies category; and Ishtar falls under the fears category. Thus, except for Ishtar, these women are compliant Others who reinforce the gender binary of

ancient Mesopotamia. Though all of these women are part of Gilgamesh's larger community, they only matter so far as they are related to men.

For Gilgamesh, the larger community of the city is primarily important because it provides a source of advisement (he can seek advice from the city assembly), it gives him a sense of purpose (he can look after his people and better his city), and it supplies a way to achieve honor and glory (if he looks after his people and betters his city, he can be remembered forever). The smaller community of friendship formed by Gilgamesh's relationship with Enkidu is important because it satisfies the *mes* (they come together as two opposing forces who balance each other), it provides companionship and guidance (they achieve more together than they could if they were apart), and, since they are metaphorical twins, it gives Gilgamesh a glimpse into his own future (they are so similar that when Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh fully understands that he, too, will die one day). Thus, both the city and the friend are essential to Gilgamesh's success; he must nurture and respect his relationship with both of them in order to be an ideal man and hero.

### *Lineage and Religion*

Of course, Gilgamesh's success is also largely due to his impressive lineage—and, in Gilgamesh's case at least, lineage is inseparable from religion. At the beginning of the epic, Gilgamesh is identified as “Wild bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh, the perfect in strength, / suckling of the august Wild Cow, the goddess Ninsun!” (I 35-36); “Gilgamesh was his name from the day he was born, / two-thirds of him god and one third human” (I 47-48). This strange proportion of humanity and divinity is never explained in the epic. Perhaps a third of humanity comes from his father, the man Lugalbanda; a third of divinity comes from his mother, the goddess Ninsun; and a final third of divinity comes from his role as the city's priest-king.

Alternatively, a third of divinity could come from Ninsun; and both a third of humanity and a third of divinity could come from Lugalbanda, who is sometimes portrayed as a demigod in Mesopotamian myth (Van De Mieroop 116). Whatever the case, Gilgamesh is both human and divine, which puts him in a unique situation. As Tzvi Abusch puts it, Gilgamesh is “man, hero, king, god” (614), and various characters that Gilgamesh encounters recognize his multi-faceted nature.

When Humbaba begins to plead for his life, he says, “You are so young, Gilgamesh, your mother just bore you, / but indeed you are the offspring of Wild-Cow Ninsun! / By Shamash’s command the mountains you flattened, / O offshoot sprung from Uruk’s midst, Gilgamesh the king!” (V 145-48). Thus, Humbaba recognizes Gilgamesh’s divine parentage (Ninsun is his mother), divine approval (he is favored of Shamash), heroic strength (he flattened mountains), and manly status (he is the king of Uruk); in this way, Humbaba attempts to appeal to the various aspects, both divine and human, that make up Gilgamesh. The scorpion-man and his wife recognize Gilgamesh’s unique heritage as well: “The scorpion-man called to his mate: / ‘He who has come to us, flesh of the gods is his body.’ / The scorpion-man’s mate answered him: / ‘Two-thirds of him is god, and one third human’” (IX 49-52). Then, when Gilgamesh tells them what he seeks and how far he has come, the scorpion-man remarks, “Never before, O Gilgamesh, was there one like you, / never did anyone travel the path of the mountain” (IX 80-81), and, finally, the scorpion-man allows Gilgamesh to pass because of his strength and because he is “flesh of the gods” (IX 130). It seems that the scorpion-man, who has not allowed anyone to pass before, would not have allowed Gilgamesh to pass unless he had been exceptional both as a human and as a god.

Sometimes, however, Gilgamesh needs to be reminded of his divine heritage, his royal

privilege, and why they both matter. When Gilgamesh visits Uta-napishti, he recounts his tale of woe: how Enkidu died and how he has traveled ever since in search of immortality. Uta-napishti responds,

Why, Gilgamesh, do you ever chase sorrow?  
 You, who are built from gods' flesh and human,  
 whom the gods did fashion like your father and mother!  
 Did you ever, Gilgamesh, compare your lot with the fool?  
 ...  
 He is clad in a rag, instead of fine garments,  
 instead of a belt, he is girt with old rope.  
 Because he has no advisers to guide him,  
 his affairs lack counsel. (X 266-70; 274-77)

Uta-napishti reminds Gilgamesh that he is blessed not only because of his parentage—for he has an exceptional human father and a divine mother—but also blessed because of his station as king, which has nothing to do with lineage in ancient Mesopotamia. The city assembly, guided by the gods, chose him from among all of the men in Uruk to lead his people. Gilgamesh, therefore, should be thankful for the opportunities provided him by both his unusual lineage and his royal privilege. Basically, Uta-napishti tells him to stop moping, to realize the advantages he has, and to fulfill his natural and social obligations.

To understand how important Gilgamesh's lineage is, it is worth taking a look at someone who has no lineage whatsoever: Enkidu. When Enkidu sees Ninsun interacting lovingly with her son, he is "bitter," for

Enkidu possesses no kith or kin.

Shaggy hair hanging loose [...]

he was born in the wild and has no brother.

Standing there, Enkidu heard what [Ninsun] said [to Enkidu],

and thinking it over, he sat down weeping,

His eyes brimmed with tears,

his arms fell limp, his strength ebbed away. (II 173-81)

Since Enkidu was expressly created by the gods to be “a match for the storm of [Gilgamesh’s] heart” (I 97), he has no parents and no family. He is entirely alone. And since, as Stone points out, the household and the family are the basic units of organization within Mesopotamian society (145), Enkidu has no way to enter into that society. Much like Gilgamesh, who did not realize his need for a friend until the opportunity presented itself, the wild man Enkidu did not know the importance of family until he observed Ninsun speaking with and caring for her son. When Gilgamesh sees the distress of his new friend, he does his best to encourage him, but it is Ninsun, not Gilgamesh, who manages to help Enkidu. The epic often describes Ninsun as “clever and wise, well versed in everything” (III 117), and with good reason: she acknowledges Enkidu’s sorrow and decides to fix it in a way that only a mother can, saying,

“O mighty Enkidu, you are not sprung from my womb,

but henceforth your brood will belong with the votaries of Gilgamesh,

the priestesses, the hierodules, and the women of the temple.’

She put the symbols on Enkidu’s neck.

The priestesses took in the foundling,

and the Divine Daughters brought up the foster-child.

‘Enkidu, whom I love, I take for my son,

Enkidu in brotherhood, Gilgamesh shall favor him!” (III 121-28)

Ninsun’s adoption of Enkidu is profound because it offers him something that not even Gilgamesh could. Now, instead of simply being Gilgamesh’s brother through friendship, Enkidu is Gilgamesh’s brother by adoption, and he gains a mother and a home as well. As an adopted son—an adopted son of a goddess, no less—Enkidu now has a sense of identity and the means to participate in Mesopotamian culture more fully.

In addition to his divine parentage, Gilgamesh also receives the favor of the gods. The prologue reveals that he was handcrafted by the gods: “It was the Lady of the Gods drew the form of his figure, / while his build was perfected by the divine Nudimmud” (I 49-50). Shamhat tells Enkidu, “Gilgamesh it is whom divine Shamash loves. / The gods Anu, Enlil and Ea have broadened his wisdom” (I 241-42), and, after encountering Gilgamesh for the first time, Enkidu declares, “High over warriors you are exalted, / to be king of the people Enlil made it your destiny!” (P 239-40). Throughout the tale, Shamash in particular shows concern for Gilgamesh: “Shamash grew worried, and bending down, / he spoke to Gilgamesh: / ‘O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering? / The life that you seek you never will find’” (Si I 5’). All of these instances prove that, for whatever reason, the gods have taken favor with Gilgamesh since before he was born. Though Gilgamesh initially seems unworthy of their approval, if they had revoked it because of his tyrannical behavior, then he never would have been able to succeed. Instead of punishing him when the people voice their complaints against him, the gods are patient and send a friend to guide him. Ultimately, their patience proves well founded, for after he returns to Uruk he serves his people and honors his gods:

He built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,  
of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse.

...

Take the stairway of a bygone era,  
draw near to Eanna, seat of Ishtar the goddess,  
that no later king could ever copy!

...

[Gilgamesh] restored the cult-centers destroyed by the Deluge,  
and set in place for the people the rites of the cosmos.

(I 11-12; 15-17; 43-44)

Certainly, Gilgamesh did not deserve the favor of the gods in the beginning of his tale; though he was an exceptional man, he was an awful king who abused his people and did not give the gods proper respect. Undeserving though he was, the gods chose him and loved him and nurtured him and destined him for greatness; he would not have become the ideal man and hero without their favor.

### *Strength and Bravery*

References to Gilgamesh's lineage and community aside, Gilgamesh is most often described in terms of his strength and bravery. He is referred to as a "wild bull" or a "wild bull on the rampage" almost as often as he is referred to by name; it is a title that emphasizes his unmatched strength. Strength is not much use without bravery, but luckily Gilgamesh has both in spades. Prior to his quest to discover immortality, however, Gilgamesh's bravery is perhaps a bit foolish. The best example of this foolish bravery is his decision to seek battle with Humbaba:

Hear me, O young men of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,  
O young men of Uruk, who understand combat!

Bold as I am I shall tread the distant path to the home of Humbaba.

I shall face a battle I know not.

I shall ride a road I know not. (II 260-64)

Interestingly enough, Gilgamesh does not make this announcement to the entire city of Uruk, or even to all of the men of Uruk; instead, he makes it the “young men of Uruk.” This suggests that Gilgamesh decides to fight Humbaba out of a desire to prove his strength and his bravery to those who are most likely to question his strength and assert their own: the young men of his city. The quest to slay Humbaba is, essentially, the heroic version of showing off. Gilgamesh even boasts that he is entering into a conflict and following a road of which he knows nothing—he *boasts*, as if either of those facts were desirable. Additionally, when Enkidu and the city assembly advise Gilgamesh against undertaking this task, he reacts flippantly:

Gilgamesh heard the words of the senior advisers,

he looked with a laugh at Enkidu [...] :

“Now, my friend, how frightened I am!

In fear of [Humbaba] shall I change my mind?” (II 300-3)

Here, Gilgamesh literally laughs in the face of danger—and in the face of the gods, for though Humbaba is a monster, he is also the god-appointed guardian of the Cedar Forest. But Gilgamesh, in his foolish bravery and pride, does not heed the warnings of Enkidu and his advisors. He runs headlong into danger, and he takes Enkidu with him. If not for the intercession of Shamash, who “roused against Humbaba the mighty gale-winds” in order to aid Gilgamesh (V 137), and the counsel of Enkidu, who convinces Gilgamesh to ignore Humbaba’s deceitful words and kill him while he has the chance, then both Gilgamesh and Enkidu would have surely perished.

Thus, Gilgamesh's title of "wild bull" can be interpreted positively—it is, after all, an indication of his strength, and "the essential characteristics of masculinity [in ancient Mesopotamia are] mastery and dominance" (Harris xi)—or negatively. In the prologue, Gilgamesh is described in this manner: "In Uruk-the-Sheepfold he walks back and forth, / like a wild bull lording it, head held aloft" (I 63-64). While strength is a desirable attribute, this passage and others like it indicate that Gilgamesh's strength is problematic because it is unchecked and unbalanced; he is known for "lording it" over his people, a phrase that has a decidedly negative connotation. The implication, once more, is that Gilgamesh, in his immaturity, relies too much on one attribute instead of embracing a more holistic and balanced view of life, as is required by the *mes*. The wild bull Gilgamesh must learn to temper his strength with kindness and mercy, both of which are sentiments expressed in the long list of the *mes* (Wolkstein and Kramer 14-18). Notably, after Gilgamesh has completed his quest and gained wisdom, he is not referred to as a wild bull again. Instead of exerting wild, ungoverned strength like a raging bull, he uses his strength in a controlled manner in order to serve his gods and his people. He becomes a man who is "heroic in stature, / brave scion of Uruk" (I 29-30), a king who leads his men into battle as a member of the vanguard (I 31), and a leader whose comrades can trust him to temper his strength with wisdom and kindness.

Another notable character is characterized by strength: the goddess Ishtar. Ishtar's case is especially interesting because as a goddess she is greater than Gilgamesh the human, but as a woman she is lesser than Gilgamesh the man. This complication, however, is only one of many surrounding the goddess. In Mesopotamian mythology, Enki, the god of wisdom, delivers the *mes*—the cultural norms that guide the lives of the Mesopotamians—to Ishtar specifically (Wolkstein and Kramer 15), and, like the *mes*, Ishtar is full of contradictions and antitheses.

Throughout Mesopotamian mythology, she blurs the separations “between the sexes, between one species and another, between...age and status...She is a deity who incorporates both order and disorder” (Harris xii). Additionally, Ishtar’s main areas of concern as a goddess are two of the profoundest forms of disorder and violence: sex and war (Harris 165). If compared to the Greek pantheon, Ishtar is a composite of Aphrodite and Athena. Given that she is a goddess of war, the fact that the female Ishtar is characterized by strength (a decidedly masculine trait in ancient Mesopotamia) is understandable, but it is still problematic for Gilgamesh who usually considers her more of a woman and less of a deity. Her marriage proposal to Gilgamesh is an unconventional display of strength surpassed only by the strength she exerts when decides to seek revenge for herself (again, revenge is a decidedly masculine area) after Gilgamesh spurns her.

Harris argues that the reversal of expected gender roles in *Gilgamesh* is “an essential feature of the epic’s humor and comedy” for the ancient Mesopotamians and that Ishtar’s marriage proposal to Gilgamesh is one of the best examples of this reversal in the epic (121). Since women are not supposed to propose to men and are definitely not supposed to defy them, Ishtar’s actions are unexpected (and, according to Harris, hilarious). Whether it is meant to be entertaining or not, Ishtar’s choice of masculine strength over feminine submission is, in the view of all Mesopotamian men, unacceptable. Thus, when Gilgamesh dishonors Ishtar and foils her revenge plot, masculine strength triumphs over feminine strength, and order is restored. In this way, Gilgamesh groups Ishtar—goddess though she may be—with the other women of the poem who simply exist for the sake of men. As far as he is concerned, strength is the province of men, and he will not yield to a woman attempting to be strong.

*Glory and Honor*

All of Gilgamesh's attributes and abilities would be worthless unless he received recognition for them; this is another role that the community plays for the hero: acknowledgement. In the beginning of his story, Gilgamesh thinks he can achieve a sort of immortality by defeating Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Thus, these daring exploits are a way for Gilgamesh to conquer death, but it is not until his focus shifts from himself to his city that he truly gains a meaningful form of immortality. Initially, Gilgamesh strives to accomplish great deeds for his own sake, to "establish forever a name eternal" (Y 187). When Enkidu dies, however, Gilgamesh fully realizes that though he himself is two-thirds divine, he remains one-third human; he is not invincible, and he is certainly not immortal. His faith in his own strength is lost, and he is overcome by despair for his friend and his longing for lasting life. Still focused on himself, Gilgamesh embarks on a journey to resolve both of these internal conflicts; his journey is a struggle for self-fulfillment, yet, in the end, it is supremely unfulfilling. Almost as soon as Gilgamesh gains a means of achieving immortality, he loses it. Even if he had become immortal, however, Gilgamesh would not have been content; he eventually learns that he should have been focusing not on himself, but on his city all along. When he focused his strength on gaining immortality solely for his own sake, Gilgamesh abandoned his community, failing to acknowledge his responsibility to it or to appreciate its value. After coming to terms with his mortality, however, Gilgamesh concentrates his efforts outwardly, in a new direction entirely: he primarily aims to better and immortalize his city, and in doing so unintentionally better and immortalizes himself.

In the beginning of the epic, Gilgamesh claims to understand that men's days are numbered and that, consequently, men must gain a pseudo-immortality by performing awe-

inspiring exploits. He does not truly comprehend his own proximity to death, however; in his mind, he is invincible. He may refer to his own death when he speaks to Enkidu, saying, “As for man, his days are numbered, / whatever he may do, it is but wind” (II 234), but only a few lines later Gilgamesh confidently proclaims, “I will conquer [Humbaba] in the Forest of Cedar: / let the land learn Uruk’s offshoot is mighty! ... I will establish forever a name eternal!” (Y 184-87). Though Gilgamesh acknowledges death’s existence at this point, it is clear he is confident enough in his own strength that he does not yet fear it. If it were not for the aid of Shamash, however, the overconfidence that Gilgamesh displays here would have meant death of himself and Enkidu; if the god had not paralyzed Humbaba with wind, the two humans would have never been able to kill the beast, and Gilgamesh’s sudden terror would have allowed Humbaba to overcome him. But the humans, of course, do not credit Shamash for their victory, for after the battle Enkidu says to Gilgamesh, “By your strength alone you slew the guardian” (IM 20), and Gilgamesh accepts his friend’s praise. Even when credit and appreciation are both due to Shamash, Gilgamesh refuses to focus on anyone but himself.

Though Gilgamesh’s delusions of his own glory and power are soon shattered by Enkidu’s death, he remains focused upon himself, determined to gain immortality in both name and body. At first, Gilgamesh is distraught and does not know what to do with himself. He laments Enkidu and their lost friendship, saying,

Having joined forces we climbed the mountains,  
 seized and slew the Bull of Heaven,  
 destroyed Humbaba, who dwelt in the Forest of Cedar.  
 Now what is this sleep that has seized you? (VIII 52-55)

Enkidu was Gilgamesh's twin, the only man who rivaled him in strength, and in this speech Gilgamesh realizes how meaningless their self-focused exploits really were when compared to the finality of death. If Enkidu is really dead, then Gilgamesh will be forced to admit his own mortality. For six days and seven nights, Gilgamesh mourns his friend but denies his death, hoping that Enkidu may yet rise again. When a maggot falls out of Enkidu's nose, Gilgamesh must accept the reality and finality of death and decay. Initially, Gilgamesh would have been satisfied with fame that continued past death. After coming close to death, however, and realizing the danger that it poses to himself in particular, Gilgamesh needs something more lasting than renown, and all that is left for him to pursue is literal everlasting life.

And so Gilgamesh leaves his city to search for Uta-napishti. During this journey, Gilgamesh grieves over the death of Enkidu (IX 1-2), but even more he fears his own death. Still focused on himself, Gilgamesh struggles to reach the man who overcame death, refusing to listen to Shamash when he says, "O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering? / The life that you seek you never will find" (Si i 7'-8'). Eventually, Gilgamesh finds Uta-napishti who tells Gilgamesh about "a matter most secret...a mystery of gods" (XI 281-82): a plant that grows deep in the ocean and is the secret to regaining his youth. Gilgamesh manages to find the plant, but he is careless, and almost as soon as he has it, he loses it. He has lost the only way that he had to gain true immortality, and he now realizes that the years he has spent thinking only of himself and selfishly working to achieve only his own happiness were wasted.

Whether it was a gradual comprehension or a sudden realization, by the time Gilgamesh sees his city once more, he has come to terms with his mortality; he now knows that he should have been striving for the sake of his city, not himself. In the beginning of Gilgamesh's tale, he is a ruthless king and his people suffer from his tyranny. Once he accepts his mortal life,

however, he also accepts his mortal duties as a king; instead of focusing too much on an unavoidable future—his dying—he focuses on an achievable present—becoming a fair and worthy ruler who builds up his city instead of destroying it. Gilgamesh can finally see the beauty and potential of his larger community, and as he describes it to Urshanabi he realizes he can help his city achieve that potential. He restores the temples, revives religious devotion, and betters his city—all for the sake of his people. In the end, Gilgamesh is remembered for this, the restoration of his community and culture, not for the slaughter of Humbaba or the Bull of Heaven.

Ironically, as soon as Gilgamesh stops striving to “establish forever a name eternal” (Y 187) and strives instead to better his city, he achieves lasting fame. The tale comes full circle; as foreshadowed in the prologue, the tablets that tell his story are buried in the cornerstone of Uruk, and thus Gilgamesh, too, becomes the cornerstone that supports his city. This is what a man should do, the epic insists, this is how a hero should act: in the interest of his people.

### **Heroism as Constructed Masculinity in the Epic of Beowulf**

#### *Community*

Community is perhaps the most significant defining aspect of masculinity in Anglo-Saxon culture. Though it is somewhat counterintuitive to the modern mind—with our conception of lone cowboys and solitary heroes as epitomes of masculinity—the Anglo-Saxon man, even the hero, was nothing without his community. There are two main forms of community in the Anglo-Saxon world: the first is the *maegth*, the community at large; the second is the *comitatus*, a smaller group of companions within the *maegth*. In the epic poem named after Beowulf, the hero himself is not mentioned until nearly 200 lines into the poem, and even then he is not referred to by name. The name Beowulf does not appear until line 343, which is more than a

tenth of the way through this short (contestably epic) poem. Instead, the hero is initially referred to as “Hygelac’s thane, good man of the Geats” (*Beowulf* 194). As defined by the OED, a thane is “a military attendant, follower, or retainer; a soldier.” The role of a thane must also be understood within the Anglo-Saxon concept of a *comitatus*, which, according to the OED, is “a body of *comites* or companions; a retinue of warriors or nobles attached to the person of a king or chieftain.” Murray F. Markland explains that the *comitatus* is “the select group of the hero’s retainers, those warriors bound voluntarily and personally to his service,” and it is often understood as the “nucleus of our conception of the Germanic heroic tradition” (341). The *comitatus*, as previously mentioned, is a smaller group of companions within the larger *maegth*. The term *maegth* is used in a variety of contexts in Old English (OE), as acknowledged in its OED definition: “a family; a person’s kin; a race, a tribe; a people or nation.” In summary, a thane is part of a *comitatus* that is part of a *maegth*. Beowulf’s initial introduction as “Hygelac’s thane, good man of the Geats” is interesting because it identifies him not by name, but by his *comitatus* and his *maegth*. Even when Beowulf finally introduces himself by name, he still prefaces this introduction with his *comitatus*: “We are Hygelac’s companions in hall,” he says. “Beowulf is my name” (*Beowulf* 343). This conveys that he is nothing apart from his communities, both small and large.

Though Beowulf is frequently referred to as “Hygelac’s thane,” other terms used (by the narrator, Beowulf himself, and others) in reference to the hero include: “Geatish leader” (341), “lord of those men” (1642), “prince of thanes” (1644), “treasure-giver” (2071), “aged guardian / of the precious homeland” (2209-2210), “guard of the Weders” (2335), “Geatish gold-friend” (2583), “great king” (2789), and “beloved leader” (3079). Some of these phrases are used multiple times; others, only once. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the phrases used that

connect Beowulf to his *maegth* and his *comitatus*. This collection of phrases is simply intended to provide a representative overview true to the spirit of *Beowulf*, and it is important to note that the variety of phrases present is partially due to the style of OE poetry. As described by C.M. Millward in *A Biography of the English Language*, “The basis of OE verse was the four-stress, unrhymed, alliterative line ... Each OE poetic line was divided into two half-lines, and the first stressed word of the second half-line determined the alliteration for the entire line ... Of course, an extensive lexicon was essential in order for poets to have at their disposal synonyms beginning with various sounds to fit the alliterative demands of any given line” (Millward 139). Thus, due to the alliterative nature of OE poetry, the narrator of *Beowulf* commanded an impressive lexicon, and, in particular, had to contrive a varied collection of phrases that could be used to refer to the main character in various alliterative moments. Even taking the demands of alliteration into account, however, the particular phrases used to describe Beowulf are of the utmost importance. These phrases reveal Beowulf’s essential personhood—who he is as a man and as a hero—and many of these phrases extol Beowulf’s commitment to his *maegth* and to his *comitatus*. Several of the above phrases refer to Beowulf’s capacity as a giver of gold or treasure, an essential function of the head of a *comitatus*. Within the text of *Beowulf*, Wiglaf describes this concept best: “I recall the time, when taking the mead / in the great hall, we promised our chief / who gave us these rings, these very armllets, / that we would repay him for these war-helmets, / tempered edges, if he ever needed us” (2633-2637). The Anglo-Saxon understanding, then, is that the chief showers treasure upon his comrades-in-arms, and, in turn, the chief’s *comitatus* fights with and for him. The masculine bond of the *comitatus* is essential to the Anglo-Saxons; it embodies men’s “love of the same” and is “a means of developing solidarity against the other” (Overing 72). The Other is, of course, women, who are excluded from the *comitatus* in

order for men to increase the strength of their masculine bond.

One moment in particular sums up Beowulf's devotion to his *comitatus*. As Beowulf prepares to face Grendel's mother, he implores Hrothgar:

if I lose my life while at work in your cause,  
 you will still be to me as a father always.  
 Be shield and protector of my young men here,  
 close battle-comrades, if this fight claims me;  
 and also the treasures which you have given me,  
 beloved Hrothgar, send back to Hygelac,  
 lord of the Geats. He will understand  
 when he sees such gold, the son of Hrethel  
 will know full well that I had found  
 a ring-giving lord of all manly virtues,  
 rejoiced in his good while I was able. (1477-1488)

In the case of his death, Beowulf asks that Hrothgar look after his *comitatus*, his “close battle-comrades.” As chief of these fourteen young Geats, his de facto brothers, Beowulf wants to ensure that they are taken care of in any eventuality. But this is not the only *comitatus* that Beowulf is a part of. Though he is the chief of the Geats that he brought with him, he is also one of Hygelac's thanes. Thus Beowulf owes allegiance to Hygelac just as these young Geats owe allegiance to Beowulf. Beowulf also feels a close connection to Hrothgar, and in this moment refers to him as “a ring-giving lord of all manly virtues,” which implies that he also considers himself a member of Hrothgar's *comitatus*—if, perhaps, to a slightly lesser degree than he considers himself a member of Hygelac's *comitatus*. Nevertheless, in the course of the poem,

Beowulf identifies himself as a member of three *comitati*: he is a thane of Hygelac, he is the chief of his carefully selected band of Geats, and he is a thane of Hrothgar. Beowulf takes all of these commitments seriously, as witnessed by his unwavering devotion to all three *comitati*.

A single moment concerning Beowulf's dedication to his *maegth* is similarly revealing. After Beowulf slays not only Grendel, but also Grendel's mother, Hrothgar praises and thanks him, saying:

You have brought it to pass  
 that peace-bond, friendship, shall tie our peoples,  
 Geats and Spear-Danes, in common kinship,  
 and strife shall sleep, malicious attacks  
 which they weathered before; so long as I rule  
 this broad kingdom we shall give treasures,  
 and many shall greet each other with gifts  
 across the gannet's bath. The ring-necked boat  
 shall carry overseas gifts of friendship,  
 the strongest tokens. I know our peoples  
 will stand fast knitted toward friend and foe,  
 blameless in everything, as in the old manner. (1854-1865)

This passage reveals how Beowulf's actions have unified two smaller *maegthe*: his own *maegth*, the Geats, and Hrothgar's *maegth*, the Spear-Danes. This sort of "peace-bond," as Hrothgar calls it, is essential to the survival of people groups. Though intertribal warfare does not feature heavily in the main plot of *Beowulf*, it is frequently mentioned in the poem's historical digressions and was, in fact, an inescapable component of Anglo-Saxon society. Bonds of peace

between two *maegthe* are significant; they can be formed and reinforced in a number of ways, including marriage. But in this instance, Beowulf has done both Hrothgar's *maegth* a service—by taking care of their monster problem—and his own *maegth* a service—by paving the way for a peace-bond between the Geats and the Spear-Danes.

Though, admittedly, it is odd that a single man in the Anglo-Saxon world would be responsible for forming a peace-bond. Normally, a lasting peace-bond between two *maegthe* is accomplished in a different manner: marriage. In Anglo-Saxon tradition, when two *maegthe* are in opposition, a woman from one *maegth* will be given away in marriage to a member of the other *maegth* in order to establish peace between the two groups; this woman is known as a peace-weaver. As Gillian R. Overing points out in *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*, a masculine economy is at work in Anglo-Saxon society: “‘Economy’ is used as a comprehensive term for the complex of cultural systems of change and exchange, wherein power is sought, claimed, and distributed; ‘masculine economy’ denotes the social and material conditions of patriarchy, in which women may be construed as commodities in the system of change and exchange of power relations between men” (121). Similarly, in her discussion of exogamy, Butler quotes Lévi-Strauss: “Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy—is not simply that of goods exchange. Exchange—and consequently the rule of exogamy that expresses it—has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together” (*Gender* 55). The bonds of loyalty and friendship forged between men are foremost in the Anglo-Saxon world, and marriage is simply an extension of this. In this way, the peace-weaver herself is meaningless; she is simply a form of currency exchanged between men in order to solidify their masculine bond. Marriage—and the implied subsequent tasks of childbearing and child rearing—is the woman's only apparent task of significance within this masculine economy, and it is a task that she has no

choice in. She represents a bond between two *maegthe*—which are, essentially, two groups of men—and that is all.

Women's apparent non-importance is reinforced by the fact that there are only eleven women mentioned in *Beowulf*; of these eleven, only five are named; of these five, only one actually speaks (Overing 73, 88). The women are, as Overing puts it, "profoundly silent" (72). But, as far as the men of *Beowulf* are concerned, the women do not need to speak in order to fulfill their role. Though acting as a peace-weaver is women's most obvious function, they do serve another more subtle, more pervasive, and arguably more important role: that of the Other. As Dockray-Miller observes, "The masculine characters define themselves against an unfavorable Other: men are strong, noble, generous; the Other is weak, ignoble, miserly—and might as well be dead, for within the masculine economy of this poem, those attributes have no value" (32). Though Dockray-Miller perhaps goes too far—for women do serve a purpose, even if it is simply that of the silent Other—her point is worth making. Women's meaningfulness is derived precisely through their seeming unimportance, for without the silent compliance of women, men would not have an Other to define themselves against.

Beowulf himself understands the importance of the peace-weaving system, but he also draws attention to its tenuousness during his report to Hygelac upon his return to his homeland. He mentions, almost in passing, that Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru is engaged to the son of Froda, the leader of the Heathobards who neighbor Hrothgar's lands. This match, says Beowulf, is intended to bring an end to the ongoing feud between Hrothgar's Danes and Froda's Heathobards, but Beowulf imagines that this arrangement will later fail:

But seldom anywhere,  
after a slaying, will the death-spear rest,

even for a while, though the bride be good.

The lord of the Heathobards may well be displeased,

and each of his thanes, his nation's retainers,

when the Danish attendant [to Freawaru] walks in their hall

beside his lady, is honorably received. (2029-2035)

Beowulf goes on to imagine how the presence of Freawaru's Danish attendants will incite the Heathobards—who remember the way these Danes killed their comrades—to anger and acts of revenge, thus undoing Freawaru's work as a peace-weaver. Overing argues that this failure of the peace-weaver is inevitable: “the task is never accomplished, the role is never fully assumed...The system of masculine alliance allows women to signify in a system of apparent exchange, but does not allow them signification in their own right” (74). Thus, Freawaru's peace-weaving fails not because of herself, but because of the men surrounding her. She, and other peace-weavers like her, are taken and given, stolen and discarded, and, along the way, “their potential currency, their function, their power to signify is removed” (Overing 85). Even as a peace-weaver, then, Freawaru has no voice in this story, a truth reinforced by the fact that Beowulf imagines her dismal fate, and he, not Freawaru herself, relays the tale.

Peace-weaving momentarily aside, a final instance of Beowulf's dedication to his *maegth* bears exploring: “They said that he was, of the kings in this world, / the kindest to his men, the most courteous man, / the best to his people, and most eager for fame” (3180-3182). These closing lines of the poem provide the final glimpse of Beowulf's character. In order to properly deal with these lines, however, a consideration of Beowulf's rise to kingship is necessary. After Hygelac's death in intertribal warfare, Beowulf is the only survivor of the war party. Deprived of his established *comitatus*, Beowulf is “alone and lonely,” so he travels back to his homeland,

seeking the comfort of the *maegth* (2368). Upon his return, Hygd, Hygelac's queen, offers "treasure and kingdom, / rings and the high-seat; she did not believe / her son could hold their native land / against foreigners now that Hygelac was dead" (2369-2372). But Beowulf refuses to accept the royal power. Instead, he serves Hygelac's son as he served his father before him. That is until outcasts murder Hygelac's son. Then, and only then, does Beowulf accept the throne. This apparently unwilling king, however, is said to be the best of all kings. He is kindest to his men, the most courteous, and the best to his people—and that is a lot of superlatives. He rules the kingdom well "for fifty winters," becoming an "aged guardian / of the precious homeland" in the process (2208-2210). When Beowulf finally dies in his fight against the dragon, he dies for the sake of his *maegth*. His death, then, is the ultimate expression of his devotion to his community.

By initially and constantly identifying Beowulf as a member of his *comitatus* and his *maegth*—and through meaningful interactions with both—the narrator of Beowulf reveals one of the most important aspects of Anglo-Saxon masculinity: community. Indeed, as the epitome of masculinity, the hero cannot accomplish anything of worth apart from his community, and, though he may gain individual fame, the hero's actions should always work toward the good of his community. Beowulf is set apart from non-heroes like Unferth and the warriors who cower before the dragon because he is a "Geatish leader," a "treasure-giver," and a "guardian of the precious homeland." Though the poem never mentions if Beowulf marries, he undoubtedly benefits from the masculine economy of peace-weavers in the Anglo-Saxon world and from the presence of the Other to define himself against, as these are both essential aspects of Anglo-Saxon society. Beowulf reveals his understanding of the peace-weaving mechanism in his speech to Hygelac about the fate of Freawaru, and, as for the role of women as the Other, Beowulf

inherently benefits from it and participates in it by being part of *comitati*. In short, Beowulf is community-minded, and that makes him the best type of man: a hero.

### *Lineage*

Another key aspect of Anglo-Saxon masculinity is that of lineage. Throughout *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon obsession with genealogy is apparent. As Overing points out, “the father always identifies the son or daughter; the son is then identified by name. Often the women in the poem are not identified other than as daughters, wives, or mothers” (72). In other words, paternity, next to community, is a central defining characteristic of personhood. In this world, without a father, you are no one. (The strange exception to this rule is Scyld Scefing, whose story is told in the inception of *Beowulf*. Scyld Scefing, however, was able to overcome the fact that he was an orphan by gaining glory and honor, two other essential elements of Anglo-Saxon masculinity.) Though practically every man in the poem is constantly referred to as “x, son of y,” one moment in particular reveals the importance of lineage. When Beowulf and his fifteen Geats first come ashore in the land of Hrothgar, the Scylding watchman remarks that Beowulf (thus far unnamed and unidentified) is a mighty chief, and he demands, “I must know your lineage, / now, right away, before you go further” (251-252). Beowulf responds, “My own father was well known abroad, / a noble battle-leader, Ecgtheow by name ... every wise counselor / throughout the world remembers him well” (262-265). As soon as Beowulf identifies himself in this manner, the watchman allows the group of Geats to pass. Thus, as Overing rightly recognizes, “Paternal identification becomes the necessary condition for the subject’s identification and entry into the world” (72).

In keeping with the importance of paternal lineage, the narrator consistently refers to

Beowulf as “Ecgtheow’s son.” A few notable examples occur in lines 262, 375, 631, 957, 1383, 1473, 1551, 1651, 1871, and 2367. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it does reveal the extreme frequency of the term’s use, and this is just in Beowulf’s case. Other male characters, too, are often referred to as the sons of their fathers. Hrothgar, for example—despite being a “gray-bearded king” (1678) who is established in his own right as a ruler and leader—is frequently called “Healfdene’s son.” Other instances of lineage playing a defining role in masculinity are readily apparent. For instance, when Hrothgar’s counselor informs him that a man named Beowulf has led a troop of Geats to their shores, Hrothgar remarks, “Why, I knew him when he was only a boy; / his father, now dead, was named Ecgtheow ... And so his brave son / has now come here, seeks a loyal friend!” (372-376). After a bit of reminiscing, Hrothgar permits Beowulf’s entry, and it is clear that Hrothgar accepts Beowulf without question once he hears who his father is. This episode, just like the episode with the watchman on the shores of the beach, reveals the capacity of lineage to open doors, both literal and figurative. Another piece of lineage in *Beowulf* worth noting is Beowulf’s relation to Hygelac. As Beowulf tells Hygelac upon his return, “All my joys / still depend on you: I have few relatives, / and no chief kinsman except for you, Hygelac” (2149-2151). Thus, Beowulf’s loyalty as a thane to Hygelac is reinforced by the fact that the two share a common lineage. In fact, Beowulf is called “Hygelac’s thane” almost as frequently as he is called “Ecgtheow’s son.”

The Anglo-Saxon obsession with paternal lineage emphasizes, once more, men’s “love of the same as a means of developing solidarity against the other” (Overing 72). And, of course, there are those who cannot participate in this society that is driven by paternal lineage. The most immediate example is Grendel, who is “a doubtful male” (Overing 73), not just because he is a monster, but also because the human community does not know who his father is (1355), and,

other than a vague notion that he and all other monsters are descendants of Cain (107), they have no idea where he came from. Thus, Grendel is without a community and without paternal lineage, both of which immediately disqualify him from entrance into Anglo-Saxon society and mark him as an Other (albeit a different type of Other than women).

As far as women are concerned, however, Wealhtheow is an excellent example of how a woman must navigate this system dominated by men and male lineage. As the only woman who actually speaks in the poem, Wealhtheow's words warrant close examination—but one must bear in mind that no matter what Wealhtheow says or does, she “must use and be used by the language of masculine economy” (Overing 91). In other words, she has to work within the established patriarchal Anglo-Saxon system in which her primary role is that of a peace-weaver. During the feast in Heorot after Beowulf has defeated Grendel, Wealhtheow turns “to the bench where her sons were sitting, / Hrethric, Hrothmund, and all the young men, / the sons of nobles. There sat Beowulf, / the Geatish hero, between the two brothers” (1188-1191). She takes note of this, and, after some treasures have been passed out, Wealhtheow directly addresses Beowulf:

Enjoy this neck-ring, the treasure of a people,  
my dear young Beowulf, and have good luck  
in the use of these war-shirts—have all success.  
Make known your strength, yet be to these boys  
gentle in counsel. I will not forget you for that.

...

Be to my sons gracious in deeds,  
winner of hall-joys, in your great strength. (1216-1220, 1226-1227)

Congratulations to Beowulf aside, the core of Wealhtheow's speech consists of a plea for

Beowulf to aid her sons, both in word and deed. Her primary concern is not herself but her sons, who represent the continuation of Hrothgar's male lineage. Yet Wealhtheow herself is unable to do anything to secure their future; she must ask others—like Beowulf—to work on her behalf.

And, finally, one of the last references to lineage in the poem is a sobering one. As Beowulf lies dying, he says to the loyal Wiglaf:

You are the last man of our tribe,  
 the race of Waegmundings; fate has swept  
 all my kinsmen to their final doom,  
 undaunted nobles. I must follow them. (2813-2816)

Undoubtedly, Beowulf's most significant failure in the poem is his failure to produce an heir. This failure not only affects his immediate tribe—of which Wiglaf is somehow the only surviving member—but it also affects the future of his kingdom. Without a son to take over the kingdom after Beowulf's death, his *maegth* will most likely be thrown into chaos as it nearly was after the deaths of Hygelac and Hygelac's son. Beowulf was the only person able to save the kingdom then, and apparently, based on the state of his cowardly thanes, it is unlikely that anyone will step up. Perhaps there is some hope for the *maegth* in the form of Wiglaf, but even with his presence, the Geatish woman mourning over Beowulf's pyre sings "over and over ... that she fear[s the attacks of raiders], / many slaughters, the terror of troops, / shame and captivity" (3152-3155). Now that Beowulf is dead, the enemies of his *maegth* will close in, a bleak future made all the bleaker because it could have been avoided if Beowulf had produced a son and raised him to be a strong, worthy heir. But alas. Beowulf fails to pass on the legacy of his lineage. He breaks the chain. And there is little hope for his people afterward.

This failed lineage does aid in the understanding of the Anglo-Saxon construction of

masculinity, however. It reveals just how important paternity is—and that any family line, however strong, is never more than one generation away from being decimated. The narrator also stresses the importance of lineage by using it as a consistent identifier for the main male characters, particularly Beowulf. In Anglo-Saxon society, lineage provided a way for men to relate to each other; for example, a man would accept his friend's son into the fold simply because of his paternity. Lineage is the way men are recognized and allowed to enter into the world. Though men are the most visible participants in the system of paternal lineage, women like Wealhtheow uphold it, too. Thus, within the Anglo-Saxon patriarchy, the importance of paternal lineage cannot be exaggerated.

### *Strength and Bravery*

After the facts that he is Ecgtheow's son and Hygelac's thane, the most mentioned information regarding Beowulf is his strength. In a landscape torn by intertribal warfare and the occasional hellish monster, strength is, of course, essential to the concept of masculinity. From the moment of introduction, Beowulf is known as “the strongest of all living men / at that time in the world, / noble and huge” (196-198). He is called “the mighty man” (205), “tall and truly strong” (369), “great warrior” (490), “the strongest man / who ever lived in the days of his life” (789-790), “combat-hardened” (1539), “battle-furious” (1539), “the warrior Geat” (1550), “tested warrior” (1963), and “the best, / the worthiest warrior” (3098-3099), to name a few. This is by no means the extent of strength-related phrases used to describe Beowulf, and it does not even begin to encapsulate the mighty deeds that he accomplishes before and during the poem. When it comes to Beowulf's personal attributes, strength is undoubtedly mentioned the most frequently.

When standing before Hrothgar to offer his services as a monster slayer, Beowulf

provides a summary of his strength-based achievements, remarking that his people, his *maegth*,

had known my tested strength;  
 they saw themselves how I came from combat  
 bloodied by enemies where I crushed down five,  
 killed a tribe of giants, and on the waves at night  
 slew water-beasts; no easy task,  
 but I drove out trouble from Geatland—  
 they asked for it, the enemies I killed.  
 Now, against Grendel, alone, I shall settle  
 this matter, pay back this giant demon. (418-426)

An impressive resume, to say the least. Prior to this, Beowulf established his people, his lineage, and his intelligence; the above speech represents his next rhetorical move: playing up his strength. While strength is one of the most readily apparent attributes of Anglo-Saxon masculinity it is also, perhaps, one of the most self-explanatory, and it would be of little to no use without the closely related trait of bravery.

Throughout the course of the poem, Beowulf is called “brave man” (758), “bold-hearted man” (813), “not slow in courage” (1529), “brave Geat” (1595), “brave in his deed” (1645), “valiant Geat” (1807), and “war-brave king” (2417). Nearly every mention of Beowulf’s strength is accompanied by a mention of his bravery; this reveals the interdependency of the two traits.

Beowulf sets the pace for his bravery during his speech before his battle with Grendel:

I made up my mind, when I set out to sea,  
 boarded our ship with my band of men,  
 that I would entirely fulfill the desire

of the Danish nation or else fall slaughtered,  
 in the grip of the foe. Tonight I will do  
 a heroic deed or else I will serve  
 my last day of life here in this mead-hall. (632-638)

As Overing points out, this sort of attitude is typical of Beowulf. He is “the most accomplished binarist in the poem,” frequently resolving, “I will do x or I will die” (84). This type of bravery and resolution is essential to the heroic character; whatever mental processes the hero undergoes, he must always arrive at a point of determined resolve. He must be “resolute, not slow in courage” (1529). He must equate words with reality, for his “intention or boast is tantamount to deed or actuality: saying will indeed make it so” (Overing 93). In this way, strength and bravery work hand in hand as ideal virtues of the Anglo-Saxon man.

There is, however, at least one strong woman in *Beowulf*: Modthryth. Though her story belongs to a digression, it is central to understanding Anglo-Saxon gender roles in the world of *Beowulf*. Adrien Bonjour points out that though some critics dismiss the digressions in *Beowulf* as the work of a redactor or interpolator, “the man who introduced [each digression] certainly knew, or thought that he knew, what he was doing; and it should be no impossible task to find out his reasons, whatever may be the effect of the digression and its ultimate value in the poem” (xv). The purpose of the Modthryth digression is clear: by her open and unapologetic display of strength—a distinctly masculine trait—Modthryth steps outside of her prescribed gender role and throws Anglo-Saxon society out of balance. Oftentimes, women in epics can only achieve greatness by “a denial of sexuality, an obliteration of femininity” (Overing 79), and this is certainly true in Modthryth’s case. She appears in *Beowulf* for the sake of opposition; she reveals what an Anglo-Saxon woman should not be; and, with the exception of Grendel’s mother,

Modthryth is the most unwomanly and unmannerly female in the poem.

Dockray-Miller argues that Modthryth “illustrates the performative nature of the gender of power and shows that action, rather than biological sex, is the determinant of that gender” (31). This is, of course, a return to Butler’s notion of performative gender. Modthryth encapsulates several masculine traits: she is stern, proud, strong, aggressive, and power-hungry. She also refuses “to join the ranks of the gold-adorned queens who circulate among the warriors as visible treasures” (Overing 104); she will not be objectified. To complicate matters even further, Modthryth’s actions are for the sake of no one but herself. While Grendel’s mother acts in a violent and masculine manner for the sake of her son, Modthryth has no familial motivation—indeed, no motivation but her own selfhood. As the narrator of *Beowulf* points out, none of these are “queenly customs in a lady” (1940); they are, in fact, decidedly masculine customs, and Modthryth is thus construed as a force for evil. Modthryth’s escape from “the trap of binary definition” (Overing 106), however, is short-lived. As the narrator reveals, Offa, “the kinsman of Hemming, put[s] a stop to all that” when he marries her (1944). In this way, the narrator introduces a woman whose unfeminine strength threatens the patriarchal paradigm and then effectively dismisses her.

Modthryth is the best example of a woman in the world of *Beowulf* who defies gender roles; she is the most outspoken female in the poem. Instead of acting as a passive Other for men to define themselves against, Modthryth acts up and acts out in a decidedly masculine manner, but even she is eventually tamed by marriage. Thus, order is reestablished: strength is the province of men, not women. The Modthryth digression ends as abruptly as it begins, and the narrative turns once more to Beowulf. As “the strongest man / who ever lived in the days of his life” and a “war-brave king,” Beowulf embodies everything that an Anglo-Saxon man should be.

He is not only a man; he is the best man; he is the hero.

*Glory and Honor*

Two other virtues are essentially connected in the Anglo-Saxon conception of masculinity: glory and honor. As a hero, Beowulf can carry out glorious acts, but what are those glorious acts worth if they are not seen and honored? Fortunately for Beowulf, he is a member of both a *comitatus* and a *maegth*, and these communities both honor him for his accomplishments. “Glory in battle / was given to Beowulf” (818-819), and he is known as “honored Geat” (1300), “victory-blessed man” (1310), “renowned among heroes” (1313), “tall battle hero (1316), “honored in fame” (1645), “a long-lasting hero” (1709), “walked in glory” (2177-2179), and “famous king” (2722). In fact, before Beowulf travels to land of the Danes, his reputation precedes him. When he hears the name of Beowulf, Hrothgar remarks that he knew his father and remembers that

the merchants who used to carry  
 gifts of coins, our thanks to the Geats,  
 said he had war-fame, the strength of thirty  
 in his mighty hand-grip. (378-380)

Though he is young, tales of Beowulf’s exploits have already been spread far and wide. Even before his battles with Grendel, he is well on his way to establishing himself as a renowned hero. He lives up to those expectations when he defeats Grendel, and Hrothgar’s scop sings his praises:

At times the scop,  
 a thane of the king, glorying in words,  
 the great old stories, who remembered them all,  
 one after another, song upon song,

found new words, bound them up truly,  
 began to recited Beowulf's praise,  
 a well-made lay of his glorious deed,  
 skillfully varied his matter and style. (867-874)

Interestingly enough, the scop does not simply compose a new tale about Beowulf and perform it by itself. Instead, the lay in praise of Beowulf comes after a recitation of “the great old stories,” as if Beowulf is the culmination of all the great heroes who have come before him. The scop raises Beowulf to the level of the greatest heroes, and in this way Beowulf gains both glory and honor. When Hrothgar addresses Beowulf later, he goes so far as to say, “now, by yourself, / you have done such a deed that your [fame] is assured, / will live forever” (953-955). Wealhtheow agrees, telling the hero, “Make known your strength ... / You have brought it about that far and near / none but admire you, and always will, / a sea-broad fame, walled only by wind” (1219-1223).

Before his fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf reveals one of the strongest motivators for a man to gain glory and honor:

Each of us must come  
 to the end of his life: let him who may  
 win fame before death. That is the best  
 memorial for a man after he is gone.

...

With Hrunting I will find  
 a deserving fame or death will take me! (1386-1389; 1490-1491)

So Beowulf is after immortality. Not literal immortality, of course. But if he achieves greatness

during his lifetime, the hero is assured that his fame will last beyond his death. His speech also reinforces the heroic binary, the do or die mentality so essential to Beowulf's persona. And with these words, he turns to enter the mere and face Grendel's mother. While he was able to easily defeat Grendel, Grendel's mother presents more of a challenge for the hero. It is arguably the most difficult fight that Beowulf has had up to this point, a fact that makes his victory all the more glorious and worthy of honor.

### **Conclusion**

As Judith Butler says, gender is "a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (*Gender* 14). In the epics of Gilgamesh and Beowulf, this convergence looks surprisingly similar, but there are also several differences worth noting.

For both Gilgamesh and Beowulf, perhaps the most important aspect of heroism and masculinity is community. From the perspective of the poets, this makes sense. After all, during the ancient Mesopotamian and Anglo-Saxon periods, warfare was rampant; how could anyone survive alone? Thus, it is in everyone's best interest for communities to be tightknit and for each member of a community to support the others. To ensure the formation of community, the minds behind *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* composed epics featuring heroes who are dedicated to their communities; this ideal situation takes slightly different forms in the two stories. For the Mesopotamians, the ideal community is a city ruled by a king who was chosen by the gods to lead his people; he serves the citizens of his city and listens to the advice of the city assembly; he recognizes the importance of balance and shies away from tyranny; he tempers his strength with wisdom; he honors the gods and leads his people in religious devotion. For the Anglo-Saxons, the ideal community is a *maegth* with a strong leader whose thanes have sworn allegiance to him

and form a *comitatus*; he leads his men into battle and rewards them with treasure; he communes with his people in the mead hall and protects them from outside threats. In *Gilgamesh*, more emphasis is placed on the importance of the smaller community of friendship rather than the larger community of the city. This is due, perhaps, to the fact that Mesopotamians are wary of extremes and tend to focus on the importance of balance (as seen in the *mes*). When it comes to balance, Enkidu, Gilgamesh's smaller community, serves a more immediate function than Uruk, Gilgamesh's larger community; moreover, Gilgamesh would have never set out on his quest for eternal life unless Enkidu, his twin and equal, had died; so it is understandable that the poet chose to emphasize the smaller community over the larger community. In *Beowulf*, however, the *comitatus* and the *maegth* are given about the same weight in the narrative. Unlike Gilgamesh, Beowulf does not have a twin, for the Anglo-Saxons were not as concerned with balance as the Mesopotamians. In both narratives, male companionship is repeatedly emphasized over female companionship; men define their masculinity by the oppression and exclusion of women. Women are defined by their relationship to men—they are wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and so on—and never have any rightful importance by themselves.

Both epics also emphasize lineage as a key aspect of masculinity. In Gilgamesh's case, his lineage is inextricably bound up with religion, for he is two-thirds divine and one third human, but lineage is just as important for Beowulf, even though he is not a demigod. In both of their societies, lineage is the way to enter into society. Though Mesopotamian kingship is not based on lineage, Gilgamesh is often recognized as a great man because of his parents, and while he is on his quest, he receives benefits because of his divine heritage. Similarly, Beowulf is allowed to enter Hrothgar's hall because Hrothgar knows his father, and other characters constantly refer to Beowulf not by his name but as "Ecgtheow's son." Both heroes, then, are

privileged by their birth. To underscore the importance of lineage, both epics have notable examples of characters who struggle to enter society because, unlike Gilgamesh and Beowulf, they lack appropriate parentage. In *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu “possesses no kith or kin...he was born in the wild and has no brother” (II 173, 175), so he belongs to no one and cannot fully take part in Mesopotamian society. When Enkidu observes the love shared between Gilgamesh and Ninsun, he longs for a family of his own; Ninsun subsequently provides that family by adopting Enkidu as her own son. In *Beowulf*, however, Grendel is not so fortunate. That “great monster in the outer darkness” (86) is “a doubtful male” (Overing 73), not just because he is a monster, but also because the human community does not know who his father is (1355). Other than a vague notion that he and all other monsters are descendants of Cain (107), they have no idea where he came from. Thus, Grendel is without a community and without paternal lineage, both of which immediately disqualify him from entrance into Anglo-Saxon society and mark him as an Other. Thus, those who lack proper parentage reinforce Gilgamesh and Beowulf’s own advantages of lineage.

When it comes to strength and bravery, however, *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* differ a bit more. For starters, Gilgamesh’s unmatched strength is not always seen in a positive light. In the beginning of the story, his reckless, ungoverned strength harms his people; instead of being impressive, Gilgamesh’s unmatched strength is objectionable for the Mesopotamians. The gods, in their wisdom, determine that Gilgamesh needs to be balanced by someone who can equal him in strength: Enkidu. In Beowulf’s case, however, the Anglo-Saxons have no problems with Beowulf’s singular strength. He is positively described as “the strongest of all living men / at that time in the world, / noble and huge” (196-198), “the mighty man” (205), and “the strongest man / who ever lived in the days of his life” (789-790). He does not need to be balanced by an equal;

rather, he is free to revel in his unparalleled strength. There are, however, characters in both *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* whose strength is problematic: Ishtar and Modthryth. Though Ishtar is a deity, her display of strength against Gilgamesh is cast in a negative light, most likely because of her femininity; since she is a woman, it is unseemly for her to propose to Gilgamesh and then to seek revenge after he spurns her. For the Mesopotamians, excessive female strength emasculates the men around them, and even a goddess could be found at fault. Similarly, in *Beowulf*, Modthryth exhibits strength that is unacceptable for the women of her day. Modthryth's display of strength—a distinctly masculine trait—is open and unapologetic, thus she steps outside of her prescribed gender role and threatens the order of Anglo-Saxon society. Both Ishtar and Modthryth adopt masculine traits—particularly that of strength—and refuse to be compliant. Others in the gender binary; therefore, they are seen as dangerous to their respective communities. The strength of heroes like Gilgamesh and Beowulf, however, is desirable and acceptable within their communities.

Finally, glory and honor are essential elements of heroic masculinity. Though neither Gilgamesh nor Beowulf achieves bodily immortality, their names live on long after they do. In the beginning of his story, Gilgamesh thinks he can achieve a sort of immortality by defeating Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Thus, these daring exploits are a way for Gilgamesh to conquer death, but it is not until his focus shifts from himself to his city that he truly gains a meaningful form of immortality. Ironically, as soon as Gilgamesh stops striving to “establish forever a name eternal” (Y 187) and strives instead to better his city, he achieves lasting fame. Similarly, Beowulf's most significant accomplishment is not one of his acts of youthful heroics but his willingness to take on the dragon, even in his old age, and sacrifice himself for his *maegth*. His death is the ultimate expression of his devotion to his community, and he is

remembered for that devotion long after his death. Not everyone can be remembered forever, though; by its very nature, the heroic system elevates few and suppresses most. Though only exceptional men like Gilgamesh and Beowulf are able to push themselves to fore and be epitome of manhood, both epics encourage men to try their hardest and be their best. Not everyone can be a Beowulf; but every man can uphold the principles that Beowulf stands for and can perhaps be a Wiglaf.

Though *Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* were written in different times and places, both epics emphasize similar systems of masculinity that contribute to the characteristics of the hero. Within these epics, “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender,” a framework that enforces a harsh gender binary (*Gender* 30). The storytellers use systems of contrast and opposition—setting the heroes against Others like Enkidu, Ishtar, Unferth, the cowardly *comitatus*, Modthryth, Grendel, and Grendel’s mother—to reveal their culture’s ideal form of masculinity. After all, these stories were written by men and for men, so they have intensely androcentric perspectives. But more than that, the epic hero embodies many of the values that his culture holds dear. In this way, the hero is less of an individual and more of a composite of desirable masculine traits. As Nietzsche declares, “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”

## Appendix A

The epic of Gilgamesh exists in scattered fragments from various tablets written in multiple languages. For my analysis, I chose to work with Andrew George's translation of *Gilgamesh*. George masterfully incorporates multiple source materials to create a seamless and accurate verse narrative, and his translation is widely considered one of the best currently available. It is somewhat difficult, however, to cite each source correctly. Here are some examples of my citation method, a brief account of the abbreviations I use throughout my discussion of Gilgamesh, and the page numbers in the text of the George translation that give a fuller explanation of each source:

- (IV) Any citation that begins with Roman numerals comes from the Akkadian language version of the epic that was standard in first-millennium Babylonia and Assyria; the Roman numeral simply indicates which of the twelve tablets that make up the epic is being cited. This version is still considered the definitive version today, but it does have some holes—holes that have to be filled in with other sources (xv).
- (MB Ni) An older version of the text written by a student scribe on an exercise tablet found in the city of Nippur (4)
- (P) The Old Babylonian Pennsylvania tablet (13)
- (Y) The Yale tablet, sequel to the Pennsylvania tablet (17)
- (Ish) An Old Babylonian tablet from Ishchali (44)
- (IM) An Old Babylonian tablet of unknown provenance, now in Baghdad (46)
- (H) A fragmentary prose paraphrase written in Hittite (54)
- (Si) An Old Babylonian tablet from Sippar (70)

In addition to carefully noting each source he uses, George makes extensive use of editorial notes to ensure clarity throughout his translation. While these notes doubtless prove invaluable to linguists, I have chosen to exclude them since my interest in the text of *Gilgamesh* is literary and not linguistic. The only editorial notations that I have retained are the ellipses. Wherever a bracketed ellipsis appears (e.g. “He who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation, / who knew [...], was wise in all matters!”), it indicates a gap in the original text where writing is damaged beyond deciphering or missing outright. Ellipses without brackets (e.g. “He saw what was secret...he brought back a tale of before the Deluge”) and brackets that do not surround an ellipsis (e.g. “brave scion of Uruk, [Gilgamesh was a] wild bull on the rampage!”) indicate areas where I have omitted text or changed the text to suit the grammatical structure of the sentence, as is standard.

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