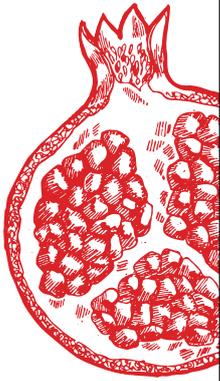
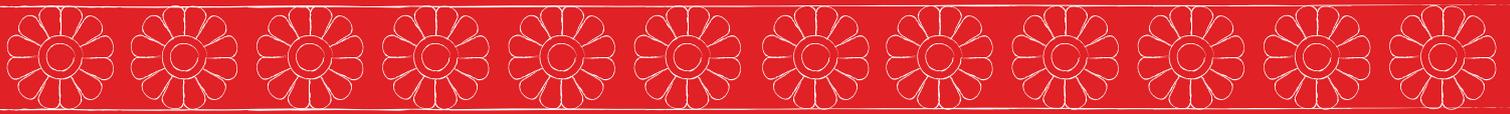


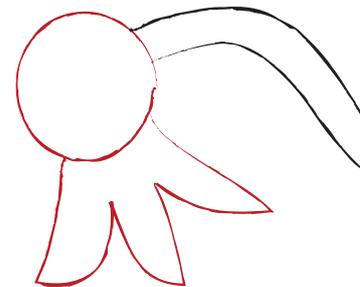
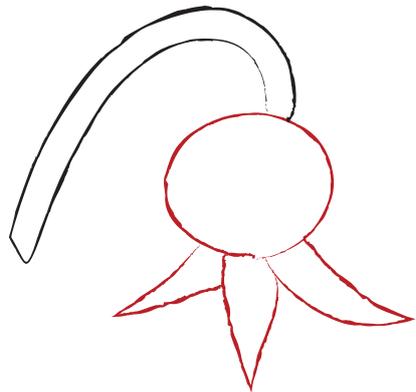
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**ISHTAR THE THOT:
THE APPROPRIATION OF THE EPIC OF
GILGAMESH BY THE MANOSPHERE**

Susannah Rees

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
2, no. 1 (May, 2022), 1–36

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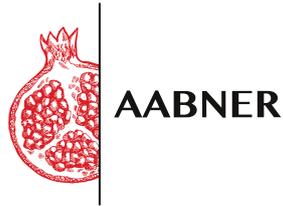
Keywords: Epic of Gilgamesh, manosphere, Ishtar, Shamhat,
reception

Abstract

Online antifeminist forums, blogs, and social media sites are replete with references to and retellings of the Epic of Gilgamesh. These appeals to the Epic are used to endorse the misogynistic worldview propounded by the manosphere and to convey a cultural and intellectual heritage onto their explicitly antifeminist ideology. This article focuses on the characterization of Shamhat and Ishtar, who are viewed by these manosphere communities as paradigmatic of women's use of sexual capital to manipulate men. In documenting these appropriations of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the narrative strategies used in the manosphere retellings of it, this article seeks to highlight the insidious distortions of the myth and their deeply concerning consequences.



Antifeministische Online-Foren, Blogs und Sozial-Media-Sites sind voll von Verweisen auf und Nacherzählungen des Gilgamesch Epos. Das Epos wird hier verwendet, um ein in der Manosphäre vertretene frauenfeindliche Weltbild zu unterstützen und ein kulturelles und intellektuelles Erbe auf ihre explizit antifeministische Ideologie zu übertragen. In diesem Artikel konzentriere ich mich auf die Charakterisierung von Shamhat und Ishtar, die von diesen Gemeinschaften der Manosphäre als paradigmatisch für die Verwendung von sexuellem Kapital durch Frauen zur Manipulation von Männern angesehen werden. Indem ich diese Aneignungen des Gilgamesch Epos und die erzählerischen Strategien dokumentiere, die in den Manosphären-Nacherzählungen verwendet werden, hebe ich die heimtückischen Verzerrungen des Mythos und ihre zutiefst besorgniserregenden Folgen hervor.



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ISHTAR THE THOT: THE APPROPRIATION OF THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH BY THE MANOSPHERE

Susannah Rees



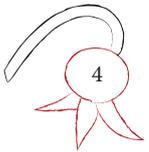
Introduction

The Epic of Gilgamesh is arguably one of the most generative narratives in all of human history. From its very inception, the Epic of Gilgamesh has been retold and adapted so that each period and location had its own version of the myth (Dalley 2008, 39). Indeed, the spread of finds, from the Akkadian tablets at Megiddo and Emar to the Hittite and Hurrian versions discovered at Hattusa, attest to the widespread popularity of the narrative (Dalley 2008, 45). Since its rediscovery in the mid-nineteenth century, there have been numerous retellings and adaptations of the myth in the form of novels, poetry, drama, opera, and films, all of which exist in several different languages. This is to say nothing of the proliferation of representations of Gilgamesh in visual media and artworks.¹ Indeed in 2016, Gilgamesh even starred

¹ For an overview of the reception history of the epic from 1884 to 2009, see Ziolkowski 2016. Michael Schmidt explores both the narrative of the Epic itself

in the immensely popular video game *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (Mol, Politopoulos, and Ariese-Vandemeulebroucke 2017, 214).

However, when studying the reception of the Epic of Gilgamesh there is a tendency to focus on these estimable cultural productions in order to defend the timeless appeal and enduring relevance of the original source-text and to overlook less palatable reinterpretations of the myth. Academia functions as a gatekeeper to authoritative and legitimate readings and largely ignores distressing instances of the (mis)use of texts like the Epic of Gilgamesh for deeply problematic and uncomfortable ends. This is perhaps born out of an understandable desire to associate ourselves as scholars with the cultural cachet of the myth and its reception, and likewise to distance ourselves from repugnant reproductions and abuses of the text.

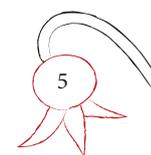


In this article, I explore the ways the Epic of Gilgamesh is interpreted by online communities which exist within the manosphere network. I will demonstrate how these communities use their readings of the Epic of Gilgamesh in an attempt to confer an intellectual and cultural pedigree onto reactionary and explicitly antifeminist political manifestos and belief systems. In particular, I will focus on the characterization of Shamhat and Ishtar, who are read by the manosphere communities as archetypal women.² The gendered interactions and relationships in the manosphere's reading of the epic are subsequently used as a basis for normative claims about gender relations in the modern world.

as well its significance for and reception in the work of a number of modern poets (2019). Gilgamesh has also lent his name to a death metal band as well as a number of albums put out by the bands Aephanemer and Acrassicauda. For a discussion of the reception of the Epic of Gilgamesh in Star Trek, see Miller 2020.

² I explore the characterization of Enkidu and Gilgamesh and the manosphere's understanding of their friendship in my article "Gilgamesh the Chad, Enkidu the Incel and the 5,000-Year-Old Red Pill" (in preparation). The complex issues surrounding the performance of masculinity and sexuality in both the ancient and manosphere contexts warrants more detailed analysis than can be addressed within the constraints of this article.

It might be argued, not unreasonably, that the retellings and reinterpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh by manosphere communities are the product of deeply disturbing, misogynistic prejudice and as such are unworthy of serious, critical study. The manosphere readings lack academic rigour and, consequently, some might say that these reinterpretations have little relevance outside of a fringe, isolated online community. Nevertheless, the way manosphere communities are reading and retelling the Epic of Gilgamesh has a real-world impact not least through its use as a post hoc justification for “Gamergate”, the campaign of networked harassment against female videogame developers and critics.³ For many of the manosphere readers and retellers, the narrative world of the Epic reflects a normative expression of gendered ideals from which modern society has deviated. According to this reading, the modern developments of feminism and gender equality represent an aberration when compared to the rest of human history. The antiquity of the Epic of Gilgamesh is treated as incontrovertible proof of the truth of the manosphere’s understanding of gender dynamics. Consequently, manosphere interpreters frequently extrapolate from the gender performance of the characters in the Epic of Gilgamesh to make universal, cross-temporal, and cross-cultural claims about gender roles and performances. The very act of documenting the manosphere’s appropriation of the Epic of Gilgamesh

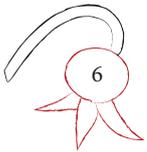


³ See references to the Epic of Gilgamesh in comments on a thread entitled “How did Gamergate Start?,” accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/awhk06/how_did_gamergate_start/. For an analysis and feminist critique of the events of Gamergate, see Chess and Shaw 2015. The attacks perpetrated by the manosphere are not confined to online spaces. In recent years there have been a number of high-profile and violent, real-world attacks including the murder spree committed by Elliot Rogers in 2014, whose autobiographical manifesto promotes incel ideology and intense misogyny (Mykietiak 2016); the stabbing spree by British teenager and incel Ben Moynihan in June and July 2014 (O’Donnell 2019, 670; Van Brunt and Taylor 2020, 206) and Alek Minassian’s use of a van to target pedestrians in Toronto in 2018 (Van Brunt and Taylor 2020, 212; Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 570). Most recently, the mass-shooting in Plymouth, UK, in August 2021 has drawn public horror. Sadly, these represent only the most high profile attacks; Van Brunt and Taylor document 54 attacks perpetrated by incels (2020).

and highlighting the omissions and distortions inherent within their readings is an act of resistance.⁴

Nevertheless, the question of how to ethically resist these claims and the appropriation of the text of the Epic of Gilgamesh by the manosphere more broadly is fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, it is tempting to emphasize the ancient cultural context of the composition and circulation of the myth in order to assert that it is not only undesirable but impossible to extrapolate values drawn from the thought-world of the epic to make normative claims about our own modern context. Under this paradigm, the epic is a time-capsule that allows the modern reader to peek into a world that is remote from our own. However, if the Epic of Gilgamesh is treated as extraneous to the modern world, it is easily appropriated by those who are dissatisfied with modernity. The myth's worldview can all too easily be cast as a golden age that its adherents seek to recapture.

On the other hand, it is tempting to counter these abhorrent manosphere retellings by offering a redemptive reading of the Epic of



⁴ Here I follow the method and objectives outlined and promoted by Classics platforms such as *Pharos* (<http://pages.vassar.edu/pharos/>) and the online journal *Eidolon*, which, in response to the appropriation of artefacts, texts, and historic figures from ancient Greece and Rome to validate alt-Right and anti-feminist ideologies, encourage scholars to not only document instances where Greco-Roman culture has been co-opted by various hate groups but also to expose the errors within these hate groups' readings. For a comprehensive discussion of the misappropriation of the classics, see Donna Zuckerberg's enlightening book, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (2018). This phenomenon is, however, by no means unique to classical sources. Misogynist networks also frequently use appeals to texts which have achieved an almost canonical status in literature to justify and legitimize their insidious anti-feminist narrative. For instance, novels such as *Anna Karenina* (1877) are viewed as expressing a universal, cultural truth that women are destructive and morally abhorrent, while *Lolita* (1955) is adduced to explain the self-evident truth that "some girls are just slutty." For further discussion of the narrative strategies employed by the manosphere in relation to literature see, Nurminen 2019. However, to date, very little scholarly attention has been devoted to the (mis)use of ancient Near Eastern history and literature by the same hate groups.

Gilgamesh, highlighting features of the myth that are compatible with modern values. However, it is undeniable that some authentic aspects of the text and the cultural milieu of the epic are congenial to misogynistic politics in the present. It is, after all, hardly a novel observation that the ancient world does not meet our own, modern standards of gender equality. Approaching the narrative with uncritical admiration is a distortion of the text in itself.⁵

Nevertheless, the narrative of the manosphere retellings of the Epic has demonstrably evolved apart from textual controls, in part perhaps influenced by the popular reception of Gilgamesh in videogames such as *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*. By blending the most basic units of the myth with the antifeminist tenets of the manosphere and disseminating them online, possibly on tablets of a very different kind, the manosphere has created a *mythmeme*.⁶ Therefore, one corrective which scholars of the ancient Near East can offer is to return to the text of the



⁵ My approach here is indebted to Hannah Strømme's work on the use of biblical texts in Anders Behring Breivik's manifesto (Strømme 2017a; 2017b) and Strømme and Ulrich Schmiedel's critique of the claims made to Christianity by the Far Right more broadly (Strømme and Schmiedel 2020). While Strømme's work offers a compelling, albeit terrifying, insight into the construction of "Crusader Christianity" it is notable that she does not explore the "hyper-masculine muscular Christianity" espoused by some substrata of the manosphere (Roose 2020, 105) nor the overlap which exists between the Far Right and the manosphere (Roose 2020, 84–85; Wetzel 2020) in-depth. Indeed, research by Hope not Hate and the Antisemitism Policy Trust demonstrates that anti-feminism and misogyny often act as a "slip road" to antisemitism and other forms of racism (Lawrence, Simhony-Philpott, and Stone 2021, 3).

⁶ In coining this portmanteau term, I draw not only on the structuralist concept of the "mytheme" but also the growing field of study on internet memes. Limor Shifman argues that "internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artefacts" (Shifman 2014, 15) and act as intertextual units of culture which blend pop culture and politics. "Memes diffuse from person to person, but shape and reflect general social mindsets. The term describes cultural reproduction as driven by various means of copying and imitation – practices that have become essential in contemporary digital culture" (Shifman 2014, 4).

Epic itself and attempt to identify possible sites of resistance towards manosphere retellings.⁷

I begin with an analysis of the manosphere and the interrelated but distinct communities which exist within it. This analysis not only contextualizes the online environments and groups in which these retellings of the Epic of Gilgamesh arise, but also helps to explain and elucidate the unique terminology and language used by members of the manosphere in which these retellings are often couched.

The Manosphere

The term “manosphere” is used to refer to a consortium of interconnected organizations, blogs, forums, communities, and subcultures which exist in an online context (Ging 2019, 639). The term has readily been adopted by the communities themselves. Indeed, Ian Ironwood, a porn marketer and leading figure in the movement, is credited with popularizing the term in 2013 thanks to his self-published book *The Manosphere: A New Hope for Masculinity* (Ging 2019, 639–40). The members of these communities are predominantly but not exclusively male.⁸ Manosphere content is available on a number of online platforms and through a variety of different mediums, including Reddit, blogs, Twitter, 4Chan, 8Chan and YouTube channels. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the “online social networks represent the primary venue for moral and political discourse” in the modern world (Brady 2018, 1). The defining characteristic of this conglomeration of social media communities and websites, however, is



⁷ Unless stated, otherwise I refer to the Standard Babylonian Epic as “the text” and I follow A. R. George’s translation (George 2003). Where relevant I note textual variations. In relation to manosphere retellings, I have reproduced all comments without correcting the spelling or grammar.

⁸ There are some groups, such as the Red Pill Women on the social networking platform Reddit, which are created by and for a female membership. However, these represent the exception rather than the rule. See the discussion in Jarvis and Eddington 2021.

their openly misogynistic agenda (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 13–14). In general terms, these communities espouse the doctrine that the widespread adoption of liberal, progressive ideals has led to the erosion of social order and traditional gender roles. This contributes to the perceived structural and institutional persecution of men. Indeed, the manosphere is characterized by an overwhelming sense of male victimhood and members view themselves as an embattled minority: an underdog against a prevailing misandrist culture (Marwick and Lewis 2017, 546–47).

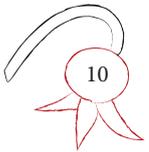
Despite these shared political beliefs, it would be a mistake to view the manosphere as a monolithic entity. Indeed, Debbie Ging (2019, 644) identifies a number of distinct and yet intersecting strands within the manosphere which include groups such as Men Go Their Own Way (MGTOW), involuntary celibates (incels), Pick-up Artists (PUAs), Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) and Traditional Christian Conservatives (TradCons). The diffuse nature of the manosphere is a product of the overlapping networks generated by the cross-referencing and cross-pollination of sites (Ging 2019, 644).

MGTOW promotes a separatist philosophy and encourages men to denounce romantic relationships with women to undermine what they perceive as the prevailing gynocentric order (Lin 2017). The community views this decision as a form of self-actualisation and the commitment to abstain from interactions with women is seen as an active choice which, crucially, distinguishes them from incels, a group which is largely constituted of sexually disenfranchised white males (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020, 572–74).

Incel groups are characterized by a sense of “aggrieved entitlement” (Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2018, 90–91). This stems from a perceived “sexual-attainment inequality” in the sexual marketplace (Witt 2020, 680). Incels subscribe to an evolutionary, biologically driven model of sexual interaction in which such intimacies are withheld from the incels as a result of selective pressures. According to this model, women sleep with the most attractive men available, referred to in the terminology of the community as an “Alpha” or “Chad,” and so spurn the “Beta” men. These Beta men therefore suffer enforced and involuntary celibacy (Witt 2020, 680). Within this model, incel communities describe



women as “femoid,”⁹ Within this, women are then further sub-divided into “Stacys” and “Beckys.” So-called Stacys are identified as attractive women, who are often hyper-feminine and tend to be presented by the incel community as shallow. “Stacys” are women who are able to exert the most “erotic capital” (Menzie 2020, 8–9). By contrast, “Becky” is a more flexible term which is used broadly to represent women who are deemed to be average in their appearance but, as a result of unrealistic standards or feminist principles, are still unwilling to engage in sexual relationships with Beta men (Menzie 2020, 9–10). Incel groups frequently exhort violent retribution against women who reject them and the sexually successful men they are unable to compete with. These incitements to violence are often couched in the language of war, revolt, and terrorism (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5019).

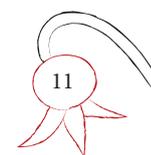


It is possible, at least in part, that the incel subculture emerged from the Pick-up Artists (PUA) movement (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019). PUAs share techniques for seducing women (Rüdiger and Dayter 2020). These techniques are often spuriously based on so-called scientific approaches such as neuro-linguistic programming (Denes 2011). These self-proclaimed PUAs teach less experienced men, known as Average Frustrated Chumps or AFCs, sexual manipulation through learning “the game” (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019, 5012). Women, who are often referred to as the “target” or “obstacle,” are controlled through assertive strategies such as “negging” in which compliments are used to insinuate negative comments about the recipient to reduce her self-esteem and encourage her to seek approval (Rüdiger and Dayter 2020, 19). One of the key proponents of these techniques, self-proclaimed PUA, Daryush “Roosh V” Valizadeh, has even published articles arguing for the legalization of rape on private property (Roose 2020, 93).

By contrast, Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) organize collective action to address men’s social issues and challenge perceived institutional

⁹ Femoid and its derivatives “foid,” “femaloid” and “void,” serve as an umbrella-term for women. Femoid is a portmanteau of female and humanoids and represents an active attempt to deny the humanity of women. The term “void” arguably draws on the intellectual heritage of viewing women as an impoverished male form. See discussion of the term and its significance in Chang 2020, 6.

discrimination against men (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016). MRAs can trace their roots back to the emergence of the Men's Liberation movement in response to second-wave feminism in the 1970s which subsequently fractured into two factions: the pro-feminist group and the anti-feminist group, from which the MRA developed (Lumsden 2019, 96). The MRA movement is chiefly comprised of “angry, straight, white men” who feel aggrieved by the feminist project and believe masculinity is in crisis (Corston and Kimmel 2013, 379). The movement tends to coalesce around issues such as father's rights (Boyd and Young 2002; Boyd 2004; Collier 2009), domestic violence (Dragiewicz 2011), and, with increasing ferocity in the post-#MeToo era, rape culture (Gotell and Dutton 2016; PettyJohn et al. 2019, 612). However, within this sub-strand of the manosphere there are often contradictory and mutually exclusive stances. For instance, some members laud the traditional role of women as homemakers, wives, and mothers while others view this as parasitic (Lumsden 2019, 97). Some members promote the rejection of traditional, hegemonic masculinity while others celebrate the notion of men being “real” men (Lumsden 2019, 97–98).



Finally, Traditional Christian Conservatives (TradCons) promote a deeply conservative, religious ideology couched in the terms of the manosphere. For instance, the TradCon website *Masculine by Design* features blogposts concerning “the Red Pill” and “never marry a woman over thirty (NMAWOT),” as well as covering topics related to Bible studies and Christianity.¹⁰ Thus, while the boundaries between these manosphere groups are permeable and there is often significant overlap in ideology and membership, there are also notable differences. Indeed, infighting between Christian and atheist, homophobic and pro-gay, pro- and anti-MGTOW, and PUA groups is not uncommon (Ging 2019, 644, 653).

¹⁰ The language of the “red pill” is borrowed from the Matrix and is used to refer to an “awakening” when a manosphere member realizes that he lives not in a patriarchy but in a gynocentric order. “Masculine By Design”, accessed July 23, 2021, <https://masculinebydesign.com/>. For discussion of this TradCon website and others, see Ging 2019, 645.

Method

As part of her analysis of the online manosphere communities, Debbie Ging identified thirty-eight of the most cross-referenced manosphere websites, blogs, subreddits, and YouTube channels.¹¹ These websites were searched for the key-terms “Gilgamesh,” “Enkidu,” and “Ishtar.” These terms were selected because of the prominent role of these figures in the narrative. Of the sites identified by Ging, ten had posts or blogs which discussed the Epic of Gilgamesh (/r/TheRedPill, /r/MGTOW, /r/KotakuInAction, The Return of Kings, MGTOW, Dalrock, A Voice for Men [AVFM], Vox Day, The Rational Male and The Red Pill Room). There was significant cross-posting on these sites to other discussions of the Epic on the subreddit /r/MGTOW2 and the blog Gynocentrism as well as a forty-minute talk entitled “The Politics of the Epic of Gilgamesh” published on YouTube delivered by Carl Benjamin who uses the handle “Sargon of Akkad.”¹² In 2019 Carl Benjamin was selected as the UKIP candidate for Southwest England in the European elections, demonstrating the troubling permeation of manosphere ideology into mainstream politics (Klein and Pirro 2021).¹³



A further four of the platforms identified by Ging (MensRights-Movement, The Cydonian Signal, Sluthate, and PUAHate) are no longer active or publicly accessible.¹⁴ However, after their closure, a number of Sluthate and PUAHate former users migrated to a website named Lookism.net which contains references to the killing of the Bull of Heaven and postings of artwork depicting Gilgamesh and Enkidu

¹¹ Ging used an inductive approach to identify these websites and employed repeated searching and cross-comparison over a six-month period. For detailed discussion of Ging’s method, see 2019, 643–44, 654 n. 3.

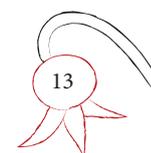
¹² “The Politics of the Epic of Gilgamesh,” accessed April 14, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=516YHWuh_XA&ab_channel=SargonofAkkad

¹³ For a detailed discussion of the construction of identity and UKIP’s use of “exclusivist and essentialist notions of religion” to further their political agenda, see Strømme and Schmiedel’s discussion of the “hard right” in Britain (2020, 92–118).

¹⁴ Since writing this article, r/MGTOW and r/MGTOW2 have also been banned from Reddit for promoting hate and have been removed from the public domain.

killing the Bull of Heaven.¹⁵ Other posts also contain comments such as, “Gilgamesh fucked your wife.”¹⁶ This brief survey alone highlights the extent of the insidious and pervasive use of the Epic by manosphere communities.

Manosphere communities frequently use the Epic of Gilgamesh to endow their ideology with cultural capital; they present their anti-feminist agenda as the natural outgrowth of the universal truths about masculinity and gendered relations which it purportedly conveys. As one commentator on the subreddit r/TheRedPill puts it: “The Epic of Gilgamesh is also called ‘He who Saw the Deep,’ in modern terms: ‘He who Sees the Unknown,’ It is, in my opinion, an ancestor of this subreddit.”¹⁷ Crucial to this understanding of the Epic is the notion that the narrative world of the Epic reflects a normative expression of gendered ideals from which modern society has deviated. According to this reading, the modern developments of feminism and gender equality represent an aberration when compared to the rest of human history. The antiquity of the Epic of Gilgamesh is treated as incontrovertible proof of the truth of the manosphere’s understanding of gender dynamics. Consequently, manosphere interpreters frequently extrapolate from the gender performance of the characters in the Epic of Gilgamesh to make universal, cross-temporal and cross-cultural claims about gender roles and performances. This fixed, static understanding of gender has been widely debunked by a growing body of work that emphasizes the highly socially and historically context-dependent nature of gender performance.¹⁸



¹⁵ Accessed July 23, 2021, <https://lookism.net/threads/tango-of-death.470870/>

¹⁶ Accessed July 23, 2021, <https://lookism.net/threads/do-you-even-realise-how-truly-fucked-you-are-when-you-are-ugly.559911/>

¹⁷ Accessed April 20, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/40fhpa/dont_get_married_advice_from_the_worlds_oldest/

¹⁸ See, for example, the work of Judith Butler (1990; 2004), Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987; 2009), Raewyn Connell (1987), and James Messerschmidt (2005), the insights of which have been fruitfully applied to a growing body of work concerning gender in the ancient Near East (Bahrani 2001; Parpola and Whiting 2002; Bolger 2008; Budin et al. 2018; Svärd and Garcia-Ventura 2018).

Shamhat and the Gynocentric Order

The civilizing of Enkidu is a focal point of manosphere retellings and interpretations. In his lecture, Carl Benjamin refers to this episode in the narrative as “the 5,000 year old red pill,” pointing to a slide entitled “How women ruin everything,” provoking much laughter and applause from his audience.¹⁹ This is a theme which is frequently repeated. For example, one comment states: “What I always thought was interesting about the story is that Enkido was taken to a group of prostitutes so that they could ‘civilize’ him. (sic) turn him into a pussy worshiper.”²⁰ Here Shamhat is anonymized and is reduced to a nameless individual among a group which not only reduces her agency within the narrative but dehumanizes her.²¹ Similarly, an appeal to the Epic of Gilgamesh is used to support the claim that “A woman will often use this knowledge to their advantage – using sex to influence men to get something is as old as Magic Vaginas (see how Enkidu got tricked, trapped, and ‘tamed’ in the Epic of Gilgamesh, over 5000 years old).”²² In the face of perceived sexual disenfranchisement, manosphere communities seem to read Shamhat’s relationship with Enkidu as an archetypal example of women’s perceived use of sexual capital to manipulate men.

The undercurrent of these comments seems to be that in a state of nature men exist apart from women in an almost paradisaical state.



¹⁹ Accessed April 20, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=516YHWuh_XA&ab_channel=SargonofAkkad

²⁰ The use of “sic” is original to the post, as is the misspelling of Enkidu. “The Politics of the Epic of Gilgamesh,” accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.mgtow.com/forums/topic/epic-of-gilgamesh/>

²¹ It is interesting to note that the commentor unwittingly stumbles upon a scholarly debate concerning Shamhat’s name, which literally translates as something akin to “voluptuous one” (Walls 2001, 19) or “flouring, luxuriant, lust” (Helle 2021, 243 n. 67). Lambert (1992, 128) suggests that *šamḥat* means “prostitute.” However, given that the term appears consistently throughout the Epic in the absolute form, it seems more plausible that this represents a proper noun, however suggestive (Walls 2001, 20).

²² “50 Shades of Game: Why Feminists Hate The Book,” accessed August 3, 2021, <http://theredpillroom.blogspot.com/search?q=gilgamesh>

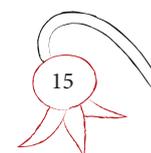
This approach to the narrative is consistent with a common feature of manosphere rhetoric; an appeal to evolutionary psychology and genetic determinism. And yet, as Debbie Ging highlights, “the manosphere’s engagement with this field is limited to the superficial interpretation and recycling of theories to support a recurring catalogue of claims: that women are irrational, hypergamous, hardwired to pair with alpha males, and need to be dominated” (Ging 2019, 649). The connection between these appeals to a natural order and the Epic of Gilgamesh is perhaps best illustrated in the sub-reddit r/TheRedPill in a post entitled “The Dynamics of Desire,” Here, we find a detailed account of how male relationships are undermined by competition as a result of the actions of women:

In the primitive order, men become more desirable than women. Men lead, hunt, war, defend, and die. Those who achieve success do so disproportionately at the expense of other men. It is the attention of these men that women crave.

This is evident in all stories since the beginning of time. Men seek greatness; women seek great men. The Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest and my fondest example. The men- Gilgamesh and Enkidu- try to best each other, and finding they cannot, grow to be close friends and quest for great deeds. The woman- Shamhat- introduces Enkidu to civilization by being fucked by him for seven days and nights.

Modern society has changed greatly, especially with marriage laws and the digital world. But the basic dynamic is still this. An Instagram model’s legions of drooling orbiters mean nothing to her- they are in fact repugnant. All her display is aimed at attracting a rich man, and the next Chad. If they are the same person, all the better.²³

Underpinning this reading of the text seems to be the precept that women are unable to achieve greatness independently and instead seek reflected glory in an almost parasitic way. The outlook is undeniably biologically deterministic. The appeal to the antiquity of the myth is used to bolster the claims that this reflects a natural order which has existed “since the beginning of time,” and “the basic dynamic,” despite



²³ “The Dynamics of Desire,” accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/8oxm3a/the_dynamics_of_desire/

many modern advances, still exists. The biologically driven model of sexual interaction which exists at the root of much of the incel and wider manosphere ideology is here projected onto the encounter between Shamhat and Enkidu. The use of sex to manipulate Enkidu is treated as paradigmatic of the perceived sexual inequality which the manosphere so violently repudiates.

Ostensibly, there are elements of the Epic itself which might seem to cohere with this manosphere retelling. The encounter with Shamhat clearly weakens Enkidu and he is no longer able to run with the wild animals as before (I:197–200)—in some versions of the myth this abasement is explicitly described as “defilement” (I:199).²⁴ Indeed, Enkidu himself curses Shamhat on his deathbed for the loss of his “pure” nature and his subsequent weakness after his initiation into civilization (VII:130–31). Enkidu condemns Shamhat to never have a safe house or home, to exist in a state of childlessness on the literal margins of society, vulnerable to drunkards who will drag her through the mud (VII:102–31).²⁵ Surprisingly, given the manosphere’s well-documented history of coordinated campaigns of online harassment against women (Marwick and Caplan 2018), the manosphere seems to show little interest in engaging in any depth with Enkidu’s curse of Shamhat, and the curse is not included in the manosphere mythmeme.



²⁴ The verb used here, *šuhhû*, occurs in MSS Fn and denotes “defilement through illicit sexual congress” (George 2003, 798), although in MS B we find *ultahhit/t* instead, which seems to convey a meaning akin to “was seized with fear” or “made himself jump” (George 2003, 551). For a detailed discussion of the different translational possibilities of this passage, see George 2003, 798, and Edzard 1985, 50–52.

²⁵ Several scholars have attempted to reconstruct the experience of Mesopotamian sex workers from Tablet VI. For instance, Rivkah Harris suggests that “the curse and blessing of Enkidu reflect the ambiguous attitudes toward the prostitute and incorporate the realities of her life. Perhaps the curse of Enkidu describes the life of the poor prostitute whereas the blessing describes the prostitute...[as]...a woman of culture and artistic talents” (Harris 1990, 222 n. 14). Similarly, Gelda Lerner proposes that the blessing and curse may be mapped onto a distinction between “sacral sexual service” and “commercial prostitutes” respectively (Lerner 1986, 246). However, as Nicole Brisch points out, reconstructing history from literary texts is fraught with methodological difficulties (Brisch 2021, 78–79).

This lack of engagement with the text of the Epic, however, is perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of appreciation for the complex and nuanced role which Shamhat plays.²⁶ After Enkidu's curse against Shamhat, the sun-god Shamash intercedes on behalf of Shamhat, pointing out that Shamhat not only provided Enkidu with lavish clothing, food, and drink, but also "let you have for a comrade the fine Gilgamesh" (VII:138). Relenting, Enkidu then blesses Shamhat, predicting a future in which she will be showered with gifts from her numerous, wealthy admirers and ultimately succeed in seducing an affluent man (VII:151–61).

Enkidu's curse and Shamhat's rebuke are embedded narratives which recapitulate the events of Tablet I, albeit in a truncated form. At this juncture, the Epic itself presciently addresses the issue of ethical retellings of the narrative. While Enkidu's original, frustrated assessment offers fertile material for the manosphere's retelling, Shamash's rebuke offers a different version of the events of Tablet I. It seems that "there is an important lesson to be learned from this scene: moral judgements rely on storytelling... The way we tell our life stories can make a big difference; they are all that stands between justice and vitriol" (Helle 2021, 162–63). Enkidu's curse with its threat of violence bears a striking similarity to the online harassment and threats directed against women by manosphere communities. Like Enkidu's version of events, the vitriolic manosphere retellings of



²⁶ There are two main loci concerning the significance of Shamhat for the narrative of the Epic of Gilgamesh around which scholarly debate tends to coalesce. The first is the extent to which Shamhat's sexual encounters with Enkidu are "tantamount to birth, as it precipitated his being, so to speak, 'reborn' as a human" (Worthington 2011, 411). For a detailed discussion of Shamhat's maternal characterization, see Harris 1990, 222–24. For counter-arguments, see Sonik 2021, 789–90. The second point of contention is the exact significance of Shamhat's designation as a *harimtu*, traditionally translated as "harlot." For further discussion, see Helle 2021, 210–11, and Brisch 2021, on whom Helle draws. Unsurprisingly, neither issue is the focus of manosphere discussions of the epic. Interestingly, while Shamhat is sometimes explicitly identified as a "prostitute" in manosphere retellings, this is not always the case, perhaps in an attempt to emphasize Shamhat's role as an everywoman.

Tablet I are the product of a frustrated, male perspective. Without the intervention of Shamash, it is Shamhat who will bear the awful consequences of Enkidu's retelling, much as the violent outpourings of the manosphere have real-world consequences for the victims of their targeted campaigns of harassment.²⁷ However, Shamash challenges this interpretation of events; asserting that it is only through Shamhat that Enkidu can experience the benefits of civilization, and it is only because of Shamhat that Gilgamesh's friendship is possible. This is incompatible with the manosphere logic that Shamhat has somehow ruined Enkidu. Through Shamash's retelling of Tablet I, a more just future is offered to Shamhat.²⁸ The Epic itself, therefore, offers us a model for intervention and how to challenge unjust retellings which denigrate women.



Ishtar the Thot

Gilgamesh's refusal to marry Ishtar and the subsequent battle with the Bull of Heaven (Tablet VI) has particular resonance for members of the manosphere communities. Indeed, it is the portion of the narrative around which the majority of comments and posts seem to coalesce. Summaries of Tablet VI proliferate across manosphere platforms such as the one found on the blog Gynocentrism:

The metaphors seem to boil out of this, the oldest of human stories:

- Women exercise covert, rather than overt, power.
- Spurned women will unleash their fury on the men who spurned them, as well as others.
- Fathers will side with angry, abusive daughters over innocent men.

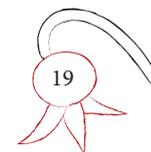
²⁷ For a discussion of how the abuse exacted by manosphere communities occurs in both online and offline spheres, see Jones, Trott, and Wright 2019, 1907.

²⁸ Although it could hardly be said that the future set out for Shamhat is idyllic, as Sophus Helle points out, even in this blessing Shamhat is "destined to disrupt family life" as the wealthy man she seduces will first leave his wife, the mother of his seven children (VII:161). Helle links this to Shamhat's role as a figure "at the threshold of society," disrupting the expected "social order of patriarchal households" (Helle 2021, 211–12).

- Women in power will give power to the dangerous and unproductive.
- Zombies are real!²⁹

In the manosphere mythmeme, Ishtar's desire to marry Gilgamesh, much like Shamhat's characterization, is a way of exerting "covert power" and is therefore read as another example of the manipulative nature of women who seek to use their influence to act through men rather than as independent agents. Many of the manosphere retellings of Tablet VI emphasize the sexual elements of Ishtar's character and repeatedly refer to her as a "thot," a derogatory term for a promiscuous woman who has numerous casual sexual encounters or relationships.³⁰ Again, this has resonance with its modern, manosphere audience; we find assertions that it is "...Good to know the Sumerians had to deal with cock carouselling damaged goods as well."³¹ The distorted manosphere worldview and perception of a modern, sexual marketplace is blended with elements of the myth to produce a quite distinct mythmeme.

Ishtar's character and actions are often read as proof of the universally and innate untrustworthiness and destructive nature of women. For instance, in a post on r/TheRedPill sub-reddit entitled "Don't Get Married: Advice From the World's Oldest Story," the events of Tablet VI are explained in great detail using select direct quotations.³²



²⁹ "The Historical Role of Gynocentrism in Societal Collapse", accessed August 2, 2021, <https://gynocentrism.com/2015/06/16/the-historical-role-of-gynocentrism-in-societal-collapse/>

³⁰ "Gilgamesh (the original MGTOW) rejected Ishtar (the goddess of THOTS)," accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW/comments/a1rs1i/gilgamesh_the_original_mgtow_rejected_ishtar_the/. "The Politics of the Epic of Gilgamesh," accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=516YHWuh_XA&ab_channel=SargonofAkkad

³¹ "Don't Get Married: Advice From The World's Oldest Story," accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/40fhpa/dont_get_married_advice_from_the_worlds_oldest/

³² Although not explicitly cited, in the post itself the version which the author seems to quote from is the Penguin Classics edition of the Epic of Gilgamesh, (Sandars 1972).

The post argues that “...Gilgamesh is addressing not just Ishtar, but womankind itself (whom Ishtar embodies)” in his diatribe against her in VI:22–79.³³ A similar sentiment is reiterated on forums on the MGTOW website:

Within the first two minutes we hear of Ishtar, the goddess of love she’s the epitome of all women throughout history...There’s nothing new in the red pill. The basis for MGTOW philosophy has remained exactly the same since the dawn of writing. Women have always been the way they are. They’ve just got more rope now.³⁴

The assertion that this episode occurs “within the first two minutes” is belied by the first five tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Nevertheless, this distortion of the narrative structure highlights the centrality of Tablet VI in the manosphere’s retellings of the epic and its import for their philosophy. This relevance is repeatedly emphasized both explicitly and implicitly through selective engagement with the text. For example, a commentor in a thread entitled “MGTOW isn’t new and was followed even centuries ago!!” in the sub-reddit r/MGTOW2, also draws on Gilgamesh’s assessment of Ishtar’s character to draw conclusions about the universal nature of women:

Cuneiform script is the oldest form of writing and gives us the oldest story in the world, ‘The Epic of Gilgamesh,’ where Ishtar treats men either as lions (fighters) or horses (workhorses). Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s suggestion that he should be her husband by pointing out how she has treated all her previous lovers, calling her a shoe that bites the foot. She then makes a false allegation of mistreatment to her father that causes Gilgamesh untold grief. Sound familiar?³⁵



³³ “Don’t Get Married: Advice From The World’s Oldest Story,” accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/40fhpa/dont_get_married_advice_from_the_worlds_oldest/

³⁴ Accessed April 1, 2021, <https://www.mgtow.com/forums/topic/epic-of-gilgamesh/>

³⁵ “MGTOW isn’t new and was followed even centuries ago!!” accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW2/comments/gr43uv/mgtow_isnt_new_and_was_followed_even_centuries_ago/

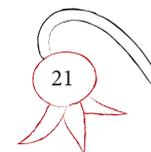
Although this post contains no direct quotations, the reference to Ishtar's treatment of men as lions or horses (VI:51–56) as well as the “shoe that bites the foot” (VI:41) could suggest engagement with the text itself rather than a mere passing-knowledge of the myth.³⁶ It is interesting that the insult that Ishtar is akin to the “shoe that bites the foot” is selected rather than, for instance, Gilgamesh's assertion that Ishtar is “a palace that massacres[...]warriors” (VI:35); “bitumen that [soils] him who carries it” (VI:37); or “a waterskin that [*wets*] him who carries it” (VI:38). In an age of modern plumbing and professional armies, it is arguably the uncomfortable shoe of all of Gilgamesh's visual and descriptive metaphors which is the most easily recognizable and relatable in a modern context. This, arguably, reflects the manosphere's agenda to present the myth as relevant and, by extension, to assert that the ancient Near Eastern cultural values and attitudes towards women which underlie the Epic are also replicable in a modern society.

This is particularly evident in a post titled “Gilgamesh (the original MGTOW) rejected Ishtar (the goddess of THOTS)” in the sub-reddit r/MGTOW, which summarizes Tablet VI thus:

Let this be a lesson boys, none of us is greater than Gilgamesh and even he said no thank to the very goddess of fertility. It's well known that she was a THOT, still pretty much no one could resist her, after all, she was the very definition of sexy. What did she do in response? She went to her papa had him order a Devine bull to destroy Gil's city. However, after a long fight Gil and his best bro (who he valued above any woman or treasure, both of which he had in masses) defeated it. So be like Gil: smash and dash (perhaps not in this day and age with all the accusations going on), and remember, bros before hoes.³⁷

³⁶ In its ancient Near Eastern context, this phrase is likely an allusion to a divinary omen that a poorly fitting sandal could have potentially fatal consequences (George 2003: 473).

³⁷ “Gilgamesh (the original MGTOW) rejected Ishtar (the goddess of THOTS),” accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW/comments/a1rs1i/gilgamesh_the_original_mgtow_rejected_ishtar_the/



This is characteristic of many of the strategies employed by manosphere readings and reflects the clear use of the Epic of Gilgamesh mythmeme in order to lend a cultural and intellectual pedigree to the separatist philosophy espoused by some elements of the manosphere. The mythmeme is not only treated as authoritative but also as a basis from which normative claims can be made about modern social values and gender dynamics. Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar is seen as an aspirational act, despite the temptations Ishtar poses. For the post's author, the moral is clear: male relationships should be prioritized above inter-gender relationships, the inclusion of women in society ultimately poisons these masculine relationships.

The assertion that Ishtar "went to her papa" after Gilgamesh's rejection and the caution required "with all the accusations going on" highlights another element of the myth which manosphere readers find particularly relatable: the threat of false allegations. The interaction between Ishtar and her father Anu (VI:80–114) is repeatedly returned to in these manosphere readings and retellings and is often depicted as Ishtar making a "false allegation of mistreatment" against Gilgamesh.³⁸ The language of false allegations is particularly loaded given the widespread belief among the manosphere communities that false accusations of rape and sexual violence are rampant (Gotell and Dutton 2016). In reality, false accusations are extremely rare (Lisak et al. 2010). Indeed, the high prevalence of rape and sexual assault, under-reporting of attacks, and low conviction rates all contribute to a "justice gap" for rape survivors who are routinely doubted and discredited (Gotell and Dutton 2016, 67).

Nevertheless, the manosphere mythmeme asserts that "Ishtar claimed the two of them raped her to the gods."³⁹ This represents a significant departure from Ishtar's complaint in the original text: "O father, Gilgamesh has been heaping abuse on me, Gilgamesh kept recounting



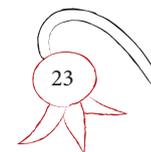
³⁸ "MGTOW isn't new and was followed even centuries ago!!" accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW2/comments/gr43uv/mgtow_isnt_new_and_was_followed_even_centuries_ago/

³⁹ "How did Gamergate Start?" accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/KotakuInAction/comments/awhk06/how_did_gamergate_start/

things that insult me, things that insult and revile me” (VI:84–86).⁴⁰ Ishtar’s response is treated as paradigmatic of women abdicating responsibility for their actions. For instance, in the sub-reddit r/MGTOW a response to a post titled “An excerpt from the epic of Gilgamesh” reads:

Of course she has to run back to her Dad and ask him to kill him over being rejected. Girls do this all the time. They’ll insult everybody, but as soon as they feel ‘wronged’ they tell lies to another male to attack that male. Whether it’s her dad, the police, or simply clicking the report button on facebook. They are such pathetic creatures.⁴¹

Similarly, a blog post on A Voice for Men equates Ishtar with “modern feminists” because “...she seeks to avoid direct responsibility for her actions.”⁴² Likewise, a blog post on Return of Kings summarizes the encounter thus: “the divine princess Ishtar gets her daddy to take revenge on Gilgamesh for refusing her sexual advances, and he ends up losing eternal life. Babylon was a feminist dream.”⁴³ The irony that



⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that the assessment of Ishtar’s actions in mainstream ancient Near Eastern scholarship are not that dissimilar to the conclusions drawn by the manosphere. See, for instance, A. R. George’s summary of Tablet VI in his influential critical edition of the epic: “Her reaction is that of an angry child. She runs off to complain to her parents of the rough treatment she has had to endure (80-6). Her father, Anu, knows his daughter well, for he suspects at once she was at fault (87-91). Ištar then demands the Bull of Heaven, the constellation Taurus, with which to kill Gilgameš in revenge (92-5). In order to get her way she threatens to release the dead from the Netherworld so that they overwhelm the living and eat them (96-100)” (George 2003, 474). A somewhat uncharitable reading, given Ishtar’s supposed provocation of Gilgamesh was to find him sexually attractive and to offer to lavish wealth on him. Although, of course, George does not use this to make a normative claim about modern gender relationships.

⁴¹ “An excerpt from the epic of Gilgamesh,” accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW/comments/6uzw2k/an_excerpt_from_the_epic_of_gilgamesh/

⁴² “How Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse is like MGTOW,” accessed August 3, 2021, <https://avoiceformen.com/featured/how-surviving-the-zombie-apocalypse-is-like-mgtow/>

⁴³ “Why Social Justice is Satanic and We Need Religion to Defeat It,” accessed August 3, 2021, <https://www.returnofkings.com/71337/social-justice-is-satanic-and-we-need-religion-to-defeat-it>

many of these manosphere sites also contain posts decrying women who reject the sexual advances of men is apparently lost on the authors of these posts.

Interestingly, a number of comments on a manosphere retelling of this section of the narrative praise Anu's response to Ishtar's initial request to be allowed to avenge herself against Gilgamesh: "...probably my favorite part was that+how little bitch runs to her dad(Anu),only for him to say: Dafuq y u so mad hoe?All he said was true lolololol."⁴⁴ In this manosphere retelling we find: "Anu basically replies 'lol what did you expect? Everything he said about you was true, ya dumb bitch.' But Ishtar literally threatens to raise Hell and unleash the dead upon the living, so he relents..."⁴⁵ Here, much like the treatment of the episode concerning Shamhat and Enkidu, we find the manosphere highlighting and emphasizing the theme of men being pitted against one another as a result of the actions of women. Anu is praised for his instinct to side with the male protagonists Gilgamesh and Enkidu instead of his daughter Ishtar.



Ishtar's threat to raise the dead is also a popular motif among manosphere readings. Indeed, a blog post on A Voice for Men reads the entirety of Tablet VI in light of this "zombie apocalypse," hailing the trope as particularly salient and relatable for manosphere readers. The author likens many of the experiences of a zombie apocalypse, such as a wife turning insane, the loss of children, the erosion of social order, and a loss of hope for the future, to the perceived challenges and injustices manosphere adherents face.⁴⁶

The prominence of Tablet VI in the manosphere mythmeme is perhaps unsurprising; there are elements of the Epic itself which

⁴⁴ "Don't Get Married: Advice From The World's Oldest Story," accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/40fhpa/dont_get_married_advice_from_the_worlds_oldest/

⁴⁵ "Don't Get Married: Advice From The World's Oldest Story," accessed August 3, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/40fhpa/dont_get_married_advice_from_the_worlds_oldest/

⁴⁶ "How Surviving the Zombie Apocalypse is like MGTOW," accessed August 3, 2021, <https://avoiceformen.com/featured/how-surviving-the-zombie-apocalypse-is-like-mgtow/>

might seem to cohere with this manosphere retelling. The “knee-jerk misogyny” of Gilgamesh’s response (Abusch 2021, 15) is quite possibly “the most abusive and irreverent discourse in Mesopotamian literature” (Leick 1994, 258). In his assessment of the Gilgamesh Epic, Benjamin Foster argues that: “Gilgamesh is not hysterically rejecting Ishtar, but rather is talking to her as if she were a girl still in school” (Foster 1987, 35). While it seems doubtful that the manosphere retellings engage with the text at a text-critical level, it is equally not difficult to see how this assessment might be attractive to manosphere adherents. The term “girl” is disproportionately more likely to be used than “boy” to refer to an adult (Sigley and Holmes 2002, 145), and in manosphere contexts this discourse is employed particularly to infantilize adult women and subordinate them to their male counterparts (Krendel 2020).

The manosphere’s emphasis on Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar as a lens through which to read the entire Epic is not wholly incongruous with the scholarly assessment of the significance of the episode for the narrative arc of the Epic. Gilgamesh’s rejection of Ishtar is as an “interpretative crux in most commentaries on the epic since readers must explain the hero’s reaction in accordance with their own hermeneutical approaches” (Walls 2001, 44). Many scholars interpret Ishtar’s sexual advances as a threat to Gilgamesh’s masculinity, if not his life (Harris 1990, 227; Leick 1994, 262; Abusch 2021, 11–57). In proposing marriage and offering gifts to Gilgamesh, Ishtar has “behaved like a man” (Harris 1990, 227; Leick 1994, 258).⁴⁷ In evoking the fate of



⁴⁷ Given that there is only one other example of a marriage proposal preserved in Akkadian literature, namely Ereshkigal the Queen of the Netherworld’s proposal to Nergal the god of plague, it is hard to determine to what extent Ishtar’s proposal represents a departure from gendered norms (Helle 2021, 213). As Samuel Greengus argues when comparing actual marriage contracts and formulas to the accounts presented in these myths, “our literary sources may faithfully mirror the activities of life; but they may also contain invention and fantasy” (Greengus 1969, 517). Nevertheless, Gwendolyn Leick argues that there is a “striking literary parallel” between these two texts (Leick 1994, 260). Based in part on his comparison between them, Tzvi Abusch argues that Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar’s proposal because she is trying to trick him into becoming a functionary of the

Ishtar's former lovers (VI:42–79), Gilgamesh seemingly illustrates the dangers of female sexuality, as represented by Ishtar (Leick 1994, 262; Bahrani 2001, 153–54). Both issues speak to deep-rooted, manosphere anxieties: the erosion of social order and traditional gender roles and the excessive power women accrue through their sexual capital. It is easy to see how these concerns might appeal to manosphere readers and why Gilgamesh has been adopted as a mouthpiece for modern antifeminist ideology.

An alternative scholarly approach to Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar is to suggest that it signifies a transformation of his character from a brash hedonist to a responsible hero concerned with higher pursuits (Foster 1987: 36; Leick 1994, 263; Nissinen 1998, 23–24). In this paradigm, Ishtar represents "lavish and sex-hungry city culture" and by rejecting her, Gilgamesh indicates that his "relationships with women and women's world are now replaced by an accentuated masculine asceticism" (Nissinen 1998, 23–24). In overcoming his lust, Gilgamesh opts instead for male companionship with Enkidu. In some quarters, this has been read as indicative of a possible homoerotic relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Walls 2001, 37–49).⁴⁸ Within the manosphere, this rejection of female company is treated as significant by those who espouse a MGTOW separatist philosophy; Gilgamesh is emblematic of the decision for men to go their own way. It is interesting to note, however, that the possibility of a homoerotic relationship



Netherworld (Abusch 2021, 11–57). However, given that Ishtar embodies both sexuality and death and the manifest tensions between the two concepts, it is perhaps unsurprising that her proposal might allude to death and draw on the overlap between wedding and funeral imagery. It is, therefore, overly reductive to suggest that her proposal should be read as simply as a piece of trickery or to "resolve the symbolic ambiguities in one direction or the other" (Walls 2001, 41).

⁴⁸ The exact nature of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has been a matter of debate since Thorkild Jacobsen labelled their relationship "homosexual" (Jacobsen 1930, 70). For further discussion, see Walls 2001; Nissinen 1998; and Ackerman 2005. For critiques of the anachronistic use of the terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" when talking about ancient Mesopotamia see Helle 2021, 171–72.

between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is not discussed in these manosphere retellings.⁴⁹

While it is undeniable that there are elements of the epic which seem to correspond with the troubling tenets of the manosphere ideology, it is also perhaps the Epic itself which offers us a potential site for resistance. In Gilgamesh's discourteous refusal, we find another embedded narrative: the story of Ishullanu and Ishtar (VI:64–79). The story of Ishullanu and Ishtar is “a miniature; in it are condensed most of the important events and speeches of the story of Gilgamesh and Ishtar” (Abusch 2021, 39).⁵⁰ Gilgamesh scathingly parallels his experience with that of Ishtar's former lover Ishullanu. In both cases it is Ishtar who gazes lustfully at the object of her desire and initiates the encounter (VI:6, 67); in both instances she uses food metaphors to attempt to entice the man (VI:8, 68); she is subsequently rejected in harsh terms by both Ishullanu (VI:70–74) and Gilgamesh (VI:22–79). Gilgamesh then recounts how Ishullanu is punished by Ishtar for his insolence (VI:75–78). Given that Gilgamesh is aware of the fate which befalls Ishullanu, his retelling to bait Ishtar is, at best, ill-thought through: “telling Ishullanu's story specifically to offend a goddess is a spectacularly bad use of it” (Helle 2021, 159).

The spectacularly foolish nature of this retelling is even more apparent when we consider the literary antecedent of Ishullanu and Ishtar: the Sumerian myth of Inanna and Shukaletuda (Volk 1995, 53–64; Pryke 2017, 147). In both stories, Ishullanu and Shukaletuda are the son of a gardener working for the goddess's family (VI:64–6; lines 90–94).⁵¹ However, in the Sumerian version, Shukaletuda is an inept



⁴⁹ I treat the reception of the characters of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the manosphere mythmeme in greater depth in “Gilgamesh the Chad, Enkidu the Incel and the 5,000-Year-Old Red Pill” (in preparation). I argue that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the manosphere retellings serves as a microcosm of the debate in manosphere communities surrounding competing models of the ideal masculinity and the metrics by which it should be measured.

⁵⁰ Tzvi Abusch (2021, 33–41) offers a detailed discussion of the narrative irony involved here.

⁵¹ Here I follow Konrad Volk's edited version of the myth (1995).

gardener (line 96) who is overcome by his lust for Inanna and rapes her while she sleeps (lines 117–25). There is no way in which this sexual intercourse can be understood as consensual; it is clear that Inanna’s vulva is bound and covered (lines 118–19). Indeed, Shukaletuda’s ultimate punishment and death at the hands of Inanna is indicative that he has perpetrated a rape (line 296).⁵² By stark contrast, in Gilgamesh’s version, Ishtar invites Ishullanu to touch her vulva (VI:69) and it is Ishtar’s vengeful actions which render Ishullanu unable to tend the garden (VI:78). Thus, “the very elements of Gilgamesh’s story which are most damning of the goddess—her attempt to seduce Ishullanu and her prevention of his ability to tend the garden—are expressed in a manner that is sympathetic to the goddess in *Inanna and Shukaletuda*” (Pryke 2017, 147–48). Indeed, Konrad Volk argues that Gilgamesh’s retelling of the story of Ishtar and Ishullanu represents an intentional distortion of the narrative of Inanna and Shukaletuda which is intended as a conscious climax of his insulting response to Ishtar (Volk 1995, 62). Although, as Volk acknowledges, this presupposes that the version of Inanna and Shukaletuda we have was also known by the author of Gilgamesh (Volk 1995, 62).⁵³



⁵² While there are undoubtedly challenges in talking about rape in ancient contexts, Alhena Gadotti (2009) compares the sexual encounter between Inanna and Shukaletuda to other descriptions of rape in Sumerian literature such as *Enki and Ninhursag* and *Enlil and Ninlil* to argue that these sexual encounters should be understood as rape. Gadotti points out that in each case the perpetrator uses either force or stealth due to a conspicuous lack of consent and the perpetrator is subsequently punished (2009, 81–82).

⁵³ This presupposition has not been universally accepted. While C. J. Gadd suggests that the story of Ishullanu and Ishtar has “a background in folk-lore”, he argues that there is “hardly enough in all of this to justify any close comparison between Shukalletuda and Ishullanu” and suggests that “if the comparison has any point it lies perhaps in the opposite conduct of the characters, especially of the goddess—in the Sumerian story her wrath is justified by the sacrilegious assault of a mortal; in the Semitic story it has no justification at all but is the mere caprice of a promiscuous and vindictive female” (Gadd 1966, 117–18). Similarly, echoing Gadd, Tzvi Abusch states that “even granting that Ishullanu and Šukalletuda may be parallel or related personages...I did not find it particularly useful to draw upon the tale of *Inanna and Šukalletuda*” (Abusch 2021, 39 n. 66).

Much as the manosphere adherents seem to find their own experiences mirrored in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh finds parallels between his experience reflected in the story of Ishullanu and Ishtar. Like the manosphere mytheme, Gilgamesh twists the narrative of a pre-existing mythic text in order to weaponize the story. Gilgamesh characterizes Ishtar as an example of the dangers of unbounded female sexuality, rather than a rape victim who is assaulted. Meanwhile, Ishullanu is cast not as sexual predator but as an unwilling victim. Gilgamesh's narrative mirrors the rhetoric espoused by the manosphere and in particular the reversal of the victim–perpetrator roles. Manosphere outlets frequently amplify stories of female perpetrators of sexual violence while simultaneously dismissing allegations against male perpetrators as false allegations in order to claim erroneously that it is men who are the real victims of sexual violence (Gotell and Dutton 2016, 74). This aggrieved and deluded sense of victimhood is, in turn, used as a justification for targeted online campaigns of harassment against women (Marwick and Caplan 2018, 547).

Once again, it is the Epic itself which seems to offer a potential site for resistance against these problematic retellings. In retelling this taunting and distorted version of the myth of Inanna and Shukaletuda, Gilgamesh makes an ill-judged and fatal error which leads to destruction and loss. Although Enkidu and Gilgamesh prevail over the Bull of Heaven, the divinely ordained death of Enkidu in Tablet VII highlights the ultimate consequences of Gilgamesh's failure to properly engage with the narrative or to consider the consequences of his retelling of it. In reading Tablet VI as a narrative about the dangers of women falsely reporting rape, the erosion of traditional gender roles, and the excessive power women accrue through their sexual capital, the manosphere adherents commit the same error and the results are undeniably destructive.

Conclusions

In order to combat the pernicious spread of manosphere ideology, it is necessary to unpick the rhetoric that is promulgated by the manosphere (Tomkinson, Harper, and Attwell 2020). This includes the co-option of



ancient Near Eastern texts that are used to underwrite their extremist, antifeminist worldview. Elements of the Epic of Gilgamesh have been blended with tenets of the manosphere ideology in order to produce a mythmeme that has evolved independently of textual controls. In order to resist these insidious online retellings, we must return to the text of the Epic.

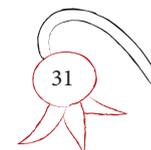
However, in doing so we cannot claim the myth as proto-feminist. Indeed, many elements of the Epic are convivial to a misogynistic outlook and within the Epic itself “male spheres of power are created by the violent exclusion of women,” Consequently, “the epic indulges in the literary fantasy that every time a woman speaks, she decides the fate of men, perhaps to justify why women must be silenced” (Helle 2021, 213). Nevertheless, perhaps due to the complex textual-history of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the scribal culture which produced so many versions of it, the narrative does display a keen awareness of issues of ethical retellings and the consequences of storytelling more broadly. Although they could never have anticipated the modern manosphere mythmeme, in an ancient context “the authors and editors reflected seriously on their literary heritage and found in it new possibilities for themselves and their audiences. What they borrowed, they modified and put to use in novel ways” (Tigay 2002, 249).



There is, therefore, a certain irony that the two episodes that the manosphere has opted to retell most frequently are also the junctures at which the Epic of Gilgamesh displays a metanarrative awareness about the ethics and the consequences of storytelling. Through Shamash and Enkidu’s discussion of how the events of Tablet I should be understood and how Shamhat’s character should be evaluated, we are offered a model for ethical retelling. By contrast, in Gilgamesh’s repurposing of Inanna and Shukaletuda, we can find a cautionary tale about the dangers and destructive consequences of distorting these texts. From the very earliest periods, the authors and redactors of the Epic of Gilgamesh have been concerned about how to retell the narrative. It is this which allows us to hold a mirror to the manosphere mythmeme and to highlight the omissions and distortions inherent within manosphere readings and, in turn, the illogical ideology that exists behind them.

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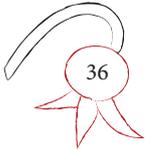
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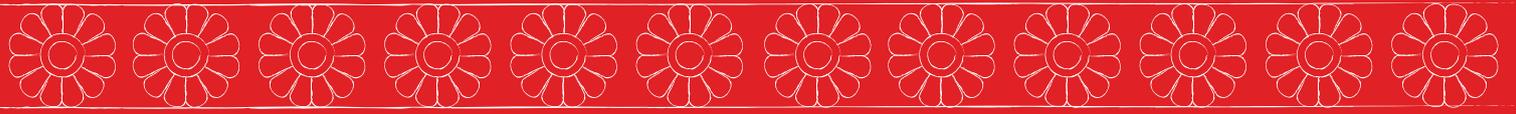


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by the Manosphere*
Susannah Rees

