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Nevertheless, She Resisted: Feminist Ethos and Agency in The Epic of Gilgamesh

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Abstract: "Nevertheless, She Resisted" challenges the concept that female agency is located exclusively in texts written by women and argues that reframing representations of women reveals resistance to the existing patriarchal social structures that excluded, erased, or overlooked them. This study is a forensic social anthropology that reconstructs the ethos of ancient women. It proposes a new rhetoric that examines the negative space occupied by female characters around and between the central male characters in texts written by men. I argue first that we can understand the ethos of women in ancient cultures even through texts that were written by men and for a culture that valorized masculine values, and second that modern principles of feminist ecological criticism can reposition the way we view women's social, emotional, and cultural agency. Combining Ryan, Myers, and Jones's feminist terminology of interrupt, advocate, and relate with the idea of resistance offers a new framework for studying ancient texts, identifies new terrains for feminist rhetorical applications, and further broadens the field of women's studies.

Keywords: negative space rhetoric, ethos, rhetorical feminism, ecological feminism, Gilgamesh, epic

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Introduction[1]

Because ancient epics are often unattached to the perspective of a single, named authorial point of view, they represent the central communal zeitgeist and values of a people who lived in a specific time and region and demonstrate a specific rhetorical function. And yet, as the old saying goes, the people who tell the story control the story: the unnamed storyteller of Beowulf and the legion of traveling Homers who carved narrative footpaths across Anglo-Saxon England and the Mediterranean had to have been primarily men. The epideictic narratives they told were tales of masculine valor and values, mythologizing the central, nation-building stories that shaped their cultural and national ethos, defining what it meant to be a warrior and leader, what it meant to be a man, and the characteristics of the monsters they fought, many of whom were female. Within the epic genre, women are often monolithi-

1 The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is situated in the literary canon alongside *The Odyssey, The Iliad*, the *Sagas of the Icelanders*, The *Aeneid*, and *Beowulf* as foundational epic texts that reflect nation-building and heroic and psychocultural values. The oldest parts of Gilgamesh comprise the second oldest text in existence after the *Pyramid Texts*. The five Sumerian texts that describe Gilgamesh's exploits date from the Old Babylonian period, or roughly 2000-1600 BC (Sonik "Awe" 493). The origin story dates to the 28th c. BC when the historical Sumerian figure Gilgamesh reigned as the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty of Uruk, ca. 2750 BC. The epic story existed as an oral tale and in poetry fragments before the full narrative epic was preserved on cuneiform tablets by the 12th c. BC Akkadian poet Sîn-lēqi-unninni (Sonik, "Awe" 493). The text that we read today is an amalgam of Bronze Age cuneiform tablets from early third-millennium Sumerian poems, second-millennium Babylonian tablets known as the "Standard Tablets," and the eleven cuneiform tablets from the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh (7th c. BC), which comprise the most complete set to date (Kennedy 121).

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cally idealized, stereotyped or otherwise relegated to the silenced background or the fearsome, murder-worthy foreground: Penelope, quiet, patient, and faithful; Grendel's rage-filled mother; the passive, seized Helen; Medusa, whom history has villainized for the sin of being raped by a powerful male; in Virgil's hand, Dido's political savvy becomes a story of betrayal, heartbreak, and suicide. All of these female characters come to us through epic, myth-building stories that are primarily for, by, and about men. Just as "history itself is a masculine archival domain and academic discipline" (Bahrani 36), ancient rhetoric has always been understood as implicitly masculine rhetoric. The types of narratives that advance nation building and manifest destiny have historically smothered the female voice, isolating and restricting the movements of women on islands, in fortresses, as foils and handmaidens, on the fringes.

Though for more than five decades feminist scholars have reinterpreted agency and ethos through a viewpoint that countered a cultural taxonomy that women did not control but inherited, a class of women remains underexplored: the representations of women in ancient narratives. As a way of reconsidering the roles of women in texts where they had no direct path to shaping their own narratives, we must ask ourselves how and if we can determine the ethos and agency of a group who left few texts behind them written in their own hand. Specifically, we must ask whether we can determine feminine agency and ethos through a text written by a masculine hand and what we can understand about women's agency in the stories of a culture long dead to us, a culture where the preponderance of texts were written by men in celebration of masculine values. Iraqi scholar Zainab Bahrani observes that "Women are often absent in historical records, not just those from antiquity. But the issue is clearly not simply one in which we have men's records and nothing about women. It is the way in which women, woman, or femininity are deployed in texts that becomes an important research question" (37). As we have seen feminist scholars recover the work of Enheduanna and reassess the influence of Aspasia, this study is a foray into both reconsidering the way that we read texts and reclaiming the ethos and agency of females through a feminist ecological lens in the world's first known epic, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Ecological Feminism: Resisting and Reframing Men's Talk

In their 2016 text *Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric*, Kathleen Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones created a framework that outlined an "alternative theory of ethos at the confluence of ecological thinking and feminist rhetorical theory… that both describes women's public ethos construction relative to time, contexts, and different relationships and attempts to collect, name, and observe patterns" (2). The study outlined here uses their framework to uncover new and unexpected sites of rhetoric: principally the epic, a genre traditionally dominated by masculine rhetoric. The methodology suggested in this study represents a significant contribution to the field of feminist narrative rhetoric in that it applies a feminist ecological approach to the negative space in ancient epics, opening the door to (un)(re)covering the ethos of female characters in places where they have not yet been recovered. Mirroring Cheryl Glenn's feminist rhetorical theory which questions previous rhetorical assumptions in "The History of Rhetoric" ("*Whose* history? *Whose* rhetoric? *Which* rhetoric?" [*Rhetoric Retold* 5]), we should similarly be asking of

texts where females are merely represented: "*Where* is ethos in the silent/invisible class?" "*What* is ethos in the silent/invisible class?" "How is women's ethos being socially constructed?" and, more narrowly, "Out of the masculine lens that that speaks for women, how are women resisting the narrative?" Critics may say the answers to these questions are unknowable, and they may be correct. However, I would resist that argument by pointing to Gilgamesh himself, who is considered to have been a historical figure and who himself represents the values of his culture; if the character of Gilgamesh represents the values of his culture, shouldn't all the characters be similarly representative of their culture? Furthermore, echoing Glenn and other feminist scholars, I also resist the flawed argument that women had no ethos and no representative voice because they left little documentary evidence behind, and I offer a counterargument that women's ethos can be reconstructed through the rhetoric of negative space in both the textual representation of community values and in the representations of their relationships with each other and with men.

In 2006, Lorraine Code proposed a theoretical framework of ecological thinking that considered the "interconnectedness" of matter; it looks for "horizontal patterns and interconnections of diverse, multiply complex epistemological terrains" (279). Ecological thinking and ecological feminism internalize and politicize the ecology movement, positioning matter and actions in an alliance that work together in a dynamic and interrelated relationship web. Ryan, Myers, and Jones reframe Code's theoretical framework, contending that "women can seek agency individually and collectively to *interrupt* dominant representations of women's ethos, to *advocate* for themselves and others in transformative ways, and to *relate to others*, both powerful and powerless" (3-4). To these three terms, I add a fourth term: *resist/resisting*. If feminist texts or actors perform agency by interrupting the dominant narrative, serving in roles of advocacy, and/or establishing patterns of relationship-building, then they also do so by resisting or breaching the prevailing norms of civil society, particularly when society is engaged in (re)(op)pressive practices. "Resistance" implies self-knowledge, self-advocacy, critical thinking, and redirecting an action, however obvious or subtle those behaviors or language practices may be. "Resistance" directly contradicts the assumption of powerlessness or invisibility. These four concepts (interruption/interrupting; advocacy/advocating; relation/relating; resist/resisting) are descriptive categories of the kinds of ethos the female characters in *Gilgamesh* display and the rhetorical strategies they employ, often in resistance to more static constructions of ethos that have historically privileged public expression.

The subject of this article takes on one previously unexplored site as the location for feminist ethos: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, a nearly 4800-year-old text whose female characters initially appear to exist as foils reflecting the dominant traits and exploits of the primary male characters and who represent a broad assumption about the lack of agency of women in the ancient world, a lacking that is in part tied to their

representation.[23] Cheryl Glenn's term "mapping the silences" (*Rhetoric Retold* 1) – or creating a rhetorical cartography to chart the ways women speak, remain silenced or are silenced – gives us a blueprint to examine the ways in which negative space suggests presence through absence. In this study, I propose a novel rhetorical methodology for examining a text's negative space for content. Ancient narrative texts can be approached as rhetorical archaeological sites of paleo-feminist rhetoric, opportunities to sift through the layers of stone and soil to unearth a clearer understanding of how women lived, what mattered to them, and how they related to each other. Creating a new "rhetoric of negative space" – which examines the rhetorical space around and between the central male characters – reconsiders how we recover and reconsider feminism in texts written by men. From analyzing how women are represented in narrative epic, we can infer the sources and expressions of their agency and continue the work of understanding the lives of women living in cultures long dead.

In *Male and Female* in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tzvi Abusch summarizes the full scope of the representations of women in *Gilgamesh*; yet, of all the gendered cast of characters he references, only "a prostitute" and Ishtar make the list of female characters mentioned, which reinforces the placement of females in Gilgamesh in the negative space around, between, and behind the male characters ("Introduction" 3-4, 7). Bahrani writes about the "hidden woman" in Mesopotamia, or the "woman as trace," arguing that women are largely suppressed in the historical record (35, 36). While suppression and silencing are part of the broad historical narrative of women ("It is for men to talk"), feminist narratives may be hiding in plain sight. In *Gilgamesh*, time and again the female characters are the primary catalysts of action; males may be the primary actors, but females are the agents who set the action in motion. Women are never far from the central action in *Gilgamesh*: they are the locus; they are what men keep returning to until the epic itself ceases with the image of *Gilgamesh* looking over the progeny he is able to create: the walls of the city.

I argue that we can in fact push back on the texts written by men to uncover the important liminal space occupied by women, a space that Nedra Reynolds calls the "betweens." I argue that we can understand the ethos and agency of women in ancient Sumeria through epic texts that were written by men and for a culture that valorized masculine values, and that, while women's lives may have existed on the boundaries and in the "betweens" in ancient texts, applying a framework of feminist ecological criticism can reposi-

2 For example, though *The Odyssey* post-dates *Gilgamesh* by more than a millennium, it reflects a shared feminine standard typically associated with "good/bad" women or "good/bad" wives in ancient texts. In *The Odyssey*, "good wife" Penelope's loyalty and silence are virtues. In Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*, Telemachus reflects the gendered power imbalance when he silences his mother, telling her:

> Go in and do your work.
> Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves
> to do their chores as well. It is for men
> to talk, especially me. I am the master. (I 356-359)

This is an important line, because Penelope is silenced: she doesn't resist; she simply returns to her room and weeps until the listening and all-seeing Athena intercedes to give Penelope's "eyes sweet sleep" (I 364). Penelope's passivity is a void into which slips the dominant Athena, who (like Ishtar in *Gilgamesh*) embodies both feminine compassion and masculinized agency.

3 For a comparison of the silencing of Mesopotamian women, see the edict on p. 11, where outspoken women are threatened with having their teeth smashed in by bricks.

tion the way we view their agency. Ultimately, I argue that this framework represents a meaningful shift in the way we can study ancient texts. Looking for evidence of women who are supporting a feminist agenda through advocating on behalf of themselves or others and exploring women's power within established social structures provides a valuable heuristic for examining other ancient texts. This model of rhetorical criticism can be widely applied to any society, not necessarily ancient, where men or cultural precedent control the records and the means of written expression. This way of reading texts identifies unexplored terrains for feminist rhetorical applications and further broadens the field of women's studies.

Ethos Construction: Character and Community

Our legacy understanding of ethos derives from Aristotle's description of "excellence of thought" and "excellence of character" (II03a 15). In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that "none of the virtues of character come to us by nature" (II03a 19): instead, people acquire character through habituation, or practice. The etymology of the Greek word *ēthos* describes "custom," "habit," and "a habitual gathering place" (Halloran 60; Ryan, Myers, and Jones 6); its essential meaning supports the image of people congregating around core ideals and values that are both reflected in and reflective of personal, individual character, the social character of the wider community, or a broad historical period (Halloran 62). It also more pointedly defines ethos as embodied in intrinsic and extrinsic intelligence, authority, character, credibility, trustworthiness, and virtuosity. Ethos as it abides in character emerges through enacting goodness of character. We become good by being good, through practice: "For what one has to learn to do, we learn by doing… for legislators make citizens good by habituating them" (Aristotle II03b 1). In an Aristotelian world, those exhibiting strong ethos have significant agency and influence. As Aristotle's most persuasive appeal, ethos overtakes logos to convince an audience that a person within a text – not necessarily exclusively the creator of a text – can be trusted to give advice, to behave correctly, to reflect community values.

In many respects, *Gilgamesh* is about the evolution of the principal male character through his encounters with female characters. We see over and again Gilgamesh's flaws, the unfolding of his character, the communal standard-bearing and social contract that "good" kingship must eventually both project and uphold in order to create the strong walls of an ethically upright city. Time after time, the females in *Gilgamesh* are enacting character by doing the right thing: they give the right counsel, they appeal to the right goddess, they shepherd those who need protection. In his evolution from tyrant king to just king, Gilgamesh learns from women.[4] He becomes the legendary king of strong ethos and good character portrayed in the opening lines of the epic ("He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation/[who knew the proper ways,] was wise in all matters!" [I1-2]) through his constant interactions with the female characters, who look after his safety, who give him a protective companion, who counsel him on the right way to live his life, who look after his interests while he sleeps. Gilgamesh only enacts "right behavior" through learned behavior. Michael Halloran writes: "If *ethos* is manifested in rhetorical action, and if *ethos* is formed by choosing ethical modes of action, it follows that educating a person in rhetorical action, schooling him in proper rhetorical habits is a means

4 He also learns from his friendship with Enkidu, who is himself feminized (see Notes 27 and 29).

of forming his character" (61). This is a critical detail because in many ways the *Gilgamesh* text is about the moral and civic education of Gilgamesh: he is transformed from uncouth, uncontrolled, animal-king to something considerably more human. This education is ushered in through his encounters with females who model either the way he should be behaving or by tempering him in some way—teaching him, softening him, showing him how to be more human.[5]

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca distinguish between classifying heroes based on "characteristic acts" vs. "essence," which "characterize and explain the behavior of certain classes of beings" (327). Translating the ethos of act-essence to *Gilgamesh*, the essence of "king" is incompatible with the act of "rapist" in Mesopotamian culture; how do we know this? In addition to the law codes, the text tells us that essence and act are at odds by the appeal of the raped to the powerful Ishtar and by her subsequent intercession. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write that "deficiency… [is] correlative to the notion of essence" (328); the concept of deficiency directly correlates to Aristotle's description of ethos in *Nicomachean Ethics*: "so for these reasons excess and deficiency belong to vice, and the middle state to virtue; 'noble in one simple way, bad in all sorts of ways'" (1106b 34-35). The women in *Gilgamesh* exhibit the middle state of virtue, or the absence of cultural and social deficiency, and therefore serve as models of cultural and social behavior. In *Gilgamesh*, we can see how females occupy a shared space with the primary males by determining the "relationship between act and person, and individual and group, [that] recur whenever events, objects, beings, or institutions are grouped in a comprehensive way" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 327). These groupings are repeatedly reinforced throughout *Gilgamesh*; the patterns that women enact attest to their communal ethos. For example, the brides exhibit communal ethos when they police themselves because the social structure isn't protecting them. In other evidence of communal or group ethos: Ninsun, Shiduri, and Shamhat are physically embodied: they pray, they seek shelter and think, and they enact the arts of rhetoric to persuade men. The brides, Uta-napishti's wife, and the Scorpion-man's wife collectively contradict the masculine narrative and thus resist it. Ishtar, Ninsun, and Shiduri are women who do not act on the relative to the desires or direction of men: they are not the agents or enactors of masculine decision-making; rather, they decide. Ninsun, Shiduri, and Shamhat exhibit agency through interpretation and listening, but above all through language. The repeated pattern of group agency suggests that social value is manifested in the acts of the females in *Gilgamesh* (see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 327).

Ethos creation in the characterization of females in Gilgamesh is also manifested in the Aristotelian ideal of moderation. Aristotle writes that virtue lies in "the middle state" between the extremes of vice (II06b 35); he defines good character as "honesty and unselfishness… courage, temperance, and justice" (Taylor, Translation Preliminary Note). These ideals also apply to the much older *Gilgamesh* text, which both excoriates the lack of these qualities in male characters and celebrates these same qualities in the female characters, who repeatedly represent an appreciation of, desire for, and exhibition of temperance. Both primary male characters enact the opposite of "good character": Gilgamesh who plunders, who rampages, who is out of control, who flouts the laws of Uruk; and Enkidu, who – in the process of being "tamed" by

5 Recall that Gilgamesh is "two-thirds of him god but one third human" (I 47-48).

Shamhat:

… drank the ale, a full seven jugfuls.

His mood became free, he started to sing,

His heart grew merry, his face lit up. (P 101-105)

Enkidu further embodies the vice of immoderate "excess and deficiency" described by Aristotle in the act in throwing the Bull of Heaven's shoulder at Ishtar, his superior, "the ablest] of gods" (VII 159). In other words, the text shows us immoderation and intemperance in the two primary male characters; these traits are counterbalanced by the ideal of moderate and temperate female behavior.

The Greek ideals of moderation and self-awareness ("nothing in excess" and "know thyself")[6] describe Gilgamesh's flaws; like Oedipus, Gilgamesh—who sees himself as a god—must confront the full range of human experience, and it is only through the loss of someone he loved and the confrontation with his own mortality that he does become fully human. Unlike Oedipus, Gilgamesh is led to this understanding through the female characters of the text: through their counsel, their virtue, their enactment of ethos. The female characters embody the virtues that Gilgamesh himself lacks and that the text itself states are valued by this society. He becomes human not through muscular, godly feats of slaying Humbaba or the Bull of Heaven, but through loving Enkidu and grieving his death. Arguably, Gilgamesh comes to embody ecological feminism himself, at least in part: his grief and his understanding of his legacy interrupt the masculine ideal; and he relates to Enkidu with strong emotion, enough that grief wastes his body and transforms him into an animal. In short, while this is a text about the hero Gilgamesh and his epic adventures, his ethical and moral evolution is inextricable from his encounters with the succession of females in the text; moreover, his own eventual ethos and legacy as a great king is built upon the foundational ethos of the female characters, which is representative of communal values.[7]

Contextualizing Mesopotamian Womanhood: Enheduanna and Ancient Women

Women comprised three classes in ancient Mesopotamia: the elite (wealthy, often married, sometimes priestesses, sometimes literate), semi-free, and slaves. Regardless of their social class, any woman could be sold into slavery by a male member of the family for any reason, such as a consequence of divorce or to settle a debt, and likewise men could divorce their wives for any reason, though divorce initiated by women was far less common and initiating it could be punishable by death (Halton and Svärd 18). Outside of elite social structures—royal or powerful households[8]—history gives us little information about Mesopotamian wom-

6 Given Aristotle's life (4th c. BC) post-dated the creation of *Gilgamesh* by more than two millennia, the virtues of ethos he lauded are justifiably in question. However, Gilgamesh was demonstrably violating the existing laws codes by taking the virginity of the brides in his community; the evidence is not only in legal codes but in the text itself: the brides appealed to a higher authority for protection.

7 Halloran writes that "*ethos* emphasizes the conventional rather than the idiosyncratic, the public rather than the private" (60).

8 The British Museum, University of Pennsylvania Museum, and Iraq Museum house artifacts, such as a lyre, funerary jewelry, and cylinder seals, excavated from the death pit of the Akkadian Puabi (ca. 2600-2450 BC); the opulence of these artifacts

en's lives beyond records of slave trades, legal codes, letters, statues and engraved tablets, terra cotta reliefs, inscriptions on tombs and statues, and some wisdom literature, but the scope of information is relatively miniscule compared to the historical record on men's lives. This documentary deficit has resulted in the broad consensus that Mesopotamian women experienced restricted agency (Halton and Svärd 17).[9]

The 2022-2023 exhibition at the Morgan Library titled *She Who Wrote: Enheduanna and Women of Mesopotamia*, along with the Morgan Library curator Sidney Babcock and Erhan Tamur's edited collection of essays in *She Who Wrote* and Sophus Helle's translation of Enheduanna's writings, have revivified both the scholarship and the general understanding of the complex lives of ancient Sumerian and Akkadian women, far extending their scope of influence. Babcock and Tamur study the representations of ancient Near Eastern women in art and artifacts, among them the most well-known historical female figure of the 23rd century BC, Enheduanna, the poet, priestess, and powerful daughter of the Akkadian ruler Sargon, the first named author in history, and perhaps the first feminist. Enheduanna herself dates to ca. 2300 BC. As the chief priestess of the central cultic temple, she would have wielded considerable administrative power in Ur. To contextualize the era out of which Enheduanna emerged and to understand the remarkable the scope of her agency, consider this Old Babylonia law that dates to 2350 BC – roughly 50 years prior to Enheduanna's life span:

> If a woman to a male has spoken… [bad] words (?) which exceed (her rank?),
>
> Onto the teeth of that woman a baked brick shall be smashed,
>
> And that brick will be hung at the main gate. (Foreman 26)

This broad public threat to women functions as a foil to showcase Enheduana's extreme power and self-awareness of her own high-ranking authority. "I am Enheduanna," she states on cuneiform tablets, artifacts themselves that are "object[s] of literacy, authority, and cultural memory" (Sen 80). Attaching her name with her text is both liberatory and representative of Enheduanna's awareness of her rank, particularly given "The Exaltation of Inana" is written largely to expose and respond to an injustice done to her by her father's male successor. Her use of the first-person pronoun is of essential importance in this text. Midway through "The Exaltation of Inana," Enheduanna begins using the first person "I" and repeats the pronoun 26 times throughout the remainder of the poem, reinforcing both an ontological positioning and the "theme of power [that] recurs time and time again" in her texts (Helle 143). She writes:

> I am Enheduana, I
>
> Am the high priestess.

along with the presence of attendants and the visual depictions on the cylinder seal suggest she may have been a queen but certainly attest to her status as a woman of considerable power

9 This concept is challenged by Sophus Helle and Kutay Sen. Helle ascribes the increased restrictions on women's agency to have occurred in the latter half of the 2nd millennium BC, which eclipsed women's agency (160). Sen ascribes the isolation of women to the "long-standing disregard" of scholarship that is "dominant in the discipline," reflecting a bias that "equat[es]… women with domestic space" (77).

I carried the basket

Of offering, I sang

The hymns of joy. (Helle, "The Exaltation of Inana" li. 68-69)

"I am" and "This Am I" are ethos-creating, generative, authoritative, self-creating phrases: out of the identity-less vacuum emerges the self-naming Self. Attaching "I" with "Enhenduanna" reflects a joint epistemological self-awareness and acknowledgement of her ontological position, an act that suggests ownership, ethos, and agency.

Gilgamesh began as a 3rd century BC Sumerian oral tale. The Early Dynastic period that produced the oldest cuneiform fragments of *Gilgamesh* is representative of a Bronze Age civilization transitioning into a period of urbanization and city-state formation. However, the cuneiform tablets that comprise the full range *Gilgamesh* texts are drawn from an amalgam of sources and reflect multiple eras and civilizations spanning two thousand years of Bronze Age history (see Note 1). In contrast to previous scholarship equating later Akkadian women with and relegating them to mere "domestic space," women in earlier Sumerian communities occupied a prominent administrative position (Sen 77) as the backbone of the textile economy and in the production of bread and beer.[10] Brigitte Lion, whose research studies the roles of women in the Ancient Near East, argues that women's lives were nuanced and suggests that evidence exists women had opportunities for influence, for example in managing their estates in their husbands' absence (l06). Yet even though larger numbers of women than previously thought may have known how to read and write (Meador 223), the preponderance of texts, documents, letters, laws, inscriptions, and records were written by men, for men, and about issues that concerned men (Lion 95, 106). Furthermore, the comparatively little documentary evidence we do have of women's lives was principally recorded by male scribes. While we have tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets that give us information about Mesopotamian society, the historical lives of women have remained largely opaque, which is among the reasons why the Enheduanna texts are so valuable: the subject matter is about a historical and powerful woman written in praise of another powerful female.

Contextualizing the Female Characters in Gilgamesh

The three groupings of women in *Gilgamesh* presented here reveal a significantly greater agency about women that was previously based on legal codes and cultural and historical mores present in the later Mesopotamia. Alhena Gadotti argues that ancient Sumerian literature upon which the oldest *Gilgamesh* tales are based "had everything to do with real women" (195). And yet, as a hybrid text (oral and later cuneiform) whose narrative mirrors values that shifted across centuries and regions, the Gilgamesh text shows us the ways in which women's lives were becoming increasingly restricted and female agency deteriorated (Gadotti 195). Helle writes that women in the 3rd and early 2nd millennium had more power than women in subsequent centuries, but "around the middle of the second millennium BC, i.e., roughly the period when Sîn-lēqi-unninni was collecting and revising *Gilgamesh*, a cultural shift downward took place that we have

10 Enheduanna was an Akkadian woman writing in Sumerian (Babcock and Tamur 19).

yet to fully understand" where power was stripped from priestesses and female goddesses were reassigned/reclassified as male (160); and women in later centuries were "considered to be the mediums of evil power, a dangerous, uncontrolled female power" (Westenholz 253). By the first millennium BC, Mesopotamian women had been largely excluded from the scribal class, and femininity – or the woman's experience – was exclusively being defined by and filtered through the male scribal elite (Matuszak, "Assessing Misogyny" 269).

If "domestic work [is] regarded as defining… womanhood" (Matuszak, "She Is Not Fit" 242), then none of the women represented in *Gilgamesh* reflects the typical – and perhaps inconsequential – woman, since none are portrayed as engaged in domestic work or associated with homes. The exception in this text is Shiduri, who is the only female embodied in her house and the only female who has an occupation ("ale-wife"). Arguably, the female characters in *Gilgamesh* function as ideals that counter the general assumption about the restricted roles women occupied in the ancient world. Consider the positions many of the women in *Gilgamesh* possess: independent woman surrounded by "vats of gold," priestesses, temple prostitute (who are governed by gods, not by men), revered and influential mother, young brides who collectively band together to stop a civic wrong: women who display prized masculine traits of action, reason, agency, and wisdom. The characterizations of females in *Gilgamesh* shine a light on the limited roles that women were thought to have played in this ancient society; a feminist reconsideration of their characters gives them an agency that traditional scholarship hasn't previously afforded them.

In short, when we read *Gilgamesh*, we are looking at values that span the interests of a millennium and a half, covering vastly different civilizations. While far from homogenous, the text of *Gilgamesh* nevertheless telegraphs information about two cultures that valued masculine traits: physicality, territorial dominance/domination, masculinity, fertility, city-building, and conquest, typical characteristics of the epic genre. Rivkah Harris writes that "what we find in the epic are essentially male attitudes toward women, human and divine" where "women are supporting and subsidiary characters in the cast" ("Images of Women" 220).[11]Though we do not see the women in the *Gilgamesh* tablets interacting with each other, we do see recurring examples of woman-to-woman communication and references: the brides' decision to band together in solidarity against Gilgamesh; the brides' group appeal to Ishtar; Shamhat's attestations to the wisdom and ability of Ninsun. And, while readers might not see the direct interaction between women, we do see the regard that women had for each other and the awareness of the specific types of power women held and offered to each other.

The locational niches women occupy in the *Gilgamesh* epic are geographical, emotional, and cultural. Female characters are situated in temples, taverns, and marriages, though ultimately they exist on the boundaries of a story about the relationship between two men. *Gilgamesh* depicts male-male relationships and male-female relationships, but no direct female-female interactions; men act and women often react,

11 Louise Westling associates womanhood in *Gilgamesh* with the earth, the landscape itself: the "virgin wilderness," the "feminine mysteries" (506); she explores the tension between the masculine hand as it moves across the feminine landscape, dominating both women's bodies and the physical geography itself.

though their reaction often interrupts patterns of dominance. As stated above, women are often the catalysts for action; they bridge scenes and function as threshold keepers between one epic act and the next. Women's lives and agency are also background foils: they support, listen to, interpret for, mentor, and legitimize men. Men keep returning to women in this story for advice, for sex, to make bread, for comfort, to express what they are feeling, and we can gather much information about the agency of Mesopotamian women based on how they are represented and by how often they move to the center of the story as agents who propel the action forward. The categories of women in the text—virgins, prostitutes, mothers, goddesses, women independent of men, wives—all establish ethos through interrupting the narrative, relating to the emotional condition of the male characters, and/or advocating for themselves and others in unexpected ways.

Through the lens of ecological feminism, we evaluate the ethos of the women in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* according to the following grouping of sub-themes: through the category of the violated brides, we see women organizing to interrupt the prevailing narrative and advocate for their collective welfare; through the goddess Ishtar and the wealthy working woman Shiduri, we see women exercising traditionally masculine power; and through the characters of Shamhat the Harlot, Ninsun the Mother, and the unnamed wives – the Scorpion-man's wife and Uta-napishti's wife – we see women interrupting the narrative by transforming potentially subordinate positions into positions of power.

In all of these cases, not only do we see women resisting, we witness them resisting successfully.

Women's Collective Power of Resistance

Ethos of the Violated Brides: Interrupting/Advocating/Resisting

The female characters in *Gilgamesh* are in many ways defined by their archetypes: prostitute, mother, wife, goddess. One character grouping, which I call the "violated brides," does not fall into this category. After the epic opens praising the lifetime achievements of an older Gilgamesh whose statesmanship is evident in the strength of his city ("He built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,/of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse./ See its walls…/view its parapet that none could copy…/that no later king could ever copy!" [*Gilgamesh* I 11-17])[12], the narrative begins with the equivalent of an extended flashback. *Gilgamesh* starts by establishing Gilgamesh's spiritual and physical dominance and by establishing a binary relationship between those who have power and those who do not. Gilgamesh is described first as "two-thirds of him god but one-third human" (I 48), and then by his physicality (I 51-62). He is a giant: nearly three times as tall as any man (eleven cubits, or over sixteen feet high), broad chested (four cubits, or roughly six feet wide), long limbed, and large footed (I 52-54): a Colossus. In contrast to the feats of the older Gilgamesh described in the opening lines of Tablet I ("legacy-building Gilgamesh"), the young Gilgamesh of forty lines later is a tyrant by virtue of the authority he usurps and by the sheer physicality that reinforces his tyranny. Young Gilgamesh is a ruler who pillages

12 Hereafter, the author supplies only the tablet number and the lines to the Gilgamesh text. Variations: the George text substitutes lines from the Pennsylvania Tablets (P) and others if they clarified the passage more than the Standard Babylonian.

his city as a warrior-class sexual predator, dominating the most vulnerable in society and violating the legal codes and social rules of both the Sumerian and Akkadian civilizations by claiming the right of the first night. He "harries without warrant" the young sons and daughters of Uruk: "By day and by night his tyranny grows harsher" (I 68-69); he "lets no girl go free to her bridegroom" (I 76), and he "will couple with the wife-to-be,/he first of all, the bridegroom after" (I P 159-160). Gilgamesh is motivated by exerting non-consensual, dominant masculinity over the brides and bridegrooms, and by extension over all the people of Uruk. Like other powerful and immoderate gods and men – Zeus, Poseidon, Oedipus – Gilgamesh lacks moderation and self-regulation. Among other flaws, his is a crime of excess (Gabriel 414; Sonik, "Gilgamesh and Emotional Excess" 393), and though Gilgamesh is two-thirds god, the one-third of him that is human is governed by the laws that also govern other humans, as the Scorpion-man's wife later reminds us (IX 51).

Gilgamesh's violation of the social contract is the first major flaw the text gives about the epic hero. After telling the audience Gilgamesh was a great and wise ruler at the end of his reign, the story begins with his malfeasance and disordered rule. As he opens the epic dominating both the narrative and the young brides of Uruk, Gilgamesh is also violating the principles of "right rule." Rape in Mesopotamia was considered foremost a crime against the father and husband, and the laws of Hammurabi[13] were explicit in the description of willingness, force, and sexual relations, and they were equally explicit in the penalties assessed for breaking the law. Middle Assyrian laws state that if a man forcibly rapes a married woman, he could be killed (Ross 158). And even though the laws were skewed in favor of masculinity and though the character of Gilgamesh is not held accountable in the opening lines of the epic (and in fact appears to be above the rule of law), the text tells us that his behavior was considered wrong by virtue of the urgency of the brides' collective appeal to the protective goddess Ishtar and by her immediate intercession. In short, the violated brides' appeal to Ishtar constituted a political move: an appeal to a higher authority to uphold laws that would protect them. Gilgamesh's acts breach the laws of a society deeply invested in creating legal standards for governance across multiple centuries of *Gilgamesh* retellings, from the 24th century BC Akkadian ruler Sargon, known as "the paragon of kingship" (Helle xvii) to the Babylonian Hammurabi in the 18th century BC, famous for his codex of laws micromanaging social behavior and economics (Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 214). Furthermore, a young woman's loss of virginity before marriage represented a threat to a family's economic interests, as they had a financial stake in the marital union; under Akkadian law, a bridegroom could reject a bride who wasn't a virgin. The loss ultimately jeopardized her social standing in the community (Lerner 247, 253). The audience hearing this epic would have understood the full implications of Gilgamesh's acts violating the marriage contract.

We see the brides' display of ethos in the way they resolve their "problem." Resolution in *Gilgamesh* doesn't come from the family patriarchs or the bridegrooms: the brides themselves are the ones who band together and seek help from another female, not from the men who are culturally responsible for their well-being: it was "The warrior's daughter (Ishtar), the young man's bride, to their complaint the goddess Ishtar paid heed" (I 78). The solution to Gilgamesh's sexual assault and abuse of power was not a rebuke or

13 The Code of Hammurabi dates to the 18th c. BC, corresponding roughly with the Standard Babylonian tablets.

punishment of Gilgamesh himself; rather, the brides' appeal set in motion a sequence of events that ultimately leads to the creation of Enkidu as a diversion for Gilgamesh.

This section of the text sheds light on key *a priori* proof that ethos dwells in the negative space. First, Gilgamesh's rapes violate the social structure and the laws of the period. Second, the average age of marriage for girls in Mesopotamia was fifteen. Third, unmarried women were considered politically and economically disempowered: property of their fathers and brothers. Because of these factors, the violated brides' acts of self-advocacy through resisting and interrupting an abuse being enacted by a political and gendered "superior" support agency according to Ryan, Myers, and Jones's framework as they collectively halt what Gilgamesh is taking from them. They resist by successfully interrupting the prevailing power structure and by using it as a weapon of restraint against Gilgamesh. A group who was in the intermediary stage between childhood and adulthood – a powerless group by virtue of their social position, age, and gender – performed a public act of courage by harnessing the power of the group, appealing to the right female in power, and effecting change. Ultimately the violated brides resist the status quo as a collective, and they are successful, because "resistance… is at the core of agency" (Hedge 310). Halloran's statement that "I choose my character, not my personality" (61) is particularly reflective of the brides whose agency is a choice they enact in an act of self-preservation and preservation of the social contract. It is also reflective of the flaws of Gilgamesh's innate id.

The brides' story is positioned as the text's first conflict, and its resolution results in the successful thwarting of a political tyrant by a group of girls, which is an unusual opening plot twist for an epic. Ryan, Myers, and Jones write that "women can seek agency individually or collectively"; they can "advocate for themselves and others in transformative ways" (3). The brides' act cements women's communal ethos early in the narrative, establishing a feminist framework for female characters to exercise their authority in self-advocacy and self-protection if no one else will. This act of communal agency is reflective of ways in which women have historically needed to "police themselves" (Elizabeth Wilson 151) in societies where patriarchal laws or customs did not advocate on their behalf. Ryan, Myers, and Jones define "interruption" as the "breaks, divides, hitches, disruptions, disturbances, ruptures, or breeches –counters to traditional ways of behaving or conversing—to change the status quo of dominant values and practices" (23). When the brides "interrupt" a tyrannus rex by appealing to a higher religious authority, they engage in resistance to the highest masculine legal and civil power. If the king will not uphold the social contract in a "just" society, then the brides will advocate for themselves. That in itself is an astonishing act of power – and an astonishing display of communal ethos.

Women Exercising Masculine Power

Ethos of Ishtar: Interrupting with Masculinized Power

Ishtar is the revered and often-invoked cult goddess of Uruk, which was the largest and most developed city in Sumer, said to have had a population of anywhere between 20,000-50,000 residents at its peak, a

megalopolis by Bronze Age standards (Halton and Svärd 6). One of the immediate ways we can understand the prominent position of Ishtar in Sumerian society is through the height and location of her temple: the two tallest structures in the center of Uruk are the temples of Ishtar and Anu, Ishtar's father. Their prominence as urban monuments are rhetorical signifiers: the gods, and these two in particular, are the combined powerful focal point of civic life around which human life revolves. "An old axiom in urban sociology," writes Manuel Castells, "considers space a reflection of society" (18). In her text *A City of Marble*, Kathleen Lamp supports the rhetoric of any urban space, categorizing the architecture and "physical appearance" of Augustan Rome under "rhetoric and persuasion" (2). The rhetorical text of urban architecture signposts social and civic values. In the case of the historical city around which *Gilgamesh* is centered, the most commanding feature is the temples, squarely positioning religion as a civic source of power.

Tablet VI in the Standard Version is primarily about taking down the most powerful goddess in Uruk: reprimands and physical threats come from Gilgamesh, then from Ishtar's father, and finally from Enkidu.[14] Ishtar's principal embodied scene in Gilgamesh is an interaction with Gilgamesh and Enkidu after they have returned to Uruk having slain the monster Humbaba. After Gilgamesh bathes and puts on clean clothes, "Lady Ishtar looked with longing" at the "beautiful Gilgamesh" and she makes a play for him (VI 6); she proposes marriage, offering him power and possessions beyond his wildest dreams. Ishtar says: "Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom!/Grant me your fruits, O grant me!" (VI 7-8). In fifteen lines of verse, she tells him if they marry she will give him a house, a chariot, power and respect, and her love, and he spends the next 55 lines rebuking her, listing a catalogue of her past lovers and the terrible ways she treated them. He cruelly says, "[*Why*] would I want to take you in marriage?/[*You, a frost*] that congeals no ice,/…a palace that massacres warriors/…a waterskin that [*cuts the hands*] of its bearer" (VI 32-37). Gilgamesh then mocks her sexual experience in the Mesopotamian version of slut shaming, telling her:

> You loved Ishallanu, your father's gardener,
>
> who used to bring you dates in a basket,
>
> daily making your table gleam.
>
> You eyed him up and went to meet him:
>
> "O my Inshallanu, let us taste your vigour:
>
> put out your 'hand' and stroke my quim!" (VI 64-69)

Moreover, when an enraged and weeping Ishtar approaches her parents and asks her father for help in punishing Gilgamesh for insulting her, Anu says, "Well, was it not you who provoked King Gilgamesh/so he told a tale of foulest slander,/slander about you and insults too?" (VI 89-91), again in the Mesopotamian equivalent of "what were you wearing the night you were raped?" In a final masculine assault in this scene, after Anu relents and agrees to send down the Bull of Heaven to rebuke Gilgamesh for insulting a powerful

14 Abusch notes that the Gilgamesh/Ishtar conflict in Tablet VI was not in the original Old Babylonian text, but rather was inserted later ("The Development and Meaning" 618). Bahrani writes that in Mesopotamian art, "sexuality [w]as the very essence of the feminine" (44), i.e., sexuality was indistinguishable from "woman." Gilgamesh's and Enkidu's reactions to the goddess likely reflect the influence of a later, more restrictive and misogynistic culture.

goddess, and after Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaughter it, Enkidu throws the Bull's shoulder at Ishtar – i.e., at the patron goddess of the most powerful city in Mesopotamia – threatening her with "had I caught you too, I'd have treated you likewise,/I'd have draped your arms in its guts!" (VI 156-157).[15]

Recall that their response is elicited only by Ishtar's offer of marriage, riches, power, and fame to Gilgamesh, and so this begs the question: why are three male characters rebuking a female divinity and how does this shed light on the ethos of women in Sumerian and Akkadian societies? As a major goddess in Sumerian and Akkadian lore and as the patron goddess of Uruk, Ishtar occupied a more privileged position than either Gilgamesh or Enkidu. In "The Exaltation of Inana," Enheduanna confirms the cultural respect and power that Ishtar evokes in saying "that Inana [Ishtar] is the ruler of the universe" (Helle x). And yet, challenging this position, we learn from Ishtar's father that her offer provoked Gilgamesh and that she was "asking for" degradation, and we witness that she is insulted, denigrated, and physically threatened by someone far inferior to her: Enkidu, whose threat doesn't even merit a response.[16]

The message here is that sexual aggression or even simple forthrightness coming from females is unattractive and threatening; sexual assertiveness is a masculine trait, as we see from Gilgamesh with the brides in the opening lines. Compare the representation of Ishtar's sexuality to that of Shamhat's: procuring Shamhat to tame Enkidu is initially suggested by the hunter's father and corroborated by Gilgamesh himself. The text doesn't show us the means by which Shamhat was solicited in this transaction; she is simply instructed to lay on the ground, show her body to Enkidu, and let nature take its course. In other words, Shamhat doesn't incur wrath because men are in control of her body, and therefore she does not threaten the patriarchal order. Ishtar, however, does – at least when she the one is initiating sex.

Immediately after the scene with Ishtar, Gilgamesh visits the "serving girls of [his palace]" – another class of silent women – and asks them:

> Who is the finest among men?
>
> Who the most glorious of fellows?
>
> Gilgamesh is the finest among men!
>
> [*Gilgamesh the most*] glorious of fellows! (VI 171-175)

In this scene, after rejecting the highly revered goddess of love and war and slaughtering the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh shamelessly solicits the admiration of servant girls over whom he presumably has economic and bodily control to reassert his masculine authority, a move that displays immaturity, vanity, and a desire to re-establish dominance. Gilgamesh's response to a woman of power is to turn to a group of women

15 Ironically, one Tablet later, as he lay dying shortly after killing the Bull of Heaven and threatening Ishtar, Enkidu, having forgotten throwing the Bull's shoulder at her, refers to Ishtar as "the ablest of gods" (VII 159).

16 In fact, the textual response to Enkidu's threat is that "Ishtar assembled the courtesans, prostitutes and harlots,/over the Bull of Heaven's shoulder she began rites of mourning" (VI 158-159), which circles back to the sacred and (suggested) respected role of Shamhat as a temple prostitute.

who have no power. He reflects a temperamental disposition that lashes out when a female of higher status reveals her higher status, and he returns to powerless girls to re-establish his position in the cultural order that historically places him at the apex. This scene, easily overlooked, can be situated alongside the text's other grouping of "girls": the violated brides, who themselves are also girls on the cusp of womanhood. Where one group exhibits intrinsic ethos by identifying a problem, interrupting a narrative they couldn't initially control, and ultimately advocating for themselves and thereby changing the narrative, the serving girls' response is either lost or muted, a response that becomes a minor foil to the violated brides' expression of agency.

When Ishtar proposes marriage, she is fully enacting ecological feminism by interrupting the cultural narrative with her own masculinized power. Her proposal implies she has more power than Gilgamesh and that she is fully capable of giving *him* power and goods without ceding any of her power to him. Her proposal implies that she knows it; his response implies that he knows it as well, but resists. Ishtar's proposal also represents the degree to which power embodied in a woman challenges the patriarchal hierarchy, particularly when a female exhibits the kind of sexual powerplays typically expected of men. Ishtar's offer of marriage and goods, along with the display of her own power, threaten Gilgamesh, and he reacts by asserting his "superior" masculinity through shunning, shaming, and belittling her and by asserting his dominance over her. The text further attempts to exert masculine dominance over Ishtar with the rebuke of Ishtar's father and Enkidu's act of throwing the Bull of Heaven's shoulder at her.

What is happening in this scene is two-fold. Even though the text outwardly reprimands Ishtar via what the male characters say and how they respond to her, in the negative space we see how Ishtar's display of agency challenges and threatens the masculine power narrative; we can see the cultural bias in the strong reactions her agency provokes in the male characters; we see the impact of Ishtar exercising of her own ethos in Gilgamesh's vain response as he strives to salvage his ego in front of serving girls who are far beneath his social status. While Gilgamesh's, Anu's, and Enkidu's reactions to Ishtar in these scenes support the prevailing cultural assumption that men have a right to assert their dominance over women, regardless whether they are stronger or weaker than they, their reactions also suggest an undercurrent of fear of a power that women might have over men, and the need to control it.

In other words, the negative space rhetoric shows us that the masculine drive to control female power implies that females had power to control. Looking at feminine ethos through this lens disrupts the narrative of the "subordinate status" (Ryan, Myers, and Jones 4) of women. More importantly, it challenges the absence of ethos in the vast historical space where women were not writing their own lives.

Ethos of Shiduri the Tavernkeeper: Emotional Respite and Relating

The first person Gilgamesh encounters in the Netherworld on his quest for immortality is Shiduri, who occupies a unique position in this text. Shiduri is part of the otherworldly "beyond the mountain"

population of Tablets IX and X; she lives at the edge of the Netherworld; she is the one who instructs him how to finish his quest to find Uta-napishti, the immortal Noah-like figure who survived the Flood and who, along with his wife, guards the secret of immortality. Described as a minor goddess who lives at the edge of the world, Shiduri is given an unusual amount of narrative description: we know where she lives (in an "inn by the sea"), what she does ("tavern-keeper"), what she wears (she is "swathed in hoods" and "veils"), and her general financial status (she has "potstands" and "vats all of gold"). Allocated 28 lines of speech and 37 lines of listening, Shiduri is engaged in an active dialogue with Gilgamesh as she keeps asking him questions to determine the core of his motivation. Functioning as an empathetic relator, Shiduri's central purpose is to bolster Gilgamesh, to listen to him, and to advise him frankly. She initially tells him that he should give up his quest, and, upon realizing this is futile, she advises the correct way for him to keep searching for it.

More than any other female in this text, Shiduri is associated with embodiment and physical place. She is initially defined by what *she is* and what she is *not*. She is introduced in the first line of Tablet X by name, occupation, and location: "Shiduri was a tavern-keeper who lived by the sea-shore" (X 1). Like Shamhat, Shiduri is a working woman. She is neither defined by her relation to a male figure nor her lack thereof. Her name is not also her occupation ("Shamhat"/"harlot" or "Uta-napishti's wife"; Shiduri's name means "she is my rampart").[17] The text refers to her as "Shiduri" once in the first line of Tablet X, and thereafter she is referred to as "the tavern-keeper" eleven times, never again by her name. In other words, she is strongly associated with her occupation and her means to get money, and she is surrounded by the material evidence of her success.[18]

In many ways, Shiduri is a threshold figure: the way-station she occupies is not just a tavern, not just her home, but the gateway that Gilgamesh and anyone else who seeks everlasting life must pass through. The first introduction of Shiduri is likely found in the final lines of Tablet IX. Lines 190-194 of Tablet IX are among the missing, but the female form we understand to be Shiduri, who makes a full appearance in the opening line of Tablet X, first makes her first appearance in Tablet IX in this way:

> As Gilgamesh walked about [*in wonder,*]
>
> she lifted [her head in order] to watch him. (IX 195-196)

This quality of watchful wariness and assessment is carried over into Tablet X "as the tavern-keeper watched him in the distance" (X10). Though Gilgamesh is legendary in Uruk, Shiduri fails to recognize him and instead seeks shelter from a wasted man who has turned wild in his grief. Shiduri is a female character who, like the violated brides, reflects instinctual self-preservation and existence independent of masculine authority. Like Ninsun, she acts completely according to her own agency; she is her own authority. By virtue of the fact that she lives alone, governs herself through an occupation, doesn't answer to a man through

17 Harris suggests that "Siduri" (alt. spelling) may be translated as "young girl" ("Images of Women" 225).

18 In Old Babylonian law books, alewives, also known as "ale-wife" or "bar-wife," had the personal means to make small loans to people (Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1" 60; Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia" 137), corroborating the image of material abundance associated with Shiduri's introduction

a marital or filial relationship, and possesses knowledge that Gilgamesh seeks, Shiduri embodies agency arguably more than any other female character in this text. Like Ishtar, Ninsun, and Shamhat, Shiduri offers something to the male characters in *Gilgamesh* that they do not already possess, whether it be social status, wise counsel, or sexual awakening. Ninsun and Shiduri listen, and they offer men conversation assesses and responds.

Most importantly, Shiduri is given embodied movement and brief interior monologue. Unlike any other female in *Gilgamesh*, the text tells us what she thinks, not only what she says or does. Shiduri sees Gilgamesh approaching the tavern looking dishevelled, "fearful [to look at]":

> As the tavern-keeper watched him in the distance,
> talking to herself she spoke a word
> taking counsel in her own mind:
> *For sure this man is a hunter of wild bulls*
> *but where does he come from, making straight for my gate?*
> Thus the tavern-keeper saw him, and barred her gate,
> barred her gate and went up on the roof. (X 10-16)

Like the brides, Ishtar, and Shamhat, Shiduri is represented as active rather than passive. The difference between Shiduri and the brides is that the young women who live in the city take action by appealing to the more powerful Ishtar, whereas Shiduri protects herself by retreating to the roof of her house where he cannot easily get her, and apparently she remains throughout their interaction.[19] Similar to the brides, Shiduri is portrayed as having more agency over her body and decision-making: she sees Gilgamesh approaching and the text tells us she acts to protect herself. The line "taking counsel in her own mind" reflects an agency that continues to build the ethos of female characters in the epic. Bear in mind that Gilgamesh is a created text, and therefore rhetorical decisions were made in its creation and perpetuation. All the female characters might have been two-dimensional, like the serving girls or the sketched out Aruru, who created Enkidu. Instead, we are given an assemblage of female characters who are thinking, resisting, interrupting, watching, assessing: doing all the consequential tasks that engage independent critical thinkers. This fact strongly supports negative space feminine ethos in *Gilgamesh*.

Gilgamesh arrives at Shiduri's doorstep broken, clothed in ragged animal skins, paradoxically more human and more tame than he has been portrayed to this point. His weakened animal state functions as a literary foil to the powerful animal state embodied by Enkidu, who is described in Tablet I by the hunter

19 Partial and entire lines are missing from this section, so the possibility that Shiduri descends from the roof to interact with Gilgamesh exists (such as between X 22 and X 25 after Gilgamesh asks Shiduri why she has barred her gate and retreated to her roof; after those lines, the text resumes with the two of them in conversation). However, the lines in the George text suggest that Shiduri remains on the roof during their conversation, ostensibly in an act of self-preservation. X 18 says that Gilgamesh "lifted his chin, *and turned [towards her]*," indicating that he is looking up at her during the conversation that occurs between X 19–X 91.

soliciting Gilgamesh's assistance in the following way:

There was a man [*came by the water-hole*,]
Mightiest in the land, strength [he possesses,]
[his strength] is as mighty as a rock from the sky. (I 150-152)

By comparison, in his animal state, Gilgamesh is described by Shiduri as:

"cheeks [so hollow,] your face so sunken,
[your mood so wretched,] your visage [so] wasted…
[Why are] your features burnt [by frost and by sunshine,]
[and why do] you wander the wild [in lion's garb]?" (X 40-45)

When Gilgamesh engaged in his predatory animal/sexual nature with the violated brides, he was paradoxically the well-dressed and legendary city builder; when he approached Shiduri – though he was clothed in animal skins – he was the functional opposite of a predatory animal, so weakened and non-threatening that Shiduri asks him to tell her his story. Shiduri's interaction with Gilgamesh from this point forward shows how fully the ethos of women has shifted in the epic. *Gilgamesh* began with the hero taking what he presumed was "his" – separating parents from their children and raping young brides – to now approaching a strange woman's house not with malintent but for counsel and ultimately consolation. George writes that in an earlier Sumerian version, in this scene Shiduri advises Gilgamesh to cast aside his sadness and his quest for immortality:

But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
Enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
Dance and play day and night!
Let your clothes be clean,
Let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
Let a wife enjoy your repeated embrace! (George xxxviii) [20]

In these lines, Shiduri reveals her ethos in the way that she relates to Gilgamesh, by telling the com-

20 On his death bed in Tablet VII, in a speech where Enkidu curses Shamhat for having tamed him, his language indirectly supports the Sumerian/Akkadian values that Shiduri urges Gilgamesh to seek:
[I will] curse you with a mighty curse, …
A home to delight in [you shall not acquire],
never to reside in the [midst] of a family! (VII 104-107)
Shamash the sun god immediately rebukes Enkidu for cursing Shamhat "who fed you bread… and poured you ale… and clothed you" (VII 135-137); Enkidu recants the curse and blesses her (VII 152).

paratively more powerful Gilgamesh that he is essentially wrong in his pursuit of immortality and that he should instead embrace the fullness of life and human experience. It is important to step out of the text at this point and to consider rhetorical effect this language might have had on Mesopotamian audiences hearing this story: they are witnessing a weakened Promethean ruler who is being counselled with sound and sage advice from a single female to simply abandon the epic quest for immortality and to savor the deep pleasures of mortal life; Gilgamesh ultimately discounts the advice, but the story does not reward him for discounting a female's advice; in fact, the opposite happens because the end result of his quest is futility. He had what he sought, and then he accidentally let it slip away. Shiduri's relating ethos represents right thinking that is attached to her independence: like Ninsun and Shamhat, Shiduri relies on her own judgment when dispensing advice – and her language reflects wise counsel. Abusch notes that "It is significant that just as a prostitute, a woman, humanized and acculturated Enkidu at the beginning of this version, so a tavern-keeper, another woman, humanizes and acculturates Gilgamesh at the end. Women here represent the values of life" ("The Development and Meaning" 617).

Most importantly, the text reinforces the ethos of the community through Shiduri herself. It reinforces shared communal values through her counsel to Gilgamesh that his fevered quest for immortality was immoderate by virtue of her advice that he should enjoy his humanity: get a wife, enjoy her; have children, enjoy them. These were communal ethotic values that the females in this text exhibit repeatedly: a steady resistance to immoderation; a steady exhibition of wisdom and sense; a desire to uphold the values of the community; and a keen understanding of what it takes to uphold those values.

Women Transforming Subordinate Positions into Positions of Power[21]

Ethos of Shamhat: Sexual Power and Relating

Not only is Shamhat one of the sexiest women in Mesopotamian literature, she is also the first woman to speak in the text, she is given more lines of speech than any other female character (94 total[22]), and she is the first female figure represented with extended embodied mobility.[23] Shamhat's name is her profession: *samhatu* translated means "temple prostitute." She occupies a respected threshold role as the agent who helps the violated brides in the mysterious unfolding of divine will. As a city-dweller, her initial role is venture into the wild to precipitate the semi-bestial Enkidu's separation from his herd, to "defile" him through seduction (I 199), and thus cause the herd to reject him so that she can bring him back to Uruk to block Gilgamesh's interference with marriage rites (rape); this is accomplished in the epic's plot via a hunter who asks his father for advice on how to stop Enkidu from freeing the animals from his traps. The hunter's father tells him to seek help from Shamhat; once the hunter travels to Uruk, he appeals to Gilgamesh, who

21 This category also relates to the violated brides.

22 In the George edition: I 207-I 212; I 224-I 298; P 54-P 65; P 96-97; P 145-146.

23 Prior to this scene, the text implies embodied mobility for the violated brides ("The warrior's daughter, the young man's bride/to their complain the goddess Ishtar paid heed" [I 77-78]) and greater mobility for Aruru, the goddess who creates humans and who created Enkidu: "The goddess Aruru she washed her hands,/took a pinch of clay, threw it down in the wild./In the wild, she created Enkidu, the hero" (I 101-103).

also tells him to "take with you Shamhat the harlot!" (I 162). Shamhat's body is introduced as a corpus manipulated by men, yet she expresses the feminist ecological ethos of relating to the powerless Enkidu through her civilizing and mentoring role. Though her body is manipulated by decision-making that doesn't consult her, she nevertheless exhibits considerable power over Enkidu and occupies a pivotal role moving the text forward. It is not just her body that drives the plot forward, it is also the agency and rhetorical prowess that she exhibits over her speech.

Shamhat's clearest display of ethos is through the way she relates to Enkidu through her sexuality, which awakens him to his humanity. Once she is in the wild, Shamhat "unfasten[s] the cloth of her loins" and "spread[s] her clothing" on the ground so that she could "treat the man to the work of a woman" (I 192). The sex Shamhat has with Enkidu civilizes him and ushers him into the world of civil human behavior (Bahrani 42; Sonik, "Minor and Marginalized" 787): post-coitus, his herd does in fact reject him, thus sealing his fate that he will leave the wild and enter civilization. After coupling with Shamhat, Enkidu's agency deserts him; originally created to be an equal "match for the storm" of Gilgamesh (I 97), he is now alone, having been rejected by his animal tribe, and he has neither kin nor community, a state that weakens him.[24][25] Further, as Enkidu's agency wanes, Shamhat's increases. Shamhat's seduction becomes a rhetorical maneuver, which is "one of the oldest and most effective forms of nonartistic rhetoric" (Kennedy 121), and one of the most persuasive. After sex that lasts for six days and seven nights, Enkidu "sat at the feet of the harlot, watching the harlot, observing her features" (I 203-204). This subordinate positioning, which contrasts starkly with Gilgamesh's physical and psychological dominance earlier in Tablet I, suggests emotional attachment, and it seals Shamhat's ethos in a position of power.

In this dominant position, Shamhat then mentors Enkidu on what it means to be a civilized human (Bailey 139); his position in this case is receptive listener: "her words he heard, her speech found favor, a woman's counsel struck his heart" (P 68-69). Though she had been instructed simply to treat Enkidu to the "work of a woman," the next lines reveal Shamhat's own volition and the god-like power she now holds over him: "By the hand she took him, like a god [she led him]" (II 36). As she relates to Enkidu in this dominant mentoring capacity, Shamhat begins by educating him on the rules and customs of the "dwelling place" of humanity: the city. Shamhat does this by using language as another rhetorical seduction technique, enticing Enkidu to want to come to Uruk: "Let [the people] see your face… Go, Enkidu, to Uruk-the-Shepfold,/ where… every day [in Uruk] there is a festival" (I 226-228) and where there are "harlots, most comely of figure" (I 230). She persuades with the lure of masculine friendship, flattering him with the tale-within-a-tale narrative that Gilgamesh has had multiple dreams about Enkidu's arrival. In effect, she tames Enkidu on multiple fronts: by creating an emotional attachment first based on sex ("let me take you," she says, asserting dominance), followed by the dual lures of religious connection and establishing a connection with men:

24 The George text reads: "Enkidu possess no [*kith or kin.*]… and [*has*] no brother/Standing there, Enkidu heard [what (Ninsun) said],]/and thinking it over, he sat [down *weeping.*]/His eyes brimmed with [tears]" (II 175-180).

25 Compare Enkidu's reaction and situation with the images of community associated with the female characters in *Gilgamesh.*

Come, I will lead you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold,

to the sacred temple, home of Anu and Ishtar,

where Gilgamesh is perfect in strength. (I 209-211)

Shamhat proposes that Enkidu come with her to Uruk, and he agrees; female leads, and male follows. In this long dialogical passage, Shamhat exhibits her mastery over multiple rhetorical strategies, and she succeeds. In fact, she succeeds at doing what the hunter who initially procured Shamhat could not: removing Enkidu from the wild and leading him to civilization.

We should consider Shamhat's prostitution and the entire world that she opens to him (food, drink, clothing, sex, socialization, urbanization) as the sacred passageway between one's wild animal nature and a higher form of kinship and civilization.[26] Will Kynes suggests that the pre-civilized Enkidu is "at the animal-human boundary" of human existence and connects his uncivilized state with "animal-like qualities" (502). What the character of Shamhat accomplishes in the scene with Enkidu reveals how females interrupt the norms, similar to the appeals of the violated brides. In the Shamhat section, the hunter's father and Gilgamesh decide what Shamhat (or Shamhat's body) will do: they both describe in exactly the same phrasing how Shamhat's seduction will play out: she will disrobe, show herself, and Enkidu will be entrapped. Shamhat is initially voiceless, simply doing what the hunter and Gilgamesh instruct her to do: she should show neither fear nor disgust at coupling with a human who is also an animal ("Do not recoil, but take in his scent" [I 182]). However, what happens next is entirely Shamhat's undertaking: she creates a desire in Enkidu for social inclusion. She feeds him "cultivated" food: beer and bread, i.e. transitioning him from a hunter/gatherer to a farmer/herder by introducing him to the food of settled, communal, and agricultural people. She is not merely seducing him with her body: she is enticing him to leave the woods, to leave an animal life and become a city-dweller, a person who likes prepared food, who desires kinship and family, whose bodily presence is forecast, anticipated, and desired. This we know by the long, persuasive narrative Shamhat tells Enkidu, relating the story of Ninsun's prophetic dream interpretation that anticipates the arrival of Enkidu and shaping out the powerful emotional connection they will share ("Like a wife you loved it, caressed and embraced it:/a mighty comrade will come to you and be his friend's saviour" [I 267-268]).

As she shares Ninsun's prophesy with Enkidu, Shamhat exhibits her full rhetorical agency by delivering the longest uninterrupted text of any female character in *Gilgamesh*: 79 lines. She uses language to entice Enkidu to want to come to Uruk:

You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god!

Why with the beasts do you wander the wild? (I 207-208).

Additionally, after establishing the broad physical allure of Gilgamesh – so "fair in manhood, dignified in bearing/graced with charm," Shamhat follows this description with flattery: "Before you even came

26 Contrast this with Gilgamesh, who is already civilized, but who corrupts the social and legal codes by raping the brides: he must overcome his animal nature, and he does this through his love for Enkidu and his grief over Enkidu's death.

from the uplands,/Gilgamesh in Uruk was seeing you in dreams" (I 243-244). By telling Enkidu that Gilgamesh has had multiple dreams about his arrival, she cleverly dangles the lure of connection and community as another technique of persuasion. Telling a person whose herd has just rejected him that a great and handsome king is anticipating his arrival functions as an irresistible rhetorical lure, an act employing pathos; of course Enkidu bites and accompanies her to Uruk.

The emotional attachment Shamhat awakens in Enkidu is a social taming mechanism, generating his evolution into both civic and moral awareness. Shamhat doesn't tell him to protect the new brides about to be raped; Enkidu has been civilized through his sexual encounters (arguably more than Gilgamesh himself) and intuits that Gilgamesh's rape of the new brides goes against the social grain. And though it is Gilgamesh, the godly man, who is outwardly the more civilized figure, it is Enkidu, the human animal, who understands the social contract implicit in participating in urban life, and it is he who intervenes on behalf of the vulnerable females according to his own civic conscience and moral code. Enkidu's "right action" is another foil for Gilgamesh's poor behavior. Enkidu is on the side of the prevailing social norms: he blocks Gilgamesh from "wrong kingship" by physically barricading the door that Gilgamesh is about to enter on his quest to have sex with a new bride. The text uses the word "defile" to describe Enkidu's body after having had sex with Shamhat ("Enkidu had defiled his body so pure" [I 199]), yet the subtext is that by defiling the bodies of new brides and new marriages, it is Gilgamesh who has defiled the social and political order of Uruk. Gilgamesh is the one who must be stopped, and the text gives us a chain reaction of women as the solution to stopping him.[27]

We should consider Shamhat's prostitution and the entire world that she opens to him as the conduit between one's wild animal nature and a higher, more sacred form of civilization. Through Shamhat, Enkidu transitions to the fully civilized human experience; he adopts human clothing, eats their food, drinks their ale, enjoys sex with a woman, upholds the values of the city, and protects the innocents of Uruk by fighting Gilgamesh, "[Powerful, pre-eminent,] expert [and *mighty*,] (I75), the one who "built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold" (I 11), reflecting a moral code Gilgamesh does not understand, but that is in line with the Sumerian and Babylonian social and legal codes protecting marriage. Shamhat is the channel through which Gilgamesh's unchecked power and tyranny end.

Ethos of Ninsun: The Relating Advocacy of Mothering

The divine Ninsun fulfils the "benevolent mother" literary trope; she is identified alternately in this and other period texts as the Wild Cow, the Holy Mother, a goddess, and the Great Queen. In *Gilgamesh*, she is frequently referred to as "clever and wise, well versed in everything" (I 258, I 260, III 17). Ninsun both advocates for her son and relates to him through mentoring; she offers guidance in the form of dream interpretation and protection through her intercessional prayers to the more powerful sun god, Shamash. Her depiction supports Ryan, Myers, and Jones's definition of advocating/advocacy as individuals who are "advocating

27 This chain reaction begins with the brides and moves to Ishtar, to Aruru the fertility goddess who creates Enkidu, to Shamhat, and ultimately to Enkidu, who is described multiple times with feminine language (Gilgamesh covers Enkidu's face like a "bride" in VIII 59; Ninsun tells Gilgamesh "like a wife you loved" Enkidu in I 267).

for their own right to speak authoritatively or negotiating the complexities of speaking for others" (111). Unlike Penelope who is silenced and dismissed by Telemachus, when Ninsun speaks, Gilgamesh listens. He regularly seeks her counsel and obeys her judgments, and she has earned the respect of Shamhat and Enkidu. As a mother, Ninsun enacts considerable authority in Gilgamesh.

A major source of Ninsun's power is her "prophetic agency" (Halton and Svärd 28). Ninsun first appears as a reference in Shamhat's storytelling, as Shamhat introduces Ninsun as "clever and wise" (I 258), before portraying Ninsun as being skilled with interpreting the canon of dreams. In Shamhat's narrative, Gilgamesh dreams of a falling star and an axe[28]; in one of Gilgamesh's dreams, Ninsun interprets Enkidu as a star that "fell down before" Gilgamesh; he "lifted it up, set it down at my feet,/and I, Ninsun, I made it your equal" (I 262, 266). Ninsun's casual assumption of dominance in these two lines reinforces her powerful position after Gilgamesh cedes control by laying down the star at her feet. Ninsun also correctly predicts the arrival of Enkidu, his place in Gilgamesh's life ("Like a wife you'll love him, caress and embrace him,/ he… will often save you" [I 271-272]),[29][30] and her ultimate acceptance of him ("I, Ninsun, made [Enkidu] your equal" [I 266]). The text establishes first that Ninsun has skill over a dream-interpretative rite that was culturally valued—i.e., Ninsun's ability was known and recounted by Shamhat—and second that Ninsun has a strong filial connection to Gilgamesh: he listens to her counsel without questioning it. Further, Ninsun's prophetic ability associates her with uniquely interpreting and understanding divine motivation, and this affords her considerable social value both in her personal power over Gilgamesh and in her wider reputation in the community: she is known, and Shamhat's storytelling supports this. By introducing Ninsun in this way—as the subject of praise by another woman for possessing a culturally valuable skill—the breadth of Ninsun's agency is established in the text.

In the ancient near east, reading dreams was regarded as an art requiring intelligence and divine inspiration; dreams were perceived as symbols that required interpretation, typically by women who functioned as interpreters of dreams (Harris, "Images of Women" 221). While it was more commonly a priestess's job to function as an intermediary between the divine and the mortal, women were recognized for their command of "mantic faculties or techniques" (Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 219, 221, 222).[31] Consider the story of the Sumerian god Tammuz who urgently called for his sister to come interpret

28 Ninsun's skill with prophesy has been correctly described: in Enkidu's death scene, Gilgamesh's lament describes Enkidu as "The axe at my side, in which my arm trusted" (VIII 46); and Gilgamesh does loves Enkidu like a spouse, as we see during Enkidu's death scene.

29 Enkidu is described as being a wife to Gilgamesh multiple times and as taking over Ninsun's dream interpreting function for Gilgamesh in her absence. Westling notes that Enkidu "replaces women as the object of Gilgamesh's attention" (505); even from the moment of his origin, he is fashioned with long locks of hair "like those of a woman" (I 106). When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh's grief transforms him into a womanish figure, as he describes himself: "I shall weep for Enkidu, my friend,/ Like a hired mourner-woman I shall bitterly wail!" (VIII 45), which he which he in effect does through most of Tablet VIII, metaphorically becoming both female spouse and mother to Enkidu upon his death:

> [Gilgamesh] covered, like a bride, the face of his friend,
> Like an eagle he circled around him,
> Like a lioness deprived of her cubs (VIII 59-61)

30 The playwright Zeynep Avci wrote a revisionist version of *Gilgamesh* from a female perspective challenging traditional conception of masculinity, where Gilgamesh and Enkidu are lovers (see Purnur Ucar-Ozbirinci).

31 Further, an 18th c. BC message from Samsuilana-sarrum reaffirms the importance of the dream interpreter: her prophetic

a dream for him:

Bring my sister, bring! Bring my Geistnanna, bring my sister! Bring my scribe who understands tablets. Bring my sister! Bring my songstress who knows songs, bring my sister! Bring my wise one who knows the meaning of dreams, bring my sister! (Bar 84)

In this example, Tammuz's urgency for his sister is palpable as is the breadth of what Geistnanna can do for him: she reads, she connects him to music, she understands the subconscious. The broad toolbox of what she offers to her brother provides a relief that no one else can offer. Because dream interpretation was cathartic and connected to deciphering divine will, dream interpreters were seen as powerful figures who healed troubled minds (Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 219), thus strengthening the currency of women possessing this skill.

In each of his interactions with Ninsun, we can see the extent to which Gilgamesh relies on her; he repeatedly turns to his mother for counsel on multiple occasions, soliciting her advice and trusting her over his male advisors. This concept of "counsel" from women is a theme that repeats throughout Gilgamesh: the hero receives counsel from his mother (dream interpretation) and from Shiduri (unsolicited advice); the brides receive counsel from Ishtar; Uta-napishti receives counsel from his wife; Enkidu receives counsel from Shamhat. At the beginning of Tablet III, Uruk's elders advise Gilgamesh what to do when he and Enkidu go to the Cedar Forest; instead of responding to them, he tells Enkidu:

Come, my friend, let us to the Palace Sublime,
    into the presence of the great Queen Ninsun
Ninsun is clever and wise, well versed in everything,
    she will set our feet in steps of good counsel. (III 15-18)

Before he leaves for the Cedar Forest, he asks his mother: "I beseech you, give me your blessing as I go on my journey!/Let me see again your face in safety" (III 28-29). The emotional bond between mother and son is the most emotional and powerful male-female connection in *Gilgamesh*, and the steady, recurring role that Ninsun has throughout the text reinforces her profound influence over the hero and the plot.

Ninsun's ability to legitimize Enkidu is another source of her agency in Gilgamesh. After she appeals to Shamash in a sixty-line monologue to keep her son safe, she "declared her will" (III 120) to adopt Enkidu

role in Samsuilana-sarrum's life supersedes her name:

Tell the mayor and the aldermen of the city: Samsuiluna-sarrum sends the following message:
May the gods Samas and Marduk keep you in good health!
I am sending you this table of mine (to warn you): Nobody must come near the house of the woman dream-interpreter
Ummi-waqrat. I have bought that house and all its bricks. If somebody so much as touches a brick of it, I will go to court against all of you as provided by the pertinent ordinance of my lord (ie, King Samsuiluna) (Oppenheim, *Letters from Mesopotamia* 91).

("Enkidu, whom [I love,] I take for my son" [III 127]). While she does this in part to guarantee an added layer of protection for her son as they voyage out on their quest to kill the monster Humbaba. By adopting Enkidu, Ninsun provides him with the valuable currency of community and family. Karen Sonik notes that while Shamhat changes Enkidu from "homo ferus to homo urbanus" and persuades him to leave the wild to become a civilized person, Ninsun exclusively provides him legitimacy through the public acceptance represented by adoption ("Minor and Marginalized" 792). Her power to legitimize Enkidu in the city sphere comes through her offer of a family connection: he is no longer an animal in the wild fringes of civilization, existing without the protection of parentage, a lacking that moves him to tears. In Tablet II, upon their first meeting, Ninsun says, "Enkidu possesses no [kith or kin]/Shaggy hair hanging loose…/he was born in the wild and [has] no [brother]," to which Enkidu's "eyes brimmed with tears" (II 175-180). Providing a connection to a powerful family secured Enkidu's ethos in both Uruk and in legend. We can better understand the significance of possessing this kind of familial capital by comparing Ninsun's offer of legitimization with the historical record of Ur-Namma, a 22nd century BC ruler of Ur, who claimed that Ninsun was his mother, Lugalbanda (Gilgamesh's father) his father, and Gilgamesh his younger brother in order to cement his own ethos as a legitimate ruler (Meador 87).

Furthermore, the counsel that Ninsun gives to both Gilgamesh and Enkidu was largely a woman's job according to Sonik, who notes that the characters who give counsel in Gilgamesh are – in order of counsel given ¬– Ninsun, Enkidu, Shiduri, and Uta-napishti ("Gilgamesh and Emotional Excess" 393). Gilgamesh's respect for his mother is constant; he is constantly turning to her for "good counsel" (III 18), for her blessing. Sonik writes that "the motif of counsel, as well as the consequences of its absence, winds through, and arguable binds together, the [Standard Babylonian] Gilgamesh Epic" ("Gilgamesh and Emotional Excess" 396). This also connects to Shamhat, who instructs Enkidu on the ways of the city/sexual awakening, and the brides, who seek counsel from another female for protection.

Ninsun's ethos covers three essential areas of power in this text that support Ryan, Myers, and Jones's feminist ecological approach: the relating powers of interpretation, the relating social power of legitimizing, and advocating on Gilgamesh's behalf with the sun god. All her lines in the text relate to her son's welfare in some form or fashion, even her legitimization of Enkidu. Ninsun is a female character whose ethos is derived from her interpretive abilities, her facility with providing good counsel, and the power she has over her family. Ultimately, she "is clever and wise, well versed in everything," and that is the fundamental source of her ethos in the community.

Ethos of the Two Wives: Interrupting and Advocacy

Of the three female characters who appear after Gilgamesh has embarked on his grief quest, one is the named Shiduri and the other two are simply referred to by their marital status: the Scorpion-man's wife and Uta-napishiti's wife. Weiershäuser argues that unnamed women in heroic stories "remain in the background, silent and passive—the story is about the male's quest" (274), reinforcing Bahrani's concept of the

"woman as trace." And yet, though the speaking roles of the two wives may be trace, the implications of their speech and actions are consequential.

The first unnamed wife is given one line of text, the most minor speaking role in the epic. She appears in Tablet IX as Gilgamesh approaches the entrance of the Netherworld and must convince the gatekeepers, the Scorpion-men, to allow him to pass through the mountains. The Scorpion-man "calls to his mate," telling her that "flesh of the gods is his [Gilgamesh's] body" – and she replies that only "two-thirds of him [Gilgamesh] are god but a third of him is human" (IX 49-51), functionally correcting him, keeping to the truth, and reasoning. She is right and he is wrong. The text doesn't show that she interrupts and is wrong; the text shows that woman resists through interrupting man and is *correct*. She reminds listeners that *Gilgamesh* is fundamentally a story about a man on a human quest of understanding and immortality, not a god's quest.

Located in the last tablet of the text, the second unnamed wife, Uta-napishti's wife,[32] is a bookend to the brides' opening section literally and metaphorically. Unlike the other major individual females in the epic, the brides and the wives are nameless[33] and are only described according to their wedlock status; further, one group is at the beginning of wedded life, and the other—Uta-napishti's wife—is locked in eternal wedded life. Claiming just five lines in the George edition, Uta-napishti's wife occupies a subversive niche so small it could easily be overlooked. Though the wife mostly hovers in the background doing her husband's bidding, each time she speaks she subtly rebukes him, resisting the power structure that her husband represents. In her first parcel of speech, Uta-napishti squats over Gilgamesh, mocking his inability to stay awake and thus gain immortality. He says, "See the fellow who so desired life! Sleep like a fog already breathes over him." Uta-napishti's wife replies:

> touch the man and make him awake!
> The way he came he shall go back in safety,
> by the gate he came forth and he shall return to his land! (XI 213-217)

Her response to Uta-napishti's observation is a call to action, pivoting his attention to Gilgamesh's safety and well-being, an act similar to Shiduri's advice to Gilgamesh to abandon his quest and embrace a human life. She also refers to him as a "man," not as a god, similar to both Shiduri and the Scorpion-man's wife.

The second time Uta-napishti's wife speaks, Gilgamesh and the ferryman are in their boat, having just left the shore on their journey home. Gilgamesh has left emptyhanded in his quest for immortality, and Uta-napishti stands on the shore watching them depart. Uta-napishiti's wife intervenes with a rebuke, telling her husband that

32 The progression of females presented in these tablets moves from virginal bride to prostitute to mother to goddess to independent woman to wife.
33 The serving girls are also nameless.

Gilgamesh came here by toil and by travail,

what have you given him for his homeward journey? (XI 274-275)

As a result of her urging, the boat returns to the shore, and Uta-napishi does what his wife asks, telling Gilgamesh where to find the plant that will give him immortal life. Each line Uta-napishti's wife delivers represents resistance to her husband and a pivot toward advocacy for Gilgamesh. Each brief line Uta-napishti's wife speaks contradicts her husband, prodding him to act in ways that will benefit Gilgamesh, when Uta-napishti's inclination is otherwise.

In *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, Rivkah Harris notes that women who are considered older are not only largely absent from ancient Mesopotamian texts, unlike in Greco-Roman texts (88), but they are also "marginalized members of society" (92). In Mesopotamian literature, postmenopausal women were post-sexy, post sexually desirable; outside of the functional age of child bearing, they were assigned "grandmother" status to help child-bearing women with children,[34] an attitude that modern women are still fighting to this day. Harris defines an "older woman" as post-menopausal, one who is "no longer defined in terms of procreative or erotic sexuality, when she stopped bearing children and so ceased to be a source of anxiety for men" (*Gender and Aging* 88). In this way, Uta-napishti's wife stands in stark contrast to all the other representations of female in Gilgamesh as one who is cast outside the frames of sexuality and child-rearing. By virtue of her immortality, Uta-napishti's wife is trapped in post-sexual old age that is represented as nurturing and benevolent in contrast to her husband.

Though Uta-napishti's wife exists on the fringe, she is the active agent in the interaction between her husband and Gilgamesh. Without her prodding, Uta-napishti would have let Gilgamesh leave with only clothes that would remain immortal, not his own skin. Twice Uta-napishti's wife directly resists her husband in the interest of protecting a vulnerable and weakened Gilgamesh. In just five lines, Uta-napishti's wife advocates for Gilgamesh, keeps him safe, and ensures he gets what he seeks. She acts against her husband's direction, but both times he listens and changes his behavior. There is a certain irony that the beginning of this epic – which profiles Gilgamesh plundering through girls' bodies, girls are who on the cusp of being wives – is contrasted with the wives at the end of the journey who watch over his body, protect his mortality, and resist their husbands by telling the truth and acting as agents of advocacy.

Implications

This study began with a series of questions: Can we legitimately use a feminist lens to determine women's ethos in texts that are written by men? Can we understand women's ethos through and in texts that entirely exclude the authentic voice of women? And to these questions, I would also add Zainab Bahrani's essential question: "If woman is hidden in history, how do we find her?" (36). By applying Ryan, Myers, and Jones's theoretical framework of interrupting, relating, and advocacy to *Gilgamesh* alongside an examination of the ways that female characters resist the prevailing masculine narrative, evaluating women's ethos in

34 See Rivka Harris, "Chapter 6: Older Women" in *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*.

texts where women exist on the periphery can successfully be accomplished under the parameters of ecological feminism.

I have laid out a method for examining texts that wouldn't ordinarily be perceived as being within the scope of feminist analysis, and I have shown that we can gain important insights by reading ancient texts through feminist frameworks. This method offers a process that scholars can use to begin the work of wide-scale search and recovery for unexpected sites of rhetoric, such as narratives in world communities where feminism and women's narratives are either oppressed, underground, or otherwise unawakened. Based on this model, the way forward for scholars who want to identify novel sites to apply feminist theory is to search for communities and texts where the narrative is out of balance, where women's—and any subaltern—voices "belonged" to the community, where a masculine voice spoke for the values of a male-dominated community, and where there were comparatively few records left by women. We can and should revisit the exemplars of the canon to understand the ways in which the colonized express their agency through resisting, interrupting, advocating, and relating to the existing power structure. The critical first step is textual interrogation—analyzing what the "betweens" in women's behavior and speech in narratives written by/for men are showing rather than telling us—and to evaluate what these patterns signify about flesh and blood women.

The larger implication argued here is that feminist rhetoric can open itself to studying not only an array of ancient texts but any text or "culture as text" where marginalized voices are subsumed into the dominant narrative, specifically when the dominant narrative speaks for the non-dominant group or speaks over the non-dominant group; in other words, it is possible to look *at* and *through* the dominant hand to determine the ethos of the dominated group even when the dominated group is represented by someone outside of that group. Not only can we be looking for new sources of feminist rhetoric, but we *should* be actively searching for them. Cheryl Glenn calls on feminist scholars to persist in the search for "underrepresented groups" and "new ways of expanding the discipline" (*Rhetorical Feminism* 50); and Nedra Reynolds writes that "what's needed are studies of ethos in written discourse that extend outward to include multiple texts as well as the historical and political context for those texts, the ways they are read and responded to, the ways they get interpreted, adjusted, or appropriated" (334). The method I have laid out in this study is a new paradigm for feminist rhetoric that answers their call.

The "negative space" approach outlined in this study is a significant contribution to narrative rhetoric in that it employs a feminist framework to texts that have previously been unexcavated. Reading ancient narrative texts through an ecological feminist lens requires looking for acts and speech that portray resistance to the masculine narrative in addition to searching for acts that interrupt, relate, and advocate. This chiaroscuro method of rhetorical analysis sifts through the rhetoric of negative space to recover what dwells in the shadows by analyzing what appears in the light. Reading ancient narrative texts through feminist frameworks uses "critical imagination as an inquiry tool" (Royster and Kirsch 20). In 1997, Cheryl Glenn wrote that "for years, we ignored the borders of the [rhetorical] map, the shadowy regions where roads run off the edge of the paper and drop away at sharp angles" (*Rhetoric Retold* 3). The method outlined here maps part of the cartogra-

phy that recovers and reconsiders the geographic and rhetorical positionality of women who, at first glance, have been thought to have been silenced or whose voices have otherwise been overlooked. Interrupting, advocating, and relating are powerful terms in the hands of the un- or under-observed. Resistance is powerful; resistance in the hands of people who know or sense they are oppressed is a powerful tool of liberation.

The answer to Bahrani's question above – "If woman is hidden in history, how do we find her?" – can partly be found in the Assyriologist Natalie May's statement: "As soon as one starts looking for women," she writes, "they are inevitably found" (249). In other words, we must keep looking and locating; we must keep reconsidering what we know, and we must continue the material, forensic work of resisting and interrogating a historical record largely shaped by men. We must not overlook texts simply because we assume what we are looking for either isn't there or can't be found. The epideictic, nation-building epic genre is an especially fertile source for this kind of study. In her chapter on feminist rhetoric in *Comparative World Rhetorics*, Mari Lee Mifsud writes, "I need to tell of the telling of the telling of the story" (312). This is how we should feel about the representations of women inhabiting the masculine world of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: we should ask ourselves less "who tells the story?" or "who is the story about?" and more "what alternative social and cultural information can we glean about the way in which the characters are drawn? How does the story reflect the values and roles that women occupied in a society so heavily dominated by the masculine hand?"

While *Gilgamesh* could hardly be called a text where the agency of women is transcendent, a lot of information can be gathered about the relational sources of power that women had in Sumerian and Akkadian civilizations and how those sources of power shifted from one civilization to the next; we can also surmise how listening to and retelling this tale must have confirmed and circumscribed that power. We have been led to believe that ancient women had little agency, that they primarily occupied a "domestic space" (Sen 77), and while property records and legal codes Mesopotamia do corroborate restrictions on women's freedoms, women's actual agency, subversive or otherwise, is reflected in the artifacts left behind: the few letters they wrote, the few hymns, the letters written to their husbands or lovers, the letters their children wrote to them, the references to women in texts, on tombs, on slave trade records, on inscriptions, in legal codes, and the powerful female deities they worshipped. We can see the "telling of the telling of the story" in *Gilgamesh* through the interconnectedness of ecological feminism; and if we cannot see the story of ethos directly, we can work to see it indirectly, in the negative spaces.

Gilgamesh ends his days much like his epic counterparts Odysseus and Beowulf, an older, wiser hero surveying the landscape and reviewing, at the close of day, the spoils of his reign: the city wall, the physical structure that upholds the narrative of his life and guarantees him the immortality he sought.[35] For the female characters in this text and possibly for the women living during those thousands of years on the Fertile Crescent who heard and retold this story, their city wall was the social architecture that contributed

35 See Albert B. Lord's "Gilgamesh and Other Epics" for a focused comparison between *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf*.

to their agency and ethos; their city wall was the border between erasure and resistance, interrupting, and advocacy. If men in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are the builders of city walls, then it is the women who are invested in upholding the essential socio-emotional structures required for those living within the walls.

We know that ethos is a multi-dimensional, highly nuanced word with multiple layers that are measured by what the narrative eye chooses to examine and overlook, either consciously or unconsciously. We also know that ethos exists even when we cannot see it, just as we know that a wide spectrum of colors exists the naked human eye cannot detect. Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* concludes with the image of the long-silenced voice of the heroine's dead father as it reaches her through alternative means: through the transmission of ever-present electromagnetic radio waves that have been simply waiting for the correct mechanism to receive them. In much the same way, the voices in ancient epics are telegraphed to modern listeners, keeping pace with our own evolving understanding, embodying the values, the fears, the world views of the communities that produced them, communicating to us what it meant to be alive in a culture long dead.

This study is essentially a forensic social anthropology that reconstructs the ethos of ancient women. It is the rhetorical equivalent of finding shards of broken pottery embedded in the soil and reconstructing them to understand their place in a society that no longer exists. For the purpose of rereading, reframing, reimagining how we can hear women's voices in texts that seem to exclude a feminist interpretation, we must continue to conceive of alternate methods of looking at the familiar. Zainab Bahrani writes that "It is the standard historical studies of antiquity, their methodologies and approaches to the material, that must change. And the fixed nature of these methodologies that need to change also has to do, of course, with the reduced voices of women in the academic field. So we look for the trace of women within exclusionary discourses, both ancient and contemporary" (33-34). We have been given a different toolset in this study that applies modern feminist rhetorical reasoning to the close reading of an ancient story. By reshaping and reframing the way we determine what ethos might look like for a population that had been largely stripped of voice, a population that LuMing Mao calls the "concealed, the excluded, and the erased" (452), I argue that modern readers should reconsider the ways we read or regard ancient epics – and any text – where women either are portrayed as silent or overlooked and that we should reconsider assumptions that women's lived experiences mirrored their representation in texts that were written by and for men. In reconsidering the ways that we read ancient texts that are heavily skewed toward a man's experience and described through a man's hand, we can excavate and examine the lives, values, and agency of women in any region and across any era.

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