Translating Epic from an Unfamiliar Language: *Gilgamesh Retold*

Jenny Lewis

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Goldsmiths, University of London. Submitted for the

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Declaration of Authorship

I declare that the work presented in this PhD submission is entirely my own.

Signed: Date: 31st March 2021

Acknowledgements

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I'm grateful to Arts Council England for Grants for the Arts awards for my 'Writing Mesopotamia' collaboration with the exiled Iraqi poet, Adnan Al-Sayegh (aimed at strengthening ties between English and Arabic-speaking communities) to translate into Arabic, dramatise and perform extracts from *Gilgamesh Retold* and test them widely on the public. This led to my being awarded the 2016 Warden's Prize for Innovation in Public Engagement at Goldsmiths.

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The Flood episode, with woodcuts by Frances Kiernan (Mulfran Press, 2017), was exhibited at the Humanitarian Dialogue Foundation of Iraq, London and the Iraqi Embassy (April 2017); and as part of the 'Touching Mesopotamia: Text and Texture Exhibition', King's Corridor, Goldsmiths, September-October, 2018.

Abstract

This submission seeks to address my own relationship to translating epic from an unfamiliar language ('creative' translation) and to present an up-to-date assessment of the place of 'creative' translation' in twenty-first-century literary discourse. As I am unable to decipher cuneiform, I based my creative submission, *Gilgamesh Retold*, mainly on the scholarly translation by Assyriologist Andrew George (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2003) and describe it as 'a response' to the ancient epic. My view was that any retelling of Gilgamesh should primarily honour its original purpose as a story and have widespread public appeal. It was the *momentum* of the story combined with the *vitality* and *freshness* of the storytelling (prosody) that were my main concerns.

My engagement with Arabic, another script fundamentally different from our own Roman alphabet, came about through my work with the exiled Iraqi poet Adnan Al-Sayegh, working from word-for-word translations in Arabic. In this case, my approach followed Ezra Pound's advice to stay true to the poet's '*meaning*' through using plain language and translucent imagery.

My first chapter addresses the evolution and continuing impact of the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and includes close readings and comparisons of Andrew George's translation with 'creative' versions by David Ferry and Edwin Morgan. My second chapter compares Homer's *Iliad* with 'creative' versions by George Chapman, Alexander Pope, and Christopher Logue (who dismissed 'scholarly' translations as 'unpoetic'). My third chapter explores how both these approaches have fed into my own practice as a poet and translator, and gives a detailed analysis of my retelling of Gilgamesh.

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Part Two: 'Translating Epic from an Unfamiliar Language'

Gilgamesh Retold

by

Jenny Lewis

Published by Carcanet Press, 2018

(The manuscript of the whole book, *Gilgamesh Retold,* has been submitted as a separate pdf)

Introduction

> 'I know that we need scholars to decipher
> and interpret the Greek but that we also need
> poets and mystics…to see through the words.'[1]

Every translation reflects the era in which it was written as well as the way that era has shaped the consciousness of the translator. What is the translator's own history and background that he or she brings to bear on the text being translated? And what are the assumptions and expectations of the contemporary culture with which he or she is engaging? My own interest is in epic poetry and the differences between epic poems that have been translated directly from the source language (scholarly versions) as opposed to those that have been based on existing versions or intermediate literal translations where the poet is unfamiliar with the source language (creative versions). What is lost and gained between the two approaches? How far from the original can one go while staying true to its spirit? And to what extent does the poet's own definition of the new version give him or her licence for unlimited improvisation?

In my own case, as I am unable to decipher cuneiform or to read Babylonian, I based my book *Gilgamesh Retold* mainly on the scholarly translation by the Assyriologist Andrew George,[2] and describe it as 'a response' to the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh*. My view was that any retelling of Gilgamesh should primarily honour its original purpose as a story, designed to be read or to be recited in performance, and have widespread public appeal, rather than attempting to preserve it as a faithful textual archaism reserved for study by scholars. At the same time, I was also translating the poetry of the Iraqi poet Adnan Al-Sayegh from Arabic, using literal translations but in close collaboration with the poet himself, attempting to find a middle ground between a

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[1] H. D., the Imagist poet, writing about her translations of Euripides. Quoted in Josephine Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments: Translating Classical Verse, Creating Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 104.
[2] Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

faithful as opposed to a free, or creative, translation. These two different methodologies have given me key insights into translating epic from an unfamiliar language.

In 2013, encouraged by my editor at Oxford Poets/Carcanet, Robyn Marsack, I felt that, with its geopolitical themes of tyranny, hubris, irresponsibility of leaders and destruction of forests, a new version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was timely, and I started work on *Gilgamesh Retold*.[3] I wanted to look at Gilgamesh from a woman's perspective and to broaden frames of reference. Central to this approach was Adrienne Rich's idea of entering texts from a new direction from outside the dominant patriarchal culture or of 're-visioning' them, of 'seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction'.[4] In my preface to *Gilgamesh Retold* I say, 'Stories evolve to suit contemporary tastes and each retelling must create its own unity in the mind of the storyteller before it can achieve coherence for the reader.' With this in mind, my aim wasn't to deliberately re-vision the epic as a 'feminist' version per se but rather to create a version that rebalanced the masculine and feminine energies of the original to create a scenario that I, as a writer and a woman, could identify with. Seminal books such as Samuel Noah Kramer's *History Begins at Sumer*[5] and Fran Hazelton's *Three Kings of Warka*[6] gave me a more nuanced understanding of the pre-literate Sumerian stories from which the Gilgamesh literature sprang – a society where men and women were more equal, only women were allowed to brew beer and keep taverns, the reigning deity of the city, Inanna, was female and women had their own language – *emesal*.

Eugene Nida talks about the importance of 'dynamic equivalence', i.e. the degree to which 'the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language.' This response can never be identical but there should be 'a high degree of equivalence … or the translation will have failed to accomplish

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[3] Jenny Lewis, *Gilgamesh Retold* (Manchester: Carcanet Classics, 2018).
[4] Adrienne Rich. 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English* 34(1) (1972): 18–30. www.jstor.org/stable/375215 [accessed 19/2/2021], p. 18.
[5] Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956).
[6] Fran Hazelton, *Three Kings of Warka: Myths from Mesopotamia* (London: The Enheduanna Society, 2012).

its purpose'.[7] Describing his book *After Babel* as an attempt to 'locate translation at the heart of human communication', George Steiner questions such specificity, arguing that it is 'creative' translations, by translators who do not necessarily speak the source language but are poets, novelists or dramatists in their own right, that can most successfully break through the 'thorn-barriers posed by reciprocal incomprehension'[8] and best preserve for posterity the 'possible worlds and geographies' that each language construes and which, when the language dies, die with it. Citing Paul Celan's translation of Apollinaire's *Salome* as an example of Schleiemacher's notion of a hermeneutics which 'knows better than the author did',[9] he says 'it is not socio-linguistics, or psycho-linguistics, nor even anthropology' which is most illuminating, but rather the 'intuitive probes of poets, dramatists and novelists' that are 'pivotal to our perceptions of self and society'.[10] He goes on to suggest that while some texts have been 'exhausted by translation', others have been transfigured 'by an act of appropriative penetration and transfer in excess of the original', leading to a situation where the target text 'not only reflects but also generates light'.[11] This idea of a translated text generating light through creative invention should give modern translators leeway to work freely with the source material.

Translating the 'untranslatable': definitions and approaches

Dryden proclaimed that to be a 'thorough translator, he must be a thorough poet'.[12] To this end he identified three categories of translation. The first, 'metaphrase', turns an author 'word by word, and line by line, from one language into another'.[13] The second, 'paraphrase', is 'translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost', but his

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[7] Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation, with Special Reference to Bible Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 24.

[8] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xiii.

[9] Ibid., p. 318.

[10] Ibid., p. xii.

[11] Ibid., p. 317.

[12] Jacob Blakesley, *Modern Italian Poets: Translators of the Impossible* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 37.

[13] 'Thus, or near this manner, was *Horace* his art of poetry translated by Ben Jonson.' Quoted by Stuart Gillespie in *English Translation and Classical Reception: Towards a New Literary History* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 3.

words are 'not so strictly followed as his sense'.[14] With the third, 'imitation', the translator need not translate the words of the source author, nor has 'to be confined to his sense', but has 'only to set him as a pattern and to write as he supposes that author would have done, had he lived in our age, and in our country'.[15]

In his introduction to *Modern Italian Poets: Translators of the Impossible*, Jacob Blakesley reviews Dryden's categories and looks at the concept of 'untranslatability', quoting Wilhelm von Humboldt, in a letter to A. W. Schlegel in 1796, who described two familiar stumbling blocks for the 'doomed' translator: 'he will either stay too close to the original … or he will adhere too closely to the characteristics peculiar to his nation at the cost of the original.'[16] Lawrence Venuti expresses more confidence, believing that the source language poem can support 'multiple translations which are extremely different yet equally acceptable as poems or translations', and sees translation fundamentally as 'variation'.[17] There are inevitable losses, says Francis Fortini, but, also, compensations. For example, when rhyme is lost, a way of compensating is through an increase in 'the density of assonance, alliteration [and] homophony'.[18] Blakesley discusses a revised list of more recent categories of poetic translation: 'mimetic', 'analogical', 'organic', 'prose', 'phonemic' and 'imitation'. 'Mimetic' describes a word-for-word translation written in the same or formally similar metre as the original (described by André Lefevere as a 'straitjacket imposed on the target text');[19] 'analogical' is 'where the translator attempts to find functionally equivalent or equally prestigious metres in the target language' that conform to the target language reader's expectation. I would suggest that the Iliads by both George Chapman and Alexander Pope fit this category. Another example is the new translation of the *Odyssey* in iambic pentameter by classicist Emily Wilson.

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Blakesley, p. 28.
[17] Ibid., p. 32.
[18] Ibid., p. 46.
[19] Quoted in Blakesley, ibid.

In 'organic' translations, the *content* is derivative but the poem takes on its own unique shape and form, such as Christopher Logue's *War Music*. 'Prose' translations of poems would include both Anne Le Fèvre Dacier's prose version of the *Iliad* (1711) and Nancy Sandars's prose version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (1960). Dacier famously said, 'A translator can say in prose everything that Homer has said: this is something verse can never do,'[20] although she added later that prose is not ideal either, but it 'affords the lesser loss'.[21] An example of 'phonemic' or 'homophonic' translation is the Catullus of Louis and Celia Zukofsky, which, Stuart Gillespie suggests, is 'experimental rather than readable'[22]; for example, their translation of Catullus 55, '*oramus, si forte non molestum est …*' ('I beg you, if I may without offence …') was 'A rum asks me – see, fortune won't molest you.' There are numerous examples of prose 'imitations' of Homer, from James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) to Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), which demonstrate how easily epic poetry lends itself to the novel form. As Simeon Underwood says, not only do many see Homer's poems as novels but 'the early novel is deeply concerned with its relation to epic.'[23] In reference to translations of epic and classical poetry, Josephine Balmer warns against the 'intellectual hierarchy' which ranks 'textual philology' at the top and 'translation cribs' at the bottom, overlooking 'the interpretative revelations that translators … can bring to an ancient work'.[24] Poets from Chaucer through to Pope, Ted Hughes and Michael Longley, she reminds us, have not only enriched our literary culture but deepened our understanding of the classical world too, 'throwing us back to the original to look at it again with new insights'.[25]

Hughes, like Chapman, was not writing for scholars or a scholarly audience but was 'intent on telling the story vividly for a contemporary audience'.[26] A monolinguist, he relied on

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[20] Kirsti Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth Century Notions of the Early Greek Epic, 1688–1788* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 52.
[21] Simeon Underwood, *English Translations of Homer from George Chapman to Christopher Logue* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers, 1998), p. 45.
[22] Gillespie, p. 23.
[23] Underwood, p. 45.
[24] Josephine Balmer, 'Jumping Their Bones: Translating, Transgressing, and Creating', quoted in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 43.
[25] Ibid., p. 44.
[26] Daniel Weissbort, *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 158.

'bridge' translations which he preferred to be as literal and unpolished as possible; 'The very oddness and struggling dumbness of a word for word version is what makes our own imagination jump,' he says in *Modern Poetry in Translation* (*MPT*, 1967).[27] Daniel Weissbort, with whom Hughes founded *MPT* in 1965, says Hughes subscribed to a 'foreignising tendency' that allowed foreign texts to 'alter English itself';[28] and Hughes often 'distorted'[29] the original versions. Weissbort also claims that Hughes 'hoped for and needed literal versions to activate his own poetic imagination',[30] flagging up the issue of how the practice of translation can contribute to a poet's own development and influence.

     Ezra Pound's 'translations' from Chinese, published in *Cathay* (1915), are a case in point. Based on an essay and notes by Ernest Fenollosa, 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry', Pound's version of 'The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter' by Li Po, the eighth-century Chinese poet, begins 'While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead/I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.'[31] Andrés Claro points out 'the awareness that the *phanopoeic* charge created by the graphic suggestion of Chinese characters'[32] fitted well with Pound's imagistic approach, even though he couldn't read or speak Chinese. While T. S. Eliot, in his Introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems* (1928), identifies Pound as 'the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time', he also questions the validity of 'foreign' translations generally:

> When a foreign poet is successfully done into the idiom of our own language and our own time, we believe that he has been 'translated'; we believe that through this translation we really at last get the original. The Elizabethans must have thought that they *got* Homer through Chapman … we have not that illusion; we see that Chapman is more Chapman than Homer …[33]

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[27] Gillespie, p. 167.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Weissbort, p. 209. 'I'm afraid I distorted the original somewhat…', Hughes says apologetically in a letter to Helder Macedo, the Portuguese poet, in 1962.
[30] Weissbort, p. viii.
[31] Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 129.
[32] Andrés Claro, *Ezra Pound's Poetics of Translation: Principles, Performances, Implications.* Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Wolfson College, Oxford, 2004, p. 118.
[33] T. S. Eliot, quoted in Pound, p. 14.

It is illustrative of this point that Chapman took great pride in the neologisms his work introduced into English. At the same time he distrusted 'dry, philological approaches' to classical translation, initiating 'an uneasy relationship between creative translation and classical scholarship that has persisted ever since.'[34] Supporting 'creative' translation, Xiaomei Chen applauds Pound's 'misreading' of Chinese writing, claiming that it was 'exceedingly fruitful and constructive within its own cultural dynamics';[35] an assessment with which Michelle Yeh agrees, asserting that 'what does not get translated…is as interesting as what does get translated.'[36] In reflecting Li Po's poem, George Kennedy asks the million-dollar question: does the superiority of Pound's translation lie 'in the *end-product*, the superior style and poetic quality of his English', or does it lie 'at the *source*, a deeper penetration into the mind and art of the Chinese poet who furnishes the raw material for the translation?'[37] The answer, surely, must be 'both'.

The debt to Greece and Rome: translations into English of epic poetry

The earliest translations of Homer and other Greek poets and philosophers into Latin were fundamental to Roman literature, and their early history was 'every bit as diverse as it was later to become in the Anglophone world'.[38] Livius Andronicus (c. 289–205 BC) translated the *Odyssey* into the Italian Saturnian metre and adapted Greek tragedy to the Roman stage. Later, writers such as Boethius (480–525 AD) provided literal Latin translations of Greek philosophers (especially Aristotle). The impact of these translations can be seen in the work of medieval writers in English and continued through to the Renaissance.

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[34] Balmer, 'Into the Modern Era: From George Chapman to Anne Carson', *Piecing Together the Fragments*. Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2014. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199585090.001.0001, pp.1-26, p.2.
[35] R. John Williams, 'Modernist Scandals: Ezra Pound's Translations of "the" Chinese Poem', in Sabine Sielke and Christian Klöckner (eds.), *Orient and Orientalisms in US-American Poetry and Poetics* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), pp. 145–65 (p. 156).
[36] Ibid., p. 160.
[37] George Kennedy, 'The Selected Works of George Kennedy', *Yale Literary Magazine* 126(5) (1958): 24–36 (24).
[38] Gillespie, p. 2.

Translation practice grew exponentially in England in the fifteenth century when the introduction of Greek instruction at Oxford University coincided with the wider uses of printing. Chaucer's 'Man of Law' in the *Canterbury Tales* admits the poet's debt to the classics when he says he 'Hath told of lovers up and down/more than Ovid made of mencioun'.[39] His epic poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, written in the mid-1380s, demonstrates further the complex intertextuality of his relationship with classical texts. Chaucer's main source was an Italian version of a story by Boccaccio, *Il Filostrato*, set against the backdrop of the Siege of Troy, written between 1335 and 1340. This was itself based on a twelfth-century French version, *Roman de Troie*, by Benoit-de Sainte-Maure. Chaucer not only borrowed characters and *fabulae* from ancient Greece and Rome (via Italian and French translations) but also, as Jamie C. Fumo points out, stylistic allusions such as the echo, in the letters exchanged between Criseyde and Troilus, of Oenone's letter to Paris in Ovid's 'Heroides Five', through which element *Troilus and Criseyde* becomes 'a notably epistolary poem itself'.[40] Shakespeare's homage to Chaucer's epic, the 1602 stage play *Troilus and Cressida*, shifts the story away from romance and more into the scope of a history play. Milton, in his marginalia, refers to Homer 'frequently mentioning Eustathius and the *Iliad*',[41] drawing inspiration both from Homer and from Shakespeare's drama for his own epic, *Paradise Lost*. In 1611, seven years after Shakespeare's play was first performed, his fellow dramatist, George Chapman, published his revised translation of the *Iliad* – a version that inspired many others, including Alexander Pope's Augustan *Iliad* (1715–1720) and John Keats's 1816 poem 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'.

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[39] Ibid., p. 5.
[40] Jamie C. Fumo. '"Little Troilus": "Heroides 5" and its Ovidian Contexts in Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"'. *Studies in Philology* 100(3) (2003): 278–314 (p. 278). <www.jstor.org/stable/4174760> [accessed 9/2/2020].
[41] Harris Fletcher, 'Milton's Homer', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 38(2) (1939): 229–32 (231).

'I will establish for ever a name eternal';[42] Gilgamesh, Achilles and the quest for immortality

David Damrosch, in *The Buried Book*, maintains that 'The *Epic of Gilgamesh* circulated widely around the Near East … and elsewhere along the coast of what is now Turkey and Syria'; as a result 'poet-singers were likely performing *Gilgamesh* in Syria and Cyprus during the period in which the Homeric epics were first being elaborated.'[43] It's probable, he adds, that on hearing Gilgamesh performed, the Homeric poets adopted and adapted some of its themes. These include interaction between deities and humans, love between men, the hero quest, search for fame, and journeys to the underworld. The central story of both epics centres round two semi-divine heroes obsessed with the idea of fame and immortality, who bond with other men and are stricken with grief when their friends die. Both Gilgamesh and Achilles have mothers who are minor goddesses, Ninsun and Thetis respectively, who intercede on their behalf with the deities. Ninsun pleads with Shamash the sun god to keep Gilgamesh and Enkidu safe on their way to the cedar forest; Thetis asks Zeus to reverse the fortunes of the Achaeans to punish Agamemnon for stealing Briseis. Both mothers adore their sons, although Ninsun at least can see Gilgamesh's faults: 'Why did you make my son so restless!'[44] she says exasperatedly to Shamash. As well as the amount of mirroring between the two stories (both narratives hinge on the death of the beloved friend), the epics share textual similarities, suggesting a tradition of performance, where the bard, scop or teller had to recite long tracts from memory. Repetition is a familiar mnemonic device in both, with many prolonged passages of verbatim repetition in Gilgamesh, and stock epithets – 'rosy-fingered dawn', 'swift-footed Achilles', 'grey-eyed Athena' – and the famously copious, extended similes in the *Iliad*.

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[42] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 20.
[43] David Damrosch, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), p. 212.
[44] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 24.

Michael Schmidt, in his introduction to *Gilgamesh: The Life of a Poem*, explains that, despite being the oldest long poem in the world, *Gilgamesh* is a relatively new classic, a 'collaboration led by Assyriologists…archaeologists … museum curators, philologists, scholars and writers …';[45] a project, in fact, that is still in progress. In Chapter One, I will look at the history of the Gilgamesh epic and how the early Gilgamesh stories altered between different Mesopotamian states and cities. The ancient writers themselves describe the Gilgamesh epic as 'the Gilgamesh cycle', a poem in twelve songs or cantos, 'of about 300 lines each, inscribed on separate tablets'.[46] It wasn't until they were assembled as an epic by Sin-liqe-uninni, in around 1200 BC, that they acquired some form of stability; and the fact that previously untranslated tablets are still coming to light continues this heterogeneity, opening up the world's oldest piece of written literature to continuously fresh and inventive interpretations. For example, the translation by Professors Andrew George and Farouk Al-Rawi of the smuggled Tablet Five (acquired by the Sulaymaniyah Museum in 2011) shows how fugitive the elements of any story can be, with Humbaba in this case being presented as a foreign potentate rather than an ogre, and the forest itself more like a tropical jungle than a cedar forest, with a cacophony of monkeys and parrots. In his Preface to *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (2003), George explains that his 1999 Penguin translation, described by Theodore Ziolkowski as 'A monument of brilliant Assyriological scholarship',[47] was aimed at a non-specialist audience and 'concessions were made in the interests of readability'.[48] He also speaks about the specific difficulties of translating from broken and damaged clay tablets (for example, while Tablet VII once contained between 275 and 290 lines, only 210 lines are still extant). Further difficulties are presented by scribal errors such as spelling mistakes or changes when a 'memorised text is recited, then written out or otherwise handed down'.[49] I will compare

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[45] Michael Schmidt, *Gilgamesh: The Life of a Poem* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 1.
[46] Nancy Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 47.
[47] Theodore Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 153.
[48] Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: With an Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. v.
[49] Ibid., pp. 418–19.

George's translation with two 'creative' versions, by David Ferry[50] and Edwin Morgan.[51] An analysis of the Flood episode in each case will look at challenges, such as how difficult it is to replicate the powerful alliterative sound effects of Babylonian in English.

In Chapter Two, I will compare George Chapman's 1611 version of the *Iliad* with Alexander Pope's 1720 version and Christopher Logue's 1981 'account', with additional reference to Michael Longley's Iliadic poems.[52] Of the four, only Michael Longley is a classicist, and then he describes himself as a 'lapsed' one. H. C. Fay, who taught Longley at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution,[53] says of Chapman's *Iliad*, 'He claimed to have translated from the Greek, but even in his own day it was buzzed about that he used a Latin version.'[54] Despite this acerbic response, he admires Chapman's *Iliad* for its 'frequent enjambment and variations of pause and stress', which permit an effect 'as free as Homer's unrhymed decasyllables'.[55] In each case, I will look at the themes of the broader picture, connecting them to the historical and socio-political culture they reflected, and then analyse examples of the textual qualities in more detail, with particular reference to the 'Night Scene' or 'Campfire' episode at the end of Book Eight, balancing factors such as the 'vigour and originality'[56] of Chapman's dramatic vision; Pope's artistic 'taking a view';[57] the 'lyric masculinity'[58] of Christopher Logue's filmic adaptation; and the affectivity of Longley's transposition of the killing fields of Troy to twentieth-century Belfast.

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[50] David Ferry, *Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993).

[51] Edwin Morgan, 'Gilgamesh', *Long Poem Magazine* 5 (Autumn/Winter 2010–2011): 3–23.

[52] Michael Longley, *The Ghost Orchid* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1995).

[53] Longley tells us, 'The classics for him [Fay] were character-forming, like long-distance running.' Quoted in Michael Longley, 'Lapsed Classicist', in S. J. Harrison (ed.), *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English: Classical Presences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 97–113 (p. 97).

[54] H. C. Fay, 'Chapman's Translation of Homer's *Iliad*', *Greece & Rome* 21(63) (Oct., 1952): 104–11 (106).

[55] Fay, p. 104.

[56] Robert S. Miola, 'Introduction: Looking into Chapman's *Iliad*,' in Robert S. Miola (ed.), *George Chapman, Homer's Iliad*, Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1vjqnfp.5 [accessed 14/5/2020], pp. 1–18 (p. 3).

[57] Matthew Reynolds, 'Pope's *Iliad*: A "comprehensive View"', *The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer and Petrarch to Homer and Logue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Oxford Scholarship Online, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199605712.001.0001 [accessed 28.2.2019], pp. 1–32 (p. 2).

[58] George Steiner, *Homer in English* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1996), p. xix.

Chapter Three will discuss my own version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, looking at the narrative arc and structure of *Gilgamesh Retold*, additions and omissions, and my decision to tell the story in different forms – while considering specific elements which shaped my interpretation. For example, feminist interpretations of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* look at the battle for supremacy between Gilgamesh and Inanna/Ishtar as the evolution from a matriarchal (Earth Mother) to a patriarchal (Sun God) belief system, and this seems to be a possible explanation for the major shift in perception. Early Sumerian poetry reflects the *hieros gamos*, or 'sacred marriage' ceremony, carried out between the chief priestess of Inanna's temple and the king, essential to guarantee fertility and prosperity.[59] Inanna says to Dumuzi, her consort at the time:

> My vulva, the horn
> The Boat of Heaven
> Is full of eagerness like a new moon
> My untilled land lies fallow.[60]

After their yearly ceremonial coupling in the temple, she blesses his reign:

> As the farmer, let him make the fields fertile,
> As the shepherd, let him make the sheepfolds multiply,
> Under his reign let there be vegetation,
> Under his reign let there be rich grain.[61]

Gilgamesh's rejection of the goddess Inanna and her promised bounty leads to his subsequent loss of Enkidu, and months or years of wandering in the wilderness. Despite his faults, Gilgamesh does learn from his experiences, and at the very end of the epic returns older and wiser to carry out his duties as a benevolent ruler, taking pride in his lifetime's achievement, the world's first city, with its citizens kept safe by the legendary wall of Uruk. Ironically, like Ozymandias, even this claim to immortality is denied as the city of Uruk, despite its impregnable wall, is later destroyed. However, Gilgamesh achieves the eternal life he longs for, with all the

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[59] Damrosch, p. 216.
[60] Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983), p. 37.
[61] Wolkstein and Kramer, p. 46.

other characters in the narrative, through the epic tale of which he is the eponymous hero, and

to which poets and storytellers including myself continue to be drawn nearly 5,000 years later.

Chapter One: Translating the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, from 2100 Sumer to the Present Day

> 'I am Gilgamesh
> an Ur world is in me
> to inhabit.'[62]

When we come to approach Gilgamesh, Michael Schmidt warns us, 'we're always on shaky ground' because of the instability of the text; for 'No other literary adventure demands quite so much risk and care, so great an investment from the reader, as Gilgamesh does.'[63] According to Babylonian tradition, Gilgamesh was a real figure who ruled the city of Uruk (Erech) in Mesopotamia (now Iraq) at the end of the Early Dynastic II period, around 2700–2500 BC. He is named on the Sumerian King List, preceded by King Lugalbanda. A number of heroic tales about Gilgamesh circulated orally from shortly after his death but, although they contained some elements of the later written stories, 'they did not form a connected cycle, nor is there a major Sumerian theme, such as fear of death.'[64] The earliest written Gilgamesh epics were produced in the Sumerian language during the reign of King Shulgi in the Third Dynasty of Ur – between 2100 and 2000 BC. Shulgi claimed that 'the gods and ancient kings of Uruk were his ancestors to strengthen the legitimacy of his kingship', and he refers to himself as the 'brother and friend of Gilgamesh'.[65] We know that the legendary Gilgamesh was renowned for building the great wall of Uruk and that he also built a shrine at Nippur. Buildings such as temples, walls and shrines, with their accompanying inscriptions, were a conventional means of securing immortality for kings. Another way was to perform a great deed, for example King Shulgi's claim that he ran from Nippur to Ur and back in a single day 'that my praise be spread wide in the lands, that/I be

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[62] Charles Olson, in George F. Butterick (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding the Maximus Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p .9.

[63] Schmidt, p. 3.

[64] Maureen Gallery Kovacs, *Gilgamesh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. xxii.

[65] Jacob Klein, 'The Royal Hymns of Shulgi, King of Ur: Man's Quest for Immortal Fame' (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 1981), p. 10.

eulogised in all the lands.'[66] In both cases, the desire for immortality is paramount, and this becomes a core motivation of the Gilgamesh epic. Between 1800 and 1600 BC (the Old Babylonian period), there were many copies of Gilgamesh poems generated by students in scribal schools at Ur and Nippur, and around 1700 BC, with the demise of the Sumerian language, the Akkadian epic was composed (Old Babylonian version). By the Middle Babylonian period (1600–1000 BC), copies in Hurrian and Hittite were being made, and c. 1300–1200 BC the priest-scribe Sin-liqe-uninni produced the Standard version, with a newly composed Prologue in the form of a paean to Gilgamesh. Between 1000 and 125 (Neo-Assyrian and Neo- and Late Babylonian periods), the Gilgamesh epic was known and collected in the royal libraries of kings such as Ashurbanipal who ruled the Neo-Assyrian Empire. At the time of his reign (669–631 BC), it was the largest empire in the world. It was the discovery and excavation of Ashurbanipal's destroyed palace and library by archaeologists c. 1850 that brought to light the tablets carrying the Gilgamesh epic we know today.

By the time the Standard version was compiled and written down, the story was fixed in the following version:

Tablets 1–2: King Gilgamesh of Uruk tyrannises his people; the deities create a wild man, Enkidu, to equal Gilgamesh; a *harimtu* or Temple Prostitute, Shamhat, is sent to lure Enkidu from the wild and introduce him to human ways.

Tablets 3–5: To gain fame and immortality, Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to the cedar forest to kill Humbaba, its divinely appointed guardian, and fell the cedars.

Tablet 6: On their return to Uruk, the goddess Inanna/Ishtar proposes marriage to Gilgamesh, but he rejects her. She sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh, but the two heroes kill it and hack it to pieces. Enkidu has a dream foretelling his death.

Tablets 7–8: Enkidu's death and funeral. Gilgamesh's grief.

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[66] Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2002), p. 6.

Tablets 9–10: Gilgamesh wanders in the wilderness and seeks Uta-napishtim, the Flood survivor.

He fails to gain immortality but is given a Plant of Youth.

Tablet 11: On the way home, Gilgamesh loses the Plant of Youth. He returns home to Uruk, a

wiser man.

Tablet 12: Gilgamesh asks Enkidu to retrieve objects from the Netherworld. '… most scholars

regard Tablet 12 as a late and inorganic appendage, rather than part of the original epic.'[67]

Translating the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: the rediscovery

In the 1840s, Austen Henry Layard and his assistant, Hormuzd Rassam, began to excavate an

area of the Babylonian desert under which lay the ancient city of Nineveh. In 1849, the palace of

Sennacherib was unearthed, and in 1853 Rassam uncovered the remains of the palace of

Ashurbanipal. Of the fired clay tablets found at these sites, thousands were sent back to the

British Museum, where Henry Rawlinson and others succeeded in deciphering the Akkadian

portions.[68] In 1867, George Smith, a young banknote engraver, was engaged by the Museum to

assist with helping to piece together the shattered tablets. In 1872, Smith discovered a fragment

which referred to 'a flood and a ship that settled on a mountaintop', details that immediately

caught the eye of 'a young man who had been brought up on the Bible'.[69] On the basis of these

discoveries, the *Daily Telegraph* sponsored an expedition to Nineveh where Smith found another

fragment of the Flood story. In 1875, Smith published *The Chaldean Account of the Deluge*, omitting

the Enkidu/Shamhat sexual encounter. The baton was next taken up by a young German

Assyriologist, Paul Haupt, who published *The Babylonian Nimrud Epic* in 1884. The first complete

translation in any language was by Alfred Jeremias,[70] whose version, while being aimed at the

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[67] Tigay, p. 5.
[68] Theodore Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us* (New York: Cornell University Press), p. 9. Rawlinson used his knowledge of Old Persian to break the code, comparing a trilingual inscription of Darius the Great (Old Persian, Akkadian, Elamitic Susian) on the Behistun Rock.
[69] Ibid. Smith had originally been drawn to the Near Eastern collection because of his interest in Bible Studies.
[70] Ziolkowski, p. 15, Jeremias was a Lutheran minister from Leipzig who was also a historian of religion and a professional Semiticist.

general reader, faithfully followed the cuneiform text, with notes and explanations. The first

partial translation into English was in 1878 by Morris Jastrow, who maintained that the

Gilgamesh epic was 'a composite production … a medium for the perpetuation of various

popular traditions and myths',[71] and aimed his version at a scholarly audience. The first literary

adaptation was by Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, *Ishtar and Izdubar* (1884). Although based on the

scholarly versions of Smith and Haupt, Hamilton's concerns were different, leaving out the

Flood story and focusing on love and relationship interests. He expands the text, with invention

and fantasy, from 3,000 to 6,000 lines and tells the story in rhymed couplets in 48 cantos.

The growing accessibility of the Gilgamesh epic kindled wider interest, especially among

German intellectuals. Freud saw the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as a

representation of the relationship between 'a man and his libido'.[72] Jung echoes Freud in seeing

the heroes' relationship as symbols of the higher and lower man, the 'ego-consciousness and

shadow'.[73] Rilke, in a letter to Katharina Kippenberg, said 'Gilgamesh is tremendous!', and that

he counted it among the greatest texts 'that one can experience', and that 'Here is the epic of the

fear of death!'[74] Other German-language writers who fell under the sway of Gilgamesh included

Rudolph Pannitz, who produced a version in trochaic pentameter; Wilhelm Wendlant, who

retold the epic in hundreds of sonnets; Thomas Mann, whose protagonist, Joseph, learns about

the myth of Gilgamesh from his tutor in *Young Joseph*, the second volume of Mann's tetralogy

Joseph and his Brothers; and Herman Hesse, whose response was that it was 'one of the very great

primal poems along with the Indic myths and the best passages of the Old Testament'.[75]

Links with the Bible were among aspects of Gilgamesh that excited academic and

popular interest from the start, and it continues to do so, especially among people old enough to

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[71] Morris Jastrow, *The Religions of Babylonia and Assyria,* (Boston: Ginn, 1878), p. 513.

[72] Ziolkowski, p. 29. Freud adopts this theory from Paul Ehrenreich's *General Mythology and its Ethnological Foundations* (1910) and from James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890).

[73] Quoted in Ziolkowski, p. 30; Carl Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd edn, Bollingen Series XX/5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

[74] Letter to Katharina Kippenberg, 11 December 1916, in Rainer Maria Rilke/Katharina Kippenberg, *Briefwechsel* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1976), p. 99.

[75] Ziolkowski, p. 33.

have been brought up with the King James version of the Bible, which preserves the linguistic

majesty of its Hebrew origins to a far greater degree than the 'accessible' modern version. A

review of Jeremias's German translation in the *New York Times*, 1891, reminds readers how

'Hebrews and Babylonians were branches of the same great Semitic family.'[76] The stories of the

Deluge and of a man being made from clay were just two of the themes that emanate from the

same Hebrew and Babylonian traditions. In 1902, the statement by Friedrich Delitzsch,

Professor of Assyriology at the University of Berlin, in a lecture entitled 'Babel and Bible', that 'a

considerable Babylonian element adheres to our religious thought through the medium of the

Bible' further undermined the authority of the Bible in much the same way that 'Charles

Darwin's work had indirectly discredited its accounts of human genesis.'[77] In his book *The Great*

Deception (1920/1), Delitzsch proposed that the Old Testament be removed altogether from the

Christian canon because it was 'hopelessly contaminated' by Babylonian elements.[78] In *Das*

Gilgamesh-Epos in der Weltliteratur (1906), Peter Jensen claimed that Jesus was an 'Israelite

Gilgamesh' and that 'we in our cathedrals and … churches … serve a Babylonian god,

Babylonian gods'.[79] If we look at the Sumerian version of the Flood episode, with the storm god

on the move and the Annunaki, or deities of the underworld, sending out their 'lightnings' to

play 'about the rising waters', we can see that it bears a striking resemblance in tone, language

and sheer force of oratory to the later, thrilling biblical account in Psalm 18, verses 10–13:

> And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly: yea! he did fly upon the wings of the wind.
> He made darkness his secret place; his pavilion round about him were dark waters and
> thick clouds of the skies.
> At the brightness that was before him his thick clouds passed hailstones and coals of fire,
> The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice; hailstones and
> coals of fire.

These lines show the rhetorical effects used by Hebrew writers, drawing on their Ancient Near

Eastern precedents. These include exclamation –'yea!' – and repetition – 'and did fly'; 'he did fly';

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[76] *New York Times*, 10 May 1891, p.18, by 'S.S.M.'
[77] Ziolkowski, p. 24.
[78] Ibid., p. 25.
[79] Ibid., 26–7.

and 'hailstones and coals of fire' – as well as tremendous sonic effects – 'The Lord also thundered in the heavens …'. In his chapter on biblical parallels to Sumerian literature in *History Begins at Sumer*, Samuel Noah Kramer cites obvious instances such as the Flood story, but also the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninhursag, which includes the concept of Dilmun, or a divine paradise, in the form of a 'pure', 'clean' and 'bright' garden, similar to the Garden of Eden.[80] As well as larger narrative tropes and concepts, there are linguistic details that tie the two traditions together, such as the fact that in the Sumerian story, the goddess Nin-ti is created to heal the god Enki's rib. Nin-ti means 'the lady who makes live' as well as 'the lady of the rib'. The fact that the name 'Eve', as Kramer says, 'according to Bible notions' also means 'she who makes live'[81] could explain why biblical Eve is created from Adam's rib. Another genre that appears in Gilgamesh and resurfaces centuries later in Jewish liturgical traditions is the lament. The biblical Book of Lamentations carries on a tradition begun in Sumer more than 4,000 years ago with the 'Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur'.[82] The synthesis of these ancient traditions, thought to have been performed in temples and palaces with some passages closer to hymn, liturgy and wisdom sayings (replicated in medieval *sententiae*), has been in evidence in much of the literary canon since.

Translations into English of Gilgamesh

The first complete literary translation into English was R. Campbell Thompson's 1928 scholarly version,[83] in hexameters, followed in 1934 by William Ellery Leonard's *Gilgamesh: Epic of Old Babylonia*, a rendition into free verse from German, which was well received: 'What freshness!' said Peter Monro Jack of the *New York Times*.[84] *Gilgames: King of Erech* (1948) was a free telling by

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[80] Kramer, p. 142.
[81] Ibid., p. 144.
[82] Ibid., p. 172. We are still directly connected to the Sumerian Lament tradition, Kramer says, by the modern orthodox Jew, uttering his 'mournful lament at the "Western Wall" of Solomon's long-destroyed Temple'.
[83] R. Campbell Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: Text, Transliteration and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928).
[84] Peter Monro Jack, *New York Times*, July 22, 1943, Book Reviews, p. 10.

Frank Laurence Lucas which altered, expanded and abridged the material as it went along.

Lucas's prosodic approach in some ways manages to bring the text up to date, while retaining its

ancient suppleness, with greater authority than more recent versions, as these lines from the

meeting of Gilgamesh and Ziusudra (Babylonian Uta-Napishtim or the Hebrew Noah) show:

> I had tasted of battle: it sickened me.
> I had built mighty walls: I was weary.
> I had loved women: they loved not me –
> Only my gold, my power
> Or my flesh.[85]

As more fragments were found and translated, and the jigsaw puzzle added to, scholarly and

literary translations of Gilgamesh into English multiplied. *The Quest of Gilgamesh* by Douglas

Geoffrey Bridson was broadcast by the BBC in 1954. Scholarly editions by Assyriologists Noah

Samuel Kramer and Ephraim Avigdor Speiser led to literary experiments, including by Charles

Olson and Gregory Corso. For Olson, it was the Sumerian poets who were the most powerful

sources of inspiration to whom he turned:

> We are only just beginning to gauge the backward of literature, breaking through
> the notion that Greece began it, to the writings farther back: to the Phoenicians,
> to the Babylonians, behind them the Akkadians, and, most powerful of all, the
> Sumerian poets, those first makers, better than 2000 years prior to Homer,
> Hesiod – Herodotus.[86]

In the same essay, he speaks about the importance of taking up 'nature's, live nature's force'

which the Sumerians embodied.[87] Olson's 'Bigmans II' sequence begins:

> He who saw everything, of him learn, o my land, learn
> of him who sought out to know what lands are for, & people, to turn
> to fruitfulness…[88]

Later notes for poems show how his attempts to synthesise the distance between ancient and

modern worlds, which he called the 'uroboros', had the potential to produce what has been

described as an 'archaic postmodern' poetic – reaching back into the ancient past to make new

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[85] Frank Laurence Lucas, *Gilgamesh: King of Erech* (London: Golden Cockerel Press), p. 22.
[86] Quoted by Gary Grieve-Carlson, in 'At the Boundary of the Mighty World: Charles Olson and Hesiod'. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 47 (2014): 139. <www.jstor.org/stable/44030725> [accessed 19/2/2021].
[87] Schmidt, p. 25.
[88] Ibid., p. 32.

ways of communicating poetry post-Second World War. Gregory Corso enhanced the mystique of the Beat Poets by introducing Gilgamesh to their group, calling Gilgamesh and Enkidu 'proto-Jack Kerouac' and 'proto-Neal Cassady' respectively,[89] a sign of the epic's cultural importance at the time. As the epic became more widely known and studied, the growth of contextual and theoretical interpretations proliferated and a broader audience of new readers became interested. Vera Schneider, in *Gilgamesch,* invites the reader to attempt a 'spiritual-intellectual reorientation, which may not be easy for contemporary Westerners'.[90] She goes on to suggest that we must 'turn away from our purely rational, analytical mode of thought' and 'return to that intuitive grasp in which the senses, soul and intellect, are still one'.

The belief in an original gynecocracy had first been promoted by thinkers such as Jung and taken forward by writers such as Rivkah Schärf Kluger in her book *The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh: A Modern Ancient Hero.*[91] She sees the story as a shift from matriarchy to patriarchy and the development of human self-awareness. Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), both integral to the rise of the feminist movement, allowed theories about matriarchy to gain credence, producing a wave of books about the female divine;[92] and the work of feminist writers, such as Carol P. Christ's 'Why Women Need the Goddess'[93] and Rhoda Lerman's *Call Me Ishtar* (1993), were also popular.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, translated by Andrew George

The twentieth century ended with the publication, in 1999, of Andrew George's celebrated translation of Gilgamesh. In his Appendix, George tells us that 'as with any work of ancient

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[89] Ibid., p. 1.
[90] Vera Schneider, *Gilgamesch* (Bern: Origo Verlag, 1967). Quoted in Ziolkowski, p. 97.
[91] Rivkah Schärf Kluger, *The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh: A Modern Ancient Hero* (Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1991).
[92] For example, Heidi Göttner-Abendroth, *The Dancing Goddess: Principles of a Matriarchal Aesthetic* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1991); David A. Leeming and Jake Page, *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Thomas Cleary and Sartaz Aziz, *Twilight Goddess: Spiritual Feminism and Feminine Spirituality* (Boulder: Shambala, 2002).
[93] Carol P. Christ, 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections', in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979), 273–87.

Mesopotamian literature,' the translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* poses four unique challenges.[94]

First, there are no ready-made established texts, as there are for Greek and Latin literature, for

example, so the translator must either be able to decipher cuneiform or base his or her work on

the work of previous editors.[95] Second, deciphering cuneiform is extremely complex. While most

signs can convey more than one sound in syllables or half-syllables and many can stand on their

own for whole words or even several separate words, others act only as silent determinatives.[96]

The third difficulty is in interpreting languages that are 'so long dead', especially Sumerian. The

fourth is that, while clay tablets are far more enduring than writing materials such as paper or

papyrus, many were smashed, perhaps deliberately (when they became invalid or outdated), or

damaged in other ways, such as by being thrown onto rubbish tips as debris, by the salts in

groundwater, by collapsed or razed buildings or by the occasional 'earthworm passing by – or,

on occasion, even through'.[97] It is important to begin to understand George's own prosodic

solutions to these difficulties before we can evaluate modern renderings. There are two criteria

to consider. The first is the way the story is told as an 'epic' or 'heroic' narrative. The second is

the language in which it is told – in this case, poetry.

George tells us that in Babylonian prosody it is possible to identify passages of poetry by

'pairs of lines, or couplets', which can then be divided into three or four smaller units. Each unit

is defined by:

> a heavy beat, which falls on the syllable that carries the principal stress. Verses of
> four units fall into equal halves either side of a caesura. In this way we have a text
> that can be recited in a manner that one hopes a Babylonian would recognize.[98]

He also points to the alliteration and assonance of lines like:

> *sha Adad | shuhar**rassu** || **iba'**u | shamê*
> ***mim**ma | **nam**ru || ana da' **umm**ati | ut**ter**u*

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[94] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 209.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., p. 210.
[98] Ibid., p. 219.

> The stillness of the Storm God passed over the sky
> and all that was bright then turned to darkness.[99]

The Storm God was Adad. George captures the sibilance of the first line with his own
alliteration of 'stillness', 'Storm', 'passed' and 'sky' but, because the English language lacks the
intense musicality of Babylonian, it can't quite capture the effect of '*sha … shuharrassu … shamê'*.
In the second line, George points out the heavy alliteration of the consonant *m*, describing it as
like thunder rumbling on the horizon which heightens the tension like a slow drum roll. Again,
his translation, 'and all that was bright turned into darkness', while losing the pronounced sound
effects of the original, has an almost biblical sense of foreboding which gives it a balancing
equivalence.

The passage is taken from Chapter Eleven, 'Immortality Denied', in which Gilgamesh is
told by Uta-napishtim how he survived the Flood and gained immortality. The above extract
starts a few lines earlier: 'At the very first glimmer of brightening dawn.' This phrase is an echo
of an earlier identical line on p. 87 when, rather than the first hints of the ominously advancing
tempest, it heralds the hustle and bustle of workmen arriving to start building Uta-napishtim's
boat. Similar to the epithets in other texts that spring from oral beginnings, instances of different
types of repetition are copious in the Gilgamesh epic, for mnemonic, narrative and theatrical
effect, but also as a way, as in this case, of developing sonic unity within the poem, like a musical
theme or background music in a film; so 'At the first glimmer of brightening dawn' acts as a way
of signifying the important action about to take place. On p. 87, it would be upbeat and
workmanlike as first the carpenter, the reed-worker and the shipwright appear on stage, followed
by young men whom, we presume, are labourers (the line ends in ellipses indicating damage to
the tablet) and the old men 'bearing ropes of palm-fibre', while the rich man brings the pitch and
the poor man brings the tackle.

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[99] Ibid., pp. 220–1.

For the next 39 lines, we get a fascinating glimpse into the details of Babylonian

shipbuilding – 'one acre was her area, ten rods the height of her sides./At ten rods also, the sides

of her roof were each the same length.' The vessel had six decks with nine compartments inside

and required multiple measures of pitch, tar and oil, while the workmen were sumptuously fed

on freshly slaughtered joints of beef and lamb washed down with beer, ale and wine. Its

repetition, on p. 89, presages a very different sort of dawn. Like the Trojan army at the end of

Book Eight of the *Iliad,* who, replete with meat and wine, settle down to sleep by their campfires

before the carnage of the following day, Uta-napishtim battens down the hatches of the ark on

his living cargo to await the coming deluge. At first light, a menacing black cloud appears on the

horizon, which starts to travel rapidly over the landscape:

> and bellowing within it was Adad the Storm God.
> The gods Shullat and Hanish were going before him
> bearing his throne over mountain and land.[100]

The Old English word, 'bellowing', usually applied to the roaring of bulls, adds a terrifying

dimension to the image of the Storm God, carried shoulder high by two minor weather gods,

appearing on the horizon in the form of an obliterating cloud. Like the rumbles of thunder in

mimma | namru || ana da' ummati | utteru, the 'l's of 'bellowing' create a ripple of liquid sound

which cascades down the stanzas through 'Shullat' into 'Errakal' (the god of wanton destruction)

who is 'uprooting the mooring-poles', Ninurta (god of agriculture), who is making the weirs

'overflow', and the Annunaki, minor deities whose fiery torches light up the landscape with

'brilliant flashes'. In the third stanza, the ululation of 'l's continues with 'stillness', 'all', 'bull',

'vessel', on into the fourth stanza with 'gale', 'flattened', 'blew', 'Deluge', 'battle', 'cataclysm',

'people' and a second 'people'. The fifth stanza carries the orchestration further with 'Deluge',

'left', 'lying', 'curled', 'childbirth', 'Belet-ili wailed', and keeps going down to the final line, in the

seventh stanza – 'And now like fish they fill the ocean!' The fifth stanza, which gives instances of

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[100] Ibid., p. 89.

the effects of the storm in concrete detail, is, fittingly, told in a predominantly Anglo-Saxon register. The key words, mainly derived from Old German and Old Norse, act as stepping stones across the mixed etymological soundscape of the text, telling the story boldly: 'gods', 'fright', 'left', 'went', 'heaven', 'lying', 'dogs', 'open', 'woman', 'childbirth', 'wailed', 'sweet'. Only 'curled' is from Middle English/Middle Dutch, and 'deluge' and 'voice' are Latinate.

The metre of this passage is variable and, as George has explained above, loosely based on the original Babylonian rhythms. The first two lines could be stressed *anapaestically* – 'At the **ver**y first **glim**mer of **bright**ening dawn,/there rose **on** the ho**riz**on a **dark** cloud of **black**'; but to sustain any constant English metre would mean wrenching the lines and the sense of them, which would be a pointless exercise. Throughout there is a variable but strong rhythmic beat, with many of the lines falling into two halves that can be read with a *caesura*, as in 'At the very first glimmer | | of brightening dawn,/there rose on the horizon | | a dark cloud of black.' It is George's understanding of, and sensitivity to, the rhythms and sonic qualities of the original that has allowed him to create a text that is both faithful to its hypotext and, at the same time, is a remarkable literary achievement in its own right.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century 'creative' versions

i)   David Ferry

In David Ferry's 1993 version, Donald Carne-Ross tells us, the poet 'gives us a world that is very far from our own' yet brings it close enough to 'respond to the poem's central core of humanity'.[101] In his Introduction, William L. Moran says 'Let it be stated at once: it is David Ferry's poem. It is not Sin-liqe-uninni's.'[102] This points to the growing need or desire of individual authors, as the twentieth century progressed, to make Gilgamesh their own; '"My" Gilgamesh. "My" Mesopotamia,' said the French essayist Joël Cornault in his series of brief

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[101] Donald Carne-Ross, *Classics and Translation*, *Essays* (NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2010), p. 50.
[102] Ferry, p. xi.

reflections, *Éloge de Gilgamesh*; 'they are my myths that I pick and choose for my own purposes.'[103]

Ferry, known before his work on Gilgamesh for his translations of Latin classics, explains in his

'Notes' at the end of the book that he cannot read cuneiform and does not know the language or

languages the epic was written in. Instead, he has used three line-by-line translations – 'The Epic

of Gilgamesh' by E. A. Spicer;[104] *Gilgamesh* by John Gardner and John Maier;[105] and *The Epic of*

Gilgamesh by Maureen Gallery Kovacs. He explains that he has tried to avoid scholarly language

and that he has added Tablet 12 ('Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld') as a separate

appendage, partly because it spoils the conclusion of Tablet 11. The many gaps and lacunae

caused by damage offered him, he says, both 'problems and opportunities' – sometimes

condensing, sometimes expanding and sometimes varying the material.[106] Carne-Ross adds that

Ferry's innovations were introduced for the most part 'to keep the storyline going' and to 'fill in

the gaps in the narrative' or 'rearrange it when it seems incoherent'.[107] Ferry concludes that while

the 'true original' is always unrecoverable, even for the most faithfully literal translation, he has

tried to make his version 'as respectful of professional scholarship as it is feasible to be'.[108]

An interesting insight, especially in regard to poetic interpretations, is how much authors

reveal about themselves. In Ferry's case, according to Christine Hopps, he was one of a group of

writers reacting against a trend in the 1960s and 1970s to reuse the Gilgamesh material in a way

that was 'favourable to the goddess' or the feminine principle, who felt the need to reinstate a

more mainstream, patriarchal view. She discusses instances in Ferry's poem that underline his

'efforts to dethrone the goddess and reduce the role of female characters' while 'valorizing' males

and male gods.[109] One example occurs when Ishtar, enraged by Gilgamesh's insults, flies up to

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[103] Joël Cornault, *Éloge de Gilgamesh* (Église-Neuve d'Issack: Federop, 1992), p.52, quoted in Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us*, p.139.
[104] E. A. Spicer, 'The Epic of Gilgamesh', in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969).
[105] John Gardner and John Maier, *Gilgamesh* (London: Vintage, 1985).
[106] Ferry, p. 94.
[107] Carne-Ross, *Classics and Translation*, p. 50.
[108] Ferry, p. 94.
[109] Christine Hopps, 'Mythotextuality and the Evolution of Ideologies: The Reuse of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in North American Texts' (PhD, University of Sherbrooke, March 2001), p. 183.

heaven to ask her father, Anu, for the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. 'The king of Uruk

has insulted me,' she says on p. 32, 'he has found out and told about my foulness.' Anu replies

'... Why then do you rage?//He has found out and told about your foulness.' To have *found out*

something about a person means that it is true. For her father to repeat the slur reinforces its

veracity. This is in contrast to George's lines:

> O father, again and again does Gilgamesh scorn me,
> telling a tale of foulest slander,
> Slander about me and insults too. (p. 49)

to which Anu replies:

> Well, was it not you who provoked King Gilgamesh,
> so he told a tale of foulest slander,
> slander about you, and insults too? (p. 50)

This is a very different scenario. Gilgamesh here could be spreading lies or gossip ('telling a tale

of slander') about Ishtar, and Anu's fatherly response is to chide her, fairly gently, for 'provoking'

Gilgamesh, understanding, perhaps, the fragility of the male ego; after which he repeats her

version of events. In Kovaks's version, Ishtar says 'Gilgamesh has recounted despicable deeds

about me,/despicable deeds and curses' (pp. 53–4). Again, there is no suggestion that the insults

are fair (or otherwise). We are left to make our own deductions. In the Flood episode, Ferry, like

Kovaks, makes the mistake of attributing to Ishtar the cries of the 'sweet voiced goddess',

cringing against a wall with the other deities 'like beaten dogs',[110] thus making her ultimately

responsible for the Flood, although, as Hopps points out in the *Epic of Atra-hasis*, the hypotext of

the Babylonian and Standard texts of the Gilgamesh Flood episode, there is no mention of Ishtar

being involved.[111] George corroborates this – 'Ištar is quite out of place as the lamenting goddess

on this occasion.'[112] The reference is to Belet-ili, the Mother Goddess.[113]

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[110] Ferry, pp. 70–1.
[111] Hopps, p. 148.
[112] 'It is customary to take d.*iš-tar* as a proper noun. However, the following line, which develops the idea further, shows that the Mother Goddess is the subject here. Though Ištar and Bēlet-ilī can be identified in the more syncretistic theological traditions, they are normally quite separate deities.' Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 886.
[113] In some versions, including Stephen Mitchell's, she is named as Aruru.

Turning to prosody, we can see how Ferry's approach to the beginning of the Flood episode differs from George's translation in the way the couplets are laid out visually:

> In the early hours of the next morning dawning
> there was a noise of Adad in the clouds
> that rose and filled the morning sky with blackness.
> Shullat the herald of the dread Adad …

'Morning dawning', besides being a weak rhyme, lacks the charged specificity of 'the very first glimmer of brightening dawn'. The next lines have a sinuous movement – 'Shullat the herald of the dread Adad// moved out over the mountains and over the valleys/bellowing' – but is it sinuosity we need here or something more threatening? Ferry says in his note on translation, 'My intention has been to obey the laws of this meter as strictly as I could';[114] yet, as this extract exemplifies, the greater part of this 29-line passage fails to keep to a strict metre and so loses the forward-driving momentum of iambic pentameter. Where lines are end-stopped, the effect is to dampen the flow of the narrative as in lines 7–8:

> Adad moved over the plains and over the cities;
> Everything turned to darkness as to night.

The apocalyptic torrent of words and images of the original text that strikes sparks in the mind of the reader has been reduced to flat statements. Fran Hazelton speaks about the importance of finding a balance between making the stories accessible to 'anyone who can read an English newspaper' while at the same time preserving their 'startling originality'.[115] She also speaks about the 'rich store of brilliant similes … many of them reflecting the countryside'.[116] In his attempt to produce an accessible poetic version Ferry has, in many places, sacrificed a fair proportion of the drama, colour and 'startling originality' of the source text.

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[114] Ferry, p. 95.
[115] Hazelton, p. ix.
[116] Hazelton, p. xii.

ii) Edwin Morgan, the poem 'Gilgamesh'

Edwin Morgan, in his introduction to *The Play of Gilgamesh,* asks if Gilgamesh is not only the oldest poem 'but the oldest gay poem in the world? … Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu have sex with women, but they are in love only with each other.'[117] Morgan's fascination with Middle Eastern literature and culture began when he was a young man and continued with his military service in the Second World War when he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps as a non-combatant conscientious objector. As Ritchie McCaffery explains in his review of Morgan's collection *The New Divan* (1977), the 100-stanza title sequence both captured a sense of Morgan's wartime trauma but also 'the newfound freedom and sexual discovery that a role in conflict offered a young man from a conservative, middle-class background.'[118] It also showcased Morgan's knowledge and understanding of the poetry of the Middle East, using Arabic modes to 'both reveal and disguise his homosexuality' and, at the same time, experiment with narrative forms that were less 'obsessed by structure' than Western modes. This is evidenced by the Arabic idea of the 'divan', which means a collection of loosely connected poems. On returning to civilian and academic life in 1945, Morgan immediately set about a new translation of *Beowulf,* perhaps, James McGonigal suggests, as a way of recreating the sense of 'male bonding … and courage he had left behind' with his fellow soldiers.[119] As well as gaining recognition as a leading poet of his generation, Morgan also wrote successfully for theatre and, in 1994, started working with the Communicado Theatre Company on developing *The Play of Gilgamesh.* Difficulties with the dramaturgy meant that the play wasn't performed, and it was suggested that a long dramatized version, in blank verse rather than the rhyming couplets of the play, might work better, which Morgan immediately started to write. Morgan's archive at Glasgow University shows that he owned several translations of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, including those by E. A.

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117 Edwin Morgan, *The Play of Gilgamesh* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p. vii.
118 Ritchie McCaffery, 'Private Morgan: World War Two & Edwin Morgan's "The New Divan"', *The Wild Court* (London: King's College, 18 February, 2019). <https://wildcourt.co.uk/features/private-morgan-world-war-two-edwin-morgans-new-divan/> [accessed 1 /1/2021], paras 1 and 7 out of 11.
119 James McGonigal, 'Edwin Morgan and the Road to Gilgamesh', *Long Poem Magazine* 5 (Winter, 2010–2011): 25.

Speiser,[120] Nancy Sandars (1960, 1972), John Gardner,[121] Stephanie Dalley,[122] Maureen Gallery

Kovacs (1989) and two copies of Andrew George's translations, the 1999 one of which we know

Morgan consulted as he quotes from it.[123]

In his introduction to the play, Morgan speaks about Enkidu's mission to moderate

Gilgamesh's authoritarian behaviour and make him a better ruler – at the risk of himself being

tainted by the 'over-civilised urban culture of Uruk'.[124] The fear of death held echoes of his own

experience of war, as well as awareness of how the Aids pandemic was ravaging communities of

gay men. 'If a young healthy man can die, not by any enemy's sword but by an unseen virus in

the blood, no one is safe; he too might die young.'[125] He sees Gilgamesh's final loss, the Plant of

Rejuvenation, as the start of his regeneration, comparing him to Lear on the heath, everything

having been stripped away. Despite the decades-long incubation process, *The Play of Gilgamesh*

doesn't work strongly as a play. The rhyming couplets are often forced or weak:

> One of the sacred harlots, you must have seen her
> at the Temple. Shamhat, stunning. Lean her
> against a wall, and the brick smoulders – she'd
> get a pharaoh's mummy hard. Enkid-
> u doesn't stand a chance. (p. 5)

They are not helped by the addition of a transvestite Glaswegian Jester: 'See weddins? Waste a

money. A thoosen widny cover this yin' (p. 13). Yet his long-term engagement with the material

did eventually bear fruit in the fine long poem, 'Gilgamesh'.[126] As James McGonigal says, the

poem has more of Morgan himself in it than the play and uses more 'adventurous' language. It is

written for 'declamation by different voices, and through them the most ancient of human

concerns come to life.'[127]

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[120] E. A. Speiser, 'The Epic of Gilgamesh', in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd edn, pp. 72–99 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).
[121] John Gardner, *Gilgamesh* (London: Vintage, 1984).
[122] Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
[123] Morgan, *The Play of Gilgamesh*, p. xiv.
[124] Ibid., p. vi.
[125] Ibid., p. ix.
[126] Morgan, 'Gilgamesh'.
[127] McGonigal, p. 26.

Told in blank verse, the list of characters in 'Gilgamesh' is simpler, and the narrative

follows the original more closely than the play. Reported speech is flagged up in advance, as in

'Enkidu had heard enough, stopped him, saying:/'Gilgamesh, monsters are but monstrous liars!'

(p. 11); 'Siduri gazed at him, doubted his boast, said: "Why are your cheeks hollow, your limbs

famished?"' (p. 17). There are many instances where the language is both simple yet full of

lyricism and emotional drama:

> They lay down in blankets against the wind,
> they slept the sleep of all men, but at three
> Gilgamesh started up with a shout and cried:
> 'Enkidu, were you calling? What woke me up?
> Didn't you touch me? Why am I trembling?' (p. 10)

The creation of Enkidu is beautiful, mysterious and framed in imagery that captures both his

physical beauty and his otherness:

> she made
> Enkidu, wild and strong, born of darkness,
> born of silence, fortified by the war-god.
> …
> He had no home, no company, no society…
> …
> Like an animal he lapped water in the heat of the day. (p. 5)

After their fight, anticipating why he falls so deeply in love with Enkidu, Gilgamesh says:

> I have met no one
> like you. You have bound up your wild hair
> and the great wilderness is still in you. (p. 7)

Gilgamesh's lament, on p. 15, transforms the power of the Babylonian text into a lyrical modern

register:

> The elders of the city too will mourn you,
> and the hill-folk, and the hills themselves.
>
> He touched his friend's heart – there was no beat.
> He covered his friend's face like a bride's. (ll. 22–32)

The copious repetition in the hypotext is used sparingly, sometimes, as on p. 11, as *anaphora*:

> Let us both strike with one blow, Gilgamesh
> Let us give the axe its head at last.
> Let us make the cedars groan and fall. (ll. 7–9)

- when Siduri and Ur-shanabi the boatman repeat questions: 'Why are your cheeks so hollow, your limbs famished?' (pp. 17/18); or when Gilgamesh runs through Mashu Mountain, as an indicator of time passing, as on p. 16, with the lines beginning: 'Once he has put one mile to flight/dense is the dark, no sign of light.'

Morgan's Flood episode is masterly, picking up much of the powerful imagery and diction of the original Babylonian. Unlike some of his rhymed couplets in the play, his line endings here are authoritative, outlining the architecture of the story in (mainly) single masculine syllables. In the first stanza, these are predominantly Old English – 'sun', 'cloud', 'gates', 'earth', 'light', 'pot' – while 'dikes' is Old Norse. Only 'plain' is Middle English, from a Latin root, 'planus', meaning 'flat'; 'torches' is Latin, and 'horizon' is Greek. Morgan uses the formulaic 'At the first light of dawn' but then swerves quickly into 'instead of the sun/a black cloud mounted up from the horizon.' The next line, 'The storm god rumbled thunder from the cloud', contains much of the alliterative reverberation of *mimma | namru || ana da' ummati | utteru.* The imagery is superb as we see the 'judges of the heavens' raising their torches 'to flash and flare across the cowering earth'. This is exceptionally well-achieved *enargeia*[128] as the words engage all our senses – the *sound* of the rumbling of thunder, the *sight* of the flashing and flaring of lightning and the *physical sensation* of the earth cowering. The next stanza starts with the tremendous image of the 'gathering south wind' blowing 'a wall of water mountain-high' to overwhelm all in its path. In the ensuing darkness and chaos, the drowning humans are compared to 'struggling water-wraiths' as the terrified gods who had 'scuttled' to the sky, their divinity reduced to the helplessness of insects, crouch like dogs at heaven's door. Morgan's description, from George's translation – 'The ocean grew calm, that had thrashed like a woman in labour/the tempest grew

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[128] 'For Quintilian, *enargeia* seems the basic ornament…that subsumes most others … *enargeia* addresses not just the eyes but all the senses.' Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 132.

still,'[129] – of how the storm itself 'was in labour/giving painful birth to calm' is extraordinary,

showing how poetic cognition can add subtle dimensions to an existing idea.[130]

The influence of Gilgamesh on Homer

David Damrosch, in *The Buried Book*, maintains that 'The *Epic of Gilgamesh* circulated widely

around the Near East … and elsewhere along the coast of what is now Turkey and Syria'; as a

result, 'poet-singers were likely performing *Gilgamesh* in Syria and Cyprus during the period in

which the Homeric epics were first being elaborated.'[131] It's probable, he adds, that on hearing

Gilgamesh performed, 'the Homeric poets found themes they could adapt to their own

purposes.' Both traditions have a central theme of close male friendships. Both the *Epic of*

Gilgamesh and the *Odyssey* start with the poet himself introducing the trope of an initially unnamed

wanderer who journeys far, experiences pain and suffering and eventually becomes a heroic

figure, linked with a specific city-state. Emily Wilson's translation of the *Odyssey*[132] begins:

> Tell me about a complicated man.
> Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
> when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy (p. 105)

compared to the prologue and paean of George's translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*:

> He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation
> [who knew the proper ways,] was wise in all matters! (p. 1)

Line nine tells us, 'He came a far road, was weary, found peace,' and line 11 that he 'built the

rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold'. As well as the major themes, there are many other similarities

between the *Iliad* and Gilgamesh. In both epics, the gods decide that the hero's companion must

die, and the companion's death is followed by a lament. In both Gilgamesh and the *Iliad*, while

mourning their slain friends, both Gilgamesh and Achilles are compared to lions grieving over

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[129] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 90.
[130] McCaffery speaks of the influence of Hafez on Morgan's early poetry and how Morgan attempts to 'get inside some of the poetry of the desert and Sufi mysticism'.
[131] Damrosch, p. 212.
[132] Emily Wilson, *The Odyssey of Homer* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), p. 105.

lost cubs (*Iliad* 18, 318–22; Gilgamesh 8, 59).[133] There are also the stereotyped formulas and epithets: 'Swift-footed Achilles' (*Iliad*, 1, 57)/'Wild-Cow Ninsun' (Gilgamesh 3, 35); 'fleet-footed mules' (Gilgamesh 3, 96). One of the most fundamental pre-figurations is the interaction of humans with the underworld, or afterworld, and its significance to plot and character development. Theodore Ziolkowski points out in his paper, 'Encounters with the Afterworld: From *Gilgamesh* to *Faust*', that in five landmark works of world literature – *Gilgamesh*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Commedia*, *Faust* – the protagonist has an encounter with the afterworld, either through *katabasis* (a descent into the underworld) or *nekyia* (an encounter with spirits of the dead in some other setting).[134] He goes on to discuss how these encounters 'serve an identical structural and contextual function in all five works: they all take place, namely, at a midpoint in the protagonist's life' and 'mark the change from youthful adventure to mature understanding'. That the world's most ancient literary text, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, provides the bedrock for the palimpsest of epics that came after it, including the *Iliad*, can be in little doubt.

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[133] Louis Feldman, 'Homer and the Near East: The Rise of the Greek Genius', *The Biblical Archaeologist* 59(1) (1996): 13–21 (17).
[134] Theodore Ziolkowski, 'Encounters with the Afterworld: From "Gilgamesh" to "Faust"', *Comparatio* 10(2) (2018): 181–96.

Chapter Two: Translating the *Iliad* into English, from Chapman and Pope to Logue and Longley

The first major translation of the complete *Iliad* into English was by George Chapman in 1611.

He had previously published the first seven books and part of Book 18 ('Achilles' Shield') in

1598. By 1611, he had translated all 24 books of the *Iliad,* having substantially revised some

Books, further edited some more of the earlier translations and added copious notes, glosses and

marginalia. Chapman knew Andreas Divus's Latin translation in Spondanus's edition of Homer,

entitled *Homeri poematum versio Latina ac notae perpetuae,* first published in Basle in 1583.[135] Franck

Schoell has described Divus's translation as 'an absurdly literal and very inferior Latin translation

which had itself been made from a very corrupt text at a time when reading Greek was still like

deciphering hieroglyphics'.[136] Yet, Phyllis Bartlett says, Chapman made 'what he could of the

Greek with the constant help of the parallel Latin version'.[137] Many of Spondanus's annotations

were covertly incorporated into Chapman's own translation, says Allardyce Nicoll, a fact that

should be taken into account if Chapman's *Iliad* is being judged as 'an independent exercise in

the creative imagination'.[138] Chapman also consulted Joannes Scapula's Greek–Latin Lexicon

and, mainly for annotations to his translation, Laurentius Valla and Eobanus Hessus.[139]

Ben Jonson welcomed Chapman's 1618 translation of Hesiod, the first in English. This

reflects not just the huge burgeoning of interest in classical literature by Renaissance writers but

the extent to which they were educating and influencing each other with their work. Where

noblemen like Sir Philip Sidney wrote and translated poetry for an intimate aristocratic circle of

family and friends for whom he wanted to embody the *sprezzatura* of the Elizabethan courtier,

Chapman, Jonson, and Shakespeare came from relatively modest backgrounds and were

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[135] Edward Phinney, 'Continental Humanists and Chapman's Iliads', *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965): 218–26 (219).
[136] Ibid.
[137] Phyllis Bartlett, 'Chapman's Revisions in his Iliads', ELH II (1935): 104. Quoted in Phinney, 'Continental Humanists', p. 219.
[138] Phinney, p. 221.
[139] Ibid., p. 225.

professional playwrights working for Philip Henslowe. As George Steiner points out, Chapman's

language 'is also the language of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, charged with sensory,

corporeal thrust'.[140] While Chapman mainly wrote for educated audiences at the Inns of Court

which were then closely associated with the royal palaces, both Shakespeare and Jonson were

writing for the general, theatre-going public. Homer's influence can be seen in many of their

plays – especially Shakespeare's. *Troilus and Cressida* takes the audience directly to the battlefields

of Troy while Homer's ideas about fate and free will and the tensions between 'omnipotent gods

and willing humans' inflects the language and action of *Coriolanus* (1608).[141]

Robert S. Miola describes Chapman's Homer as both a work of the ancient world and a

work of its own time and place, presenting a reception of Homer that 'reinterprets the ancient

text according to later linguistic, political, moral, theological, and cultural contexts and

imperatives'.[142] He documents the way that Chapman's 'vigour and originality' allow us to hear

the Homeric voice in a way that delighted Keats much more than 'the decorum, regularity, and

good sense' of Augustan poets like Pope. In 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (1816),

Keats claims, 'Yet did I never breathe its pure serene/Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and

bold.' William Carlos Williams admires the way Chapman realised that different forms, in this

case the dramatic and the epic, 'make very different requirements upon the poet'.[143] 'Having

Greek in his ears', Carlos Williams continues, no matter how well he did or didn't know it,

forced Chapman to adapt his own craft to the heroic mode of iambic heptameters. The

difference between the initial translations and those carried out in his maturity was marked. The

later translations show that 'Homer's poem had … become part of him …', with lines that 'sing

aloud with the sea itself in great surges',[144] impressing poets 'through the ages'.[145] His mastery of

[140] Steiner, *Homer in English*, p. xxii.

[141] Robert S. Miola, 'Lesse Greeke? Homer in Jonson and Shakespeare', *Ben Jonson Journal* 23(1) (2016): 101–26 (101).

[142] Miola, 'Chapman's *Iliad*', p. 2.

[143] Review by William Carlos Williams, 'Chapman Still Heard: Chapman's Homer: *The Iliad* (I) and *The Odyssey* (II)', ed. Allardyce Nicoll, Bollingen Series, XLI (Pantheon Books, 2 vols). In *Poetry* 91(1) (1957): 61.

[144] Williams, p. 62.

[145] This brings to mind Derek Walcott's *Omeros,* a relocation of the *Odyssey* to St. Lucia in the Caribbean.

rhyme and metre had become so deeply embedded in his consciousness that he claimed to have

been visited by Homer's ghost (on a hillside in Hitchin) who describes how he 'invisibly'

prompted Chapman 'To those fair Greens, where thou dids't English me'.[146]

One of the great strengths Chapman brought to his translation of the *Iliad* was his

understanding, like Homer's, that heroic acts and stories need to be told dramatically. His

knowledge of theatre and ear for the spoken word meant that he often transposed narrated

speech into direct discourse, and, as in this example from Book 2, line 130, he uses strong,

imperative verbs to give a sense of vigorous urgency and immediacy: 'Each cried to other,

Cleanse our ships, come, launch, aboard, away!'[147] When Hector calls to Deiphobus (who is

actually Athena in Deiphobus' form) for a spear, Fitzgerald (a classicist) translates it as:

> 'Then he gave a great shout to Deiphobus
> to ask for a long spear. But there was no one
> near him, not a soul.'[148]

Chapman, again, uses a command: '"Deiphobus! Another lance!" Lance nor Deiphobus/Stood

near his call' (22.257–8). One can imagine how gripped the audience would be witnessing this

scene in the hurly-burly of a stage performance, as the ghost of Athena, and Hector's chances of

survival, slowly dematerialise. Chapman typically avoids introductory formulae for speech and

uses marginal notes and glosses as 'running speech prefixes that convert epic action into

dramatic dialogue'[149] in a way that makes some of Homer's scene setting and character

introduction redundant. It also speeds up the action. In these ways, Chapman's skills as a

dramatist gave him a significant advantage over earlier translators of Homer. He was also

fortunate to be alive at a time when invention, adventure, exploration and discovery were

bywords for the era. For the Elizabethans, finding and conquering new territories geographically,

scientifically and metaphysically fed into and empowered their endeavours. In 'To His Mistress

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[146] Quoted in Colin Burrow, 'Chapmaniac', 'Review of *Chapman's Homer: The Iliad*', *London Review of Books* 24(12) (27 June 2002). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n12/colin-burrow/chapmaniac> [accessed 26/2/2021], para. 9 of 19.
[147] Homer, trans. George Chapman, *The Iliad and the Odyssey* (Ware: Wordsworth Edition, 2000), p. 24.
[148] Robert Fitzgerald, *Homer: The Iliad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, World's Classics, 1974), p. 389, ll. 11–14.
[149] Miola, 'Chapman's *Iliad*', p. 6.

Going to Bed', John Donne likens sexual conquest to the colonising of a new land: 'O my

America! my new-found-land, … /My mine of precious stones, my Empire,/How blest am I in

this discovering thee!'[150] In his Sonnet 14, he urges God, using a foundry of language equivalent

to body blows to 'Batter my heart, three person'd God' and 'break, blow, burn and make me

new'.[151]

Compare this to Chapman's equally tightly controlled asyndeton in Book 11, when he

compares Hector, who is urging on his troops to charge the Greeks, to a hunter setting 'upon a

brace of boars/His white-toothed hounds' who 'puffs, shouts, breathes terms' and exerts 'All his

wild art to make them pinch' (ll. 256–8). And again, in Book 16, Homer's vultures are made to

'Fly on each other, strike and truss, part, meet and then stick by,/Tug both with crooked beaks

… cry, fight, and fight and cry' (ll. 406–9). It wasn't just his tough diction and experiments with

form that made Chapman's *Iliad* so strong; he, like his fellow Elizabethan writers, delighted in

innovations that would help break the bonds of the past and create a new discourse, with

neologisms (45 per cent of those listed in the *OED* are Chapman's and include 'asinine',

'vociferous', 'heartened', 'puke' and 'rapture');[152] prefixes – 'enambushed' (10.257), 'immartial'

(7.206); suffixes – 'manlessly' (22.405); coinings – 'amazeful' (3.83, meaning 'distracted), 'orby'

(3.357, meaning 'circular'); compound words – 'needle-painted' (3.387, meaning 'embroidered'),

golden-ribboned-bound-maned horse (5.344) and morphology – 'sterned', of a boat, a noun

becomes an adjective (2.684) and the same with 'oxy' of an ox (4.139).

There is a vast array of rhetorical modes and devices throughout the whole of the 22

books including invocation, simile, alliteration, pathos, periphrasis, apostrophe, irony and satire.

In his revised edition of 1611, Chapman trimmed ornament extensively, especially in Books 1

and 2. In Book 1, the 1598 version says '… he threw against the ground the sceptre he

sustained', while the 1611 text reads more simply and succinctly – 'Thus he threw his sceptre

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[150] John Donne, in John Carey (ed.), *John Donne: Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 22.
[151] Ibid., p. 204.
[152] Miola, 'Chapman's *Iliad*', pp. 2–3.

gainst the ground' (l. 243). This sense of purposeful narration is well demonstrated in an episode

at the end of Book 8 where the Trojans light campfires across the battlefield beyond the

besieged walls of their city and wait for dawn. The first three lines emphasise for the reader the

outdoor setting, with the wind carrying the scent of the meat being roasted on the campfires.

The words 'friendly sky' and the fact that the troops sit 'delightfully' in anticipation of their

supper imbue the scene with empathetic warmth and camaraderie. As Jan Parker says,

Chapman's iambic hexameters, unlike the heroic couplets of Pope's version of Homer – whose

shaping 'imparts a conscious nobility even to … everyday details'[153] – are supple, free flowing

and open. He uses frequent enjambment to suggest a sense of vitality and movement. The first

and second line mix etymological as well as prosodic registers: the single syllable 'sky' is a

brusque, Old Norse word, half rhymed with the softer, more sinuous four-syllable, Latinate

'delightfully'. That line runs over into the plain, direct diction of 'And spent all night in open

field', where three words, 'night', 'open', and 'field', all derive from Old English Germanic roots,

with only the second word, 'spent', having Latin origins, but which is used tersely, in its one

syllable, passive sense. This is the no-nonsense language of the battlefield and the war report, yet,

at the same time, the sonic qualities of its marvellously supple vowel progressions, exploiting to

the full the rough musicality of the English language, lift it into echoing poetry.

Despite the fact that Chapman was seen by many as the greatest translator of Homer, he

had detractors. His peers Nashe and Shakespeare sometimes mocked his 'ink-horn' or over-

scholarly terms, for example, 'aversation' instead of 'turning away' (22.213) and 'conduicible'

instead of 'advantageous' (1.113); and he sometimes over-ornaments simple passages. For

example, in Book 2, Homer's comparison of the endless battalions of the Greek army trooping

from their ships with 'tribes of bees' emerging from 'a hollow rock', 'ever coming on afresh and

in clusters' [154] is expanded by Chapman for several convoluted lines that hold up the action and

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[153] Jan Parker, *Chapman's Homer: The Iliad and Odyssey* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), p. viii.
[154] Miola, 'Chapman's *Iliad*,' p. 9.

don't add much to the scene (ll.87–90). Because of Chapman's lack of a thorough grounding in Greek, he also missed significances and ironies, such as mirroring (in Homer) of the deaths of Patroclus (16.855–57) and Hector (22.361–63), and he was prone to mistakes such as making Agamemnon a head taller, rather than shorter, than his peers. Thinking, perhaps, of the 'tyring house' or wardrobe of Elizabethan theatre, Chapman occasionally dressed his protagonists in Renaissance garments – a 'mandilion', a coat with buttons (well before the invention of buttons) (10.120) and a scarf (13.538) – and Agamemnon 'wakes to the sound of fifes and shawms', (10.12) which were medieval instruments.

Another fundamental anachronism that informs the whole text is Chapman's Stoic-Christian values which 'insistently … undercut the pagan Homeric code'.[155] His Achilles refers to 'our human soul' (9.394), and the Christian virtue of patience is referred to several times, including Thetis' advice to Achilles to 'have a little patience' (1.417) and a homily about 'patience and heroic martyrdom/Unsung' demonstrating 'better fortitude' in war than brutal killing (9.28–33). George Steiner comments on how Chapman's *Iliad* 'evolves and grows subtler' over time, demonstrated by an evaluative shift from Achilles to Hector as an exemplum of 'the heroic-moralistic perspective'[156] and a gradual mastery 'over the awkward fourteener'. At his best, Steiner concludes, Chapman comes to echo movingly 'Homer, Prince of Poets'.[157] The excellence of Chapman's translation lies in its sense of vigour, immediacy and drama coupled with a slowly but deeply assimilated knowledge of Greek – at least to the extent that it helped him to understand Homer's approach and pick up on some of the subtleties missed by translators working only from Latin.

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[155] Ibid., p. 16.
[156] Steiner, *Homer in English*, p. 28.
[157] Ibid.

'It is a pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you must not call it Homer.'[158] Alexander Pope's version of the *Iliad*

Alexander Pope started work on the *Iliad* in 1713, having made notes on scraps of rough paper and the backs of letters and envelopes before this and been entranced as a child by John Ogilby's translations of the *Iliad*, with illustrations.[159] Pope's *Iliad* was published in six volumes by subscription between 1715 and 1720, and secured an income for Pope which allowed him to live on his own means as a professional author.[160] He was attacked for starting the endeavour, says Felicity Rosslyn, 'on all obvious grounds', which included 'being a Catholic'[161] and 'knowing no Greek'.[162] Rosslyn adds that Pope used the method of most translators with no knowledge of Greek: he read a bilingual edition with Greek on one page and a Latin crib on the other. As well as Latin cribs, Pope worked with two classicists at Oxford University, Edward Fenton and William Broome, who provided literal translations from Greek, and, like Chapman, his translation reflects copious instances of earlier Latin translations. What Pope lacked in knowledge of scholastic Greek, Rosslyn argues, he made up for by bringing to Homer's *Iliad* 'an original poet's intuition' of what would have to be done to make Homer's meaning 'visible to a contemporary audience'.[163] Showing how Pope placed reason 'at the centre of his *Essay on Criticism*',[164] Rosslyn suggests that it is also reason (or lack of it) rather than anger that lies at the heart of Pope's *Iliad*. She gives as an example the episode in Book 24 when Achilles is denounced for his lack of *aidos* (shame, human decency or sense of propriety) in treating Hector's corpse with callous disrespect. Believing that Pope equates *aidos* with reason, or with

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[158] Richard Bentley, quoted in Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 429.
[159] Quoted by Felicity Rosslyn in *Alexander Pope: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p. 1.
[160] Ibid.
[161] As a Roman Catholic in a Protestant nation, Pope was unable to attend university, hold civic office or live within ten miles of London.
[162] Rosslyn, p. 62.
[163] Ibid., p. 64.
[164] Ibid., p. 68. Quoted from Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, 'If once right reason drives that cloud away,/Truth breaks upon us with resistless day,' ll. 211–12.

Achilles finally seeing reason,[165] this reading of such a key scene repositions the entire epic, in

line with many others, as a 'coming of age' story of young men.[166]

      Another dominating feature of Pope's translation can be seen in Reynolds's idea that

Pope's *Iliad* is like 'viewing a landscape garden',[167] rather than the 'wild paradise'[168] of Homer's

own inventiveness. Pope is not only 'taking a view' of the distant art, philosophy and literature of

classical Greece and Rome, but also, in pictorial terms, of the classical proportions and regulated

perspectives that classical art and culture inspired. This is immediately evident in the look of the

poetry on the page. If we compare Pope's campfire scene with Chapman's, we can see that the

poems look very different. Pope's end-stopped lines enclose and limit the flow of energy

compared to the way the momentum of the story cascades through the sprawling enjambment of

Chapman's iambic heptameters, where the rhymes and half-rhymes set up a polyphony of bell-

like sounds that resonate through the helter-skelter of the storytelling, giving it sonic cohesion.

Pope's neatly rhymed 'heroic' couplets of iambic pentameter and his heightened language, both

of which reflect the elegance and restraint of the Augustan era, are far removed from what

Matthew Arnold described as the 'perfectly plain … simple and intelligible' speech of Homer.[169]

For example, when Homer says, simply, that the Trojan's fires shone:

> … just as stars in the sky around the shining moon shine very brightly
> when the air is still. (Homer, *Iliad*, 8.555–6)[170]

and Chapman almost as concisely:

> fires round about them shin'd
> As when about the silver moon, when air is free from wind
> And stars shine clear … (Chapman, *Iliad*, 8.7–9)

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[165] Ibid., p. 69.

[166] For example, 'Mab', in Welsh, means 'son', so 'Mabinogi' is the 'coming of age of sons', or the 'feats of sons/young men'.

[167] Reynolds, 'Pope's *Iliad*: A "comprehensive View"', p. 3.

[168] Alexander Pope, 'Preface', *The Iliad of Homer*, 1899 edn (London: Lector House, 2021), p. xxviii.

[169] Matthew Arnold in his lecture series as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 1860, *On Translating Homer: Last Words: A Lecture Given at Oxford* (London: Longman, Green, Longman and Roberts, 1862), p. 23.

[170] Matthew Reynolds, 'Pope's *Iliad*: The "Hurry of Passion": *The Poetry of Translation*', Oxford Scholarship Online, DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199605712.003.0019 [accessed 28.2.2019], pp. 1–24 (p. 11).

Pope, who describes the passage in his notes as 'the most beautiful "Nightpiece" that can be found in Poetry',[171] expands the passage to seven lines, explaining in the same note that poets must bring their own interpretation to the details of translation which don't have to speak with 'the Exactness of Philosophy, but with the Liberty of Poetry'.[172] Yet, as Henry Power points out, Pope's 'Liberty of Poetry' is 'a distinctly literary mode of diction' in which Pope draws on a plethora of 'pre-existing poetic resources', indicating how the world of letters on which he bases his translation is a 'vast submerged continent' generated by Homer in the first place.[173] In the 'Nightpiece', Power identifies several notable allusions. The arms of the Trojan warriors 'umber'd by the fire' recall the campfire scene before Agincourt in Henry V, where 'Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames/Each battle sees the other's umber'd face.' In 'Heavn's clear azure', there's an echo of line 297 of *Paradise Lost,* where Satan's feet move 'over the burning marl, not like those steps/On heaven's azure'; and the word 'refulgent' appears throughout Dryden's *Aeneas,* including Idaeus' 'refulgent arms' flashing through 'the Shady Plain' (6.660); and Pallas Athene appearing 'refulgent through the Cloud' (2.834).

In this way, the quiet, unfussy lyricism of the extended simile of the campfires, resembling thousands of stars round a brightly shining moon, becomes obscured. Our minds struggle to decode the complex images – fires that 'illumine all the ground', a 'refulgent lamp of night' spreading her 'sacred light' over 'heaven's pure azure' while 'not a breath disturbs the deep serene,/And not a cloud o'ercasts the solemn scene' – while keeping a grip on the fact that this is an army preparing for brutal battle when morning comes. A few lines later, Homer and Chapman's humble 'shepherd' multiplies into Pope's 'conscious swains' which, Power suggests, might have 'wandered over from *Windsor Forest*[174]; Chapman's plebeian, Anglo-Saxon 'fires' become Pope's aristocratic, Latinate 'flaming piles'; and Homer and Chapman's horses, who by

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[171] Steiner, *Homer in English*, p. 82.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Henry Power, 'Christopher Logue, Alexander Pope, and the Making of *War Music*', *Review of English Studies* 69(291) (September 2018): 747–66 (762). <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgy039> [accessed 25/6/2020].
[174] Ibid., p. 760.

now we see gratefully crunching their 'oats and hard white corn', become Pope's 'coursers'

neighing over their heaps of (generic) 'corn'. Despite the self-reflective awareness often shown in

his paratexts, the 'Nightpiece' exemplifies the over-elaborate extravagance of language that Pope

in his satirical mock epics[175] himself poked fun at, and led Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria,* to

complain that Pope's diction 'seems to express not poetic thoughts' but 'thoughts translated into

the language of poetry' which make it 'difficult to determine whether … the sense, or the diction,

be the more absurd'.[176]

Compared to Chapman's, Pope's *Iliad* often seems to lack *enargeia,* or immersivity. One

reason, says Robin Sowerby, is the fact that he approaches his translation in purely visual terms

as the 'copy of a painting'.[177] Pope's Preface is full of references to painting – Homer's characters

are 'drawn' with a 'visible and surprising variety'[178]; Homer not only gives us 'the full prospects

of things, but several unexpected Peculiarities, and Side-Views, unobserv'd by any Painter but

Homer'[179] and 'His similes are like pictures'.[180] Being in tune with the visual aspect of the *Iliad,*

Pope expresses the hope 'of giving a more tolerable copy' of it than any previous translation,[181]

even those dating back to the classical Augustan era itself. During the neo-classical revival,

writers turned to Greek and Latin texts – principally Virgil, Horace and Ovid – and, in Pope's

case, especially, the writings of the Greek thinker and writer Longinus. In his treatise, 'On the

Sublime',[182] Longinus comments on the expressive power of Homer's writing that it 'ravishes, it

transports, it produces … astonishment and surprise' and it 'lifts the soul … filling it with joy'.

On the one hand, Pope agreed with Longinus, asserting in his Observations that in order to

'illustrate' the 'Poetical Beauties' of Homer's poem, he would need to capture 'the unequalled fire

[175] *The Rape of the Lock*, 1712; *The Dunciad*, 1728.

[176] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographica Literaria: The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 19.

[177] Peter J. Connelly, 'Pope's *Iliad*: Ut Pictura Translatio', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 21(3), Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1981): 439–55 (445).

[178] Pope, 'Preface', *The Iliad of Homer*, p. xxxi.

[179] Ibid., p. xxxii.

[180] Ibid., p. xxxv.

[181] Ibid., p. xi.

[182] *Longinus 'On the Sublime: The Peri Hupsous', in Translations by Nicolas Boileau-Depréaux, 1674 and William Smith, 1739* (New York: Delmar, 1975), p. 5.

and rapture of it'.[183] On the other hand, and this points to a second reason why Pope's

translation sometimes fails, he felt the need to preserve 'requisite Augustan dignity'.[184] Where

Longinus advocates undetectability of artifice – 'a Figure is most dextrously applied when it

cannot be discerned that it is a Figure'[185] – Pope's own tendency towards over-ornamentation

and aestheticizing contradicts this, especially in relation to the profusion and earthiness of some

of Homer's similes.

For example, in Book 2, lines 455–73, of his *Iliad*, Homer describes the Greek troops

facing their enemies as like 'tribes of swarming flies' buzzing round overflowing milk pails. In his

Note on this passage, Pope praises Homer's 'vast and lively' imagination, remarking on the

'Ardour' with which the Greeks run to combat, like 'Legions of Insects'.[186] Yet, in his translation,

the image has been toned down. The soldiers are like 'insects at play,/… in "Rural Bow'rs"' on a

summer's evening. In his Observations, Pope explains that he has heightened the image to avoid

its 'Lowness', which would 'scarce be forgiven in a poet of these times'.[187] On the passage in

Book 1 where Thetis advises her son, Achilles, to sleep with another woman to help him get

over the loss of Briseis, Pope censures the passage as indecent. He then modifies his opinion, in

his Observations, saying that it might be acceptable after all as it is 'of such sense as a Mother

might express to her son with Decency'.[188] He abhors the brutality of Agamemnon's order to

Menelaus in Book 6, lines 58–9 – 'Let no-one escape, not even the child in the womb!',

complaining, like Madame Dacier, on whose French prose translation he drew substantially, that

the Greeks would not have arrived at 'that pitch of cruelty to rip up the wombs of women with

child'.[189] We can gain an insight into Pope's ambivalence towards the 'high' and 'low' aspects of

Homer's genius through his comment about the suitability of the picaresque, for example,

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[183] Quoted in Reynolds, 'Pope's *Iliad*: A "comprehensive View"', p. 2.
[184] Pat Rogers *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 79.
[185] Christopher Fanning, 'The Scriblerian Sublime', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 45(3) (2005): 647–67 (655).
<www.jstor.org/stable/3844606> [accessed 7/6/2020],
[186] Quoted in Robin Sowerby, 'The Decorum of Pope's *Iliad*', *Translation and Literature* (Spring, 2004) 13(1): 49–79 (52).
[187] Sowerby, p. 51.
[188] Reynolds, 'Pope's *Iliad*: A "comprehensive View"', p. 13.
[189] Ibid., p. 15.

Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, to be stylised as 'mock epic'.[190] This reflects some of the related, contextual debates and fashions that were dominating literary circles at the time that Pope approached, and was working on, his translation of the *Iliad*.

In his Preface, Pope recommends that Homer be studied 'attentively in comparison with Virgil above all the ancients, and with Milton above all the moderns',[191] acknowledging that no translation will please everyone since 'a mere modern wit can like nothing that is not modern, and a pedant nothing that is not Greek.'[192] This was a reference to the so-called *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, a long-running French debate about the 'relationship between the classics and contemporary culture' which also influenced English writers.[193] On the side of the 'ancients' was Anthony Collins, who presented the *Iliad* as a poem 'designed for Eternity' which upheld the superior 'universal Knowledge' of the classical writers and poets.[194] His French precursors included the satirist Jean de la Bruyère, who believed that the timelessness of the classics was 'as much to do with the present as with the time they were written' because human nature was 'unchanged'.[195] Richard Bentley was among those who opposed the view, believing that society had moved on – with modern thought, morality and religious beliefs having superseded classical ideas – and that Homer, far from elevating minds to 'aspiring thoughts', wrote his epics to be 'sung by himself for small earnings and good cheer'.[196]

Particularly relevant to Pope was the fact that also on the side of the 'ancients' was his friend, Jonathan Swift, whose *Tale of a Tub*, composed between 1694 and 1697, was published in 1710. In 1713, as part of the emerging 'coffee-house' culture, Pope formed the Scriblerus Club in London with Swift, John Gay and others. Scriblerus was a reference to a *scribler*, the

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[190] Pope himself commented on how while the 'use of pompous expressions for low actions or thoughts' was 'unfit for Epic Poetry', it was 'the perfection of the Mock Epick'. Quoted in Fanning, p. 656.
[191] Pope, Preface to *The Iliad of Homer*, p. xlv.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Reynolds, 'Pope's *Iliad*: A "comprehensive View"', p. 6.
[194] Quoted in Anthony Collins, *A Discourse of Free-Thinking, Occasioned by the Rise and Growth of a Sect called Free-Thinkers, 1713* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2009), p. 7.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid., p. 6.

contemporary term of contempt for a talentless writer, especially one prone to scholarly pedantry

and dogmatism. There is a certain irony in this as, where Chapman was mocked for 'ink-horn

terms', Pope was similarly derided for pompousness. When we read his translation of the *Iliad*,

said Leslie Stephen, 'We are not listening to Homer's Agamemnon but to Agamemnon in a full-

bottomed wig.'[197] Yet what Pope learned about epic through his work on versions of the *Iliad*

and the *Odyssey* was put to superlative use in his mock-epic poems, *The Rape of the Lock* and *The

Dunciad*, two masterpieces which couldn't have been written with such confidence, surely,

without Homer.

'What we do not want is bad writing hiding behind efficiency in ancient languages.' [198] Christopher Logue's 'account' of the *Iliad*

Donald Carne-Ross, who commissioned Christopher Logue's first translation of an extract from

the *Iliad* for a 1959 BBC Radio 3 programme, urged Logue to pay close attention to Pope's *Iliad*.

At the same time, he acknowledged that, while, with Milton's *Paradise Lost* 'at his back', Pope

could still 'animate the convention' of epic in terms that his own culture could understand, a

twentieth-century translator 'didn't have a hope in hell' of being able to create a 'formal

equivalent for Homer's diction' or to 'reanimate the heroic convention within which Homer

wrote'.[199] Logue had no knowledge of Greek and was openly hostile to the 'alternative line of

scholar-translators' who did.[200] 'These professors might have been reading Homer all their lives,'

he says, 'but he's failed to tell them what verse is … They do not write verse, they write blank

verse prose.'[201] Logue describes his methodology in first tackling lines of Homeric verse in a

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[197] Leslie Stephen, *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Frankfurt: Outlook Verlag, 2020), p. 37.
[198] Christopher Logue, quoted in Gillespie, p. 22.
[199] Donald Carne-Ross, 'Structural Translation: Notes on Logue's "Patrokleia"', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, (1962): 27–38 (28).
[200] Ibid. The most current and important scholarly translations of the *Iliad* at the time Logue was writing were by the Americans, Richmond Lattimore (*Iliad,* 1951), Robert Fitzgerald (1974) and Robert Fagles (1990).
[201] Christopher Logue, 'The Art of Poetry, No. 66' (interview), *Paris Review* 127 (Summer 1993): 254.

strange (Greek) alphabet: 'Knowing no Greek, I began work on the passage he [Carne-Ross]

chose for me by studying the same passage in the translations published by Chapman (1611),

Pope (1720), Lord Derby (1865), A. T. Murray (1924) and E. V. Rieu (1950).'[202]

Writing later to Logue about the success of his first published extracts from the *Iliad*,

Patrocleia (Book 16, London, 1962), Carne-Ross praises Logue's 'patchwork' technique, his habit

of taking ideas, images and references from a plethora of different literary, political and cultural

sources: 'You bring something from Ezra [Pound], a shot from an Eisenstein film, a bit of

Chinese, etc., yet it all seems like Homer.'[203] The word 'patchwork' could also be applied to

Logue's physical methodology in his translations of the *Iliad*. He put together the text in a

fragmentary way, with no apparent chronological rationale, and published it in parts over a

period of 43 years. Like Pope, he wrote on scraps of paper and envelopes. He also used news

clippings and advertisements which he stuck onto a continuous spool of printing paper round

his room to help him keep track of characters, scenes and battles. After the publication of

Patrocleia came *Pax* (Book 19, 1967), *GBH* (Book 21, Kenyon Review, 1980), *War Music* (Books

16–19, incorporating revised versions of *Patrocleia, Pax* and *GBH,* 1981), *Kings* (Books 1 and 2,

1991) and *The Husbands* (Books 3 and 4, 1994.) All versions to that date were collated and

published as *War Music* in 2001. Then followed, in 2002, *All Day Permanent Red* (Books 5 and 6)

and, in 2005, *Cold Calls* (containing elements of Books 5, 8 and 9). A final version was published

posthumously in 2015 (Faber and Faber) under the title *War Music: An Account of Homer's Iliad*,[204]

with an introduction and notes by Christopher Reid. Any reader hoping to find resolution or

redemption in Achilles' *anagnorisis* (realisation of, and shame at, his own lack of nobility in his

treatment of Hector's corpse) and his eventual change of heart in response to Priam's plea for its

return in Book 24 would be disappointed. Book 24 was never fully translated by Logue, although

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[202] Carne-Ross, *Structural Translation*, p. 56.
[203] Quoted in Power, 'Christopher Logue, Alexander Pope and the Making of *War Music*', p. 762.
[204] Christopher Logue, *War Music: An Account of Homer's Iliad*, republished in a paperback edition (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017). All quotations are from this edition.

an addendum, at the end of the 2015 *War Music*, 'Big Men Falling a Long Way: Fragments from Books 10–24', includes a small selection of draft materials and does end with Hector's body being returned to Priam, 'Wrapped in the cloth of gold' (p. 335).

Logue's own idea of verse was profoundly influenced by modernism and the Imagist movement, with Pound's concept of epic being reimagined through a series of 'brilliant moments' and 'luminous details' being paramount. 'Don't bother with the WORDS,' Pound famously said, 'translate the MEANING!'[205] His book *The Cantos,* beginning with a loose translation of an extract from the *Odyssey*, and his translations from Chinese were cases in point, demonstrating his belief, says Simeon Underwood, that the target text can be radically different and still 'at least an equal to the source text'.[206] Christopher Reid says that, while using Homer's *Iliad* as his 'guiding text', Logue's purpose was not to make a translation but a new poem. The 'setting, principal characters and plot' are Homer's but the work had to be changed, 'fit to address the realities of our own … era'.[207] Hence the 'speeded-up … cinematic reimagining of scenes', the 'racy … harsh and jarring language', the typographical experiments – all designed to shock us into what in Homer still remains 'true and applicable to our condition'.[208] It was a new way, in fact, of bringing Homer to the public which Logue does through a range of techniques that include mixing classical registers with overt anachronisms: cars, taxis, yachts, rockets at Cape Kennedy, trampolines, windcheaters and radium all make appearances. In 'The Husbands', Paris is described as being knocked backwards by a spear and 'Bent like a gangster in his barber's chair'(p. 120).[209] While waiting for Achilles to respond to Agamemnon over their quarrel about Briseis, the stillness is like the stillness in 'Atlantis when the big wave came/… or Christmas morning by the sea' (p. 18); 'Consider planes at touchdown – how they poise' (p. 271);

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[205] Underwood, p. 4.
[206] Underwood, p. 5.
[207] Logue, *War Music*, p. ix.
[208] Ibid.
[209] '… he must have got the image from a movie like Scorsese's *The Godfather* (1972).' Quoted in Matthew Reynolds, 'Epic Zoom: Christopher Logue's Homer (with Anne Carson's *Stesichorus* and Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*)', The Poetry of Translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1–26 (p. 12). <doi.10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199605712.003.0022> [accessed 28.2.2019]

Thackta's[210] 'articulated fish' medallion is described as 'His luck, his Christopher' (p. 254).

Sometimes the anachronism is in the use of slang as when the camp followers

> Nipped down into the ditch to strip the dead
> And cosh the wounded into hell[211]

or when Hector 'jived' on his heel as Ajax lunged at him (p. 229).

Streaming through Logue's *Iliad*, and at times elevating it to the level of predecessors such as Chapman and Pope as a truly contemporary vision, expressive of its own culture, is its cinematic qualities. Logue wrote performance poetry as well as scripts for theatre and film, including Ken Russell's *Savage Messiah* (1972). This proved to be a vital element in his ability to reanimate an ancient and revered text in a way that was fresh and relevant.[212] 'Picture the east Aegean sea by night' (p. 9), the poem starts; then, 'And on a beach aslant its shimmering/Upwards of 50,000 men/Asleep like spoons beside their lethal Fleet.' The next stanza continues with an imperative, followed by a stream of active verbs 'Now look along that beach, and see/… a naked man/Run …/Then kneel … burst into tears, and say "Mother, …"'. The film directions continue throughout the whole poem, sweeping the reader (or listener) along with the momentum of the story. 'Cut to the strip between the rampart and the ditch' (p. 28); 'A roar of wind across the battlefield.//A pause.//And then//Scattering light (*WM*, 'Cold Calls', p. 187). There are also musical cues – 'Music' – 'An arch of bells/a tree of china bells … Backed by Egyptian clarinets/… Then quadrophonic ox-horns' (p. 104). Sometimes narrative lines and dialogue are interspersed, making syncopated, jazz-like rhythms, as in *GBH*, after Hector has killed who he thought was Achilles but discovers is Patroclus in Achilles' armour. He climbs down from his chariot and:

> Eyelight like sun on tin.
>   'My lord?'
> Turning Patroclus over with his foot,

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[210] 'Thackta' is one of Logue's randomly invented names, in this case for Euphorbus, who disables Patroclus before Hector kills him. The articulated fish pendant is Logue's version of the gold and silver hairclips in Homer.

[211] Christopher Logue, 'The Iliad: Book XVI: An English Version', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 1(2) (1962): 3–26 (15). <www.jstor.org/stable/20162776> [accessed 4/3/2021].

[212] This recording of Logue reading an extract from *All Day Permanent Red* captures his idiosyncratic reading/performance style: <https://poetryarchive.org/poet/christopher-logue/>

> 'Yes, Gray?'
> 'The Greek has gone for help.'
> 'I know.'
> His nostrils fluttering,
> 'Give me your axe,'
> His mouth like twine.
> 'My axe?'
> 'You – Manto.
> Shell this lookalike and load the armour up.'
> Tall plumes go bob.
> 'And you –?' (p. 257, ll. 1–13.)

The effect is gained by syllabics – six syllables/two syllables/ten syllables/two syllables/six

syllables/two syllables/… etc. The diction, with its two-syllable interjections, becomes

percussive and military, like raps on a snare drum: a war dance.

If Logue's innovative and experimental approach to translation is one of the greatest

strengths of his *Iliad*, his omissions and divergences from the source text often lead to flaws. It's

easier, says Underwood, to enumerate the similarities to Homer than the differences.[213] The fight

with Scamander is kept in, also some of the epic similes, some of the 'divine machinery' and

some of the big set pieces. Of the losses, Martin Hammond points to the parallels, the 'elaborate

forward and backward references … between characters and events',[214] which can add pathos or

irony. An example of this is the linked deaths of Sarpedon (Zeus' son), killed by Patroclus, who

is then lured on towards the walls of Troy by Zeus in revenge and wounded by Euphorbus but

killed by Hector; and Hector by Achilles in a hinge moment which deflects Achilles' anger from

Agamemnon and brings him into the fight again. In Logue, Patroclus' dying prophecy, that

Hector will meet the same end as his own at the hands of Achilles, is buried. Also lost is the

significance of the theme of fathers and sons. In Robert Fitzgerald's 1974 translation,

Euphorbus ('the best Trojan of his age/at handling spears')[215] is Panthous' son, and Homer

acknowledges the grief Panthous will suffer at the death of his son. When Hector is killed by

Achilles in Book 19, it is Priam, Hector's father, who mourns. This makes Priam's tears and

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[213] Underwood, p. 62.
[214] Martin Hammond, 'Introduction', *Homer: The Iliad* (Penguin Classics, 1987), p. xiv.
[215] Fitzgerald, p. 297.

Achilles' act of contrition, the returning of Hector's body to Priam in Book 24, a meaningful resolution to the paradoxes that weave through Homer's epic. By omitting such subtleties, Logue's version leaves *War Music* a lesser poem than its progenitor.

Logue also dispenses with most of the descriptive epithets ('grey-eyed Athena', 'rosy-fingered Dawn') and other forms of repetition. He cuts out many of the speeches or compresses them radically; skips over or merges the contents of many of the Books and omits key episodes, such as, in Book 18, the making of Achilles' shield and the corpse of Patroclus being carried back to the Greek camp. The 'Nightpiece' is a good example: compared to previous versions, Logue's is pared down to its bare bones. Sixty words in all, it starts:

> Eat by your fires
> Two hundred fires! Around each fire
> Five hundred men!

Homer's simile – about how the fires scattered across the plain resemble stars in the sky 'around the shining moon' – has vanished. The *enargeia* of Chapman's translation, where all our senses are engaged – the smell of roasting lamb, the taste of wine, the sound of the crackling campfires and horses munching their 'hard' oats – is lost. Logue's next lines introduce a harsh, sonic image, 'the sound of grindstones turning through the night'. Where Chapman's soldiers are taking a break in order to rest before the battle to come, Logue's are intent on sharpening their blades, losing the sense of ease and hiatus, dramatically used by Shakespeare,[216] which relaxes tension for an audience or reader before the contrast of high-energy action to follow. With Logue, we then zoom in from the wide, establishing shot of the campfire to a close-up shot of the men holding hands and looking into each other's 'frightened eyes'. Logue, once a soldier himself,[217] recalibrates the atmosphere of Homeric war imagined as an enthralling epic to the cold realities of twentieth-century war as mass destruction on an industrial scale.

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[216] For example, the campfire scene before Agincourt, in *Henry V*.
[217] In 1943, at seventeen, Logue saw active service in Palestine and spent sixteen months in a military prison, after which he was a lifelong pacifist, in 1958 joining the first of the Aldermaston Marches against nuclear war.

The remaining six short lines consist of a plea to Zeus – 'If only You would turn/Me into a god.' What is left unspoken is, 'Then I would be immortal and escape death' – the fate that Gilgamesh so desperately dreads and that lies at the centre of his own great epic. Despite losing the grand pageant of language that characterises the earlier 'Nightpiece', Logue's lines do capture an inkling of the true extent of the bleak and terrifying impact war has on its participants. In an interview with the *New York Times* in April 2003, just after the publication of *All Day Permanent Red*, Logue says:

> It seems to me that at one time or another during my life wars have been going on all around me. The ancient Greeks had Homer, and we have had Peter Arnett. What are we sacrificing language-wise? What are we gaining in imagery? [218]

Peter Arnett was a Pulitzer prizewinning journalist who brought back horrific war reports from the Vietnam and Gulf Wars for Associated News. For Logue, there were no ways of dignifying or aestheticizing death and carnage. Under the title of its first publication as 'The Fight Over the Body of Patroclus: Books 17 & 18 of the Iliad',[219] Logue's epigraph shows his anti-war feelings: 'The letters GBH stand for the charge of grievous bodily harm, which, after murder, is the most serious of offences against the person in English law.' Despite this declaration, there are countless instances where Logue seems to revel in the violence. Achilles says in *GBH*, 'I the paradigm/Of all creation's violent hierarchy',[220] and when Euphorbus/Thackta, who has struck the first blow against Patroclus, is killed, we are told that Menelaus 'poached his eyes and slammed and slammed/That baby face loose as a bag of nuts' until, with Thackta's 'fine, high scream/Dear to a mind inspired by violence', ringing in his ears, Menelaus 'Posted his blade between the runny lips', and 'Eased his malignant vigour with a sigh' (p. 225).

It seems strange that someone opposed to war should want to portray its brutality with so much lingering detail; yet, in itself, this was a reflection of what was becoming culturally

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[218] David Bowman, 'The Way We Live Now: Questions for Christopher Logue; Battle Lines', *New York Times*, 13 April 2003. [accessed 24/6/2020].

[219] Christopher Logue, 'GBH: The Fight over the Body of Patroclus: An Account of Books 17 and 18 of the *Iliad*', *The Kenyon Review* 2(1) (1980): 92–116 (92).

[220] Stephen Scully, 'A Homer for the Twenty-First Century', *Arion* 17(1) (Spring/Summer, 2009): 147–72 (151–2).

acceptable, perhaps even de rigueur, in the 1960s and 1970s. After the successful defence, in

1960, of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and the resulting shift of public opinion towards

liberalism, book and film censorship was greatly relaxed, allowing for the extreme, gratuitous,

physical and sexual violence of films like Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), based on

Anthony Burgess's 1962 dystopian novel of the same name. Kubrick withdrew the film in 1972

after it was said to have inspired violent 'copycat' incidents in the community.[221]

Although the *Iliad* is equally full of graphic scenes of carnage, the difference is that they

are balanced by elegiac, extended similes and poignant biographical details that help us relate to

the characters mentioned, however fleetingly. In Book 11, Iphidemus, son of 'fair-cheeked

Theano', who has been brought up by his grandfather, Cisses, 'in the fertile country of Thrace',

when killed by Agamemnon falls 'far from his wife, the new bride from whom he had had no

joy, though he had given so much for her';[222] and earlier on the same day, when Socus, the son

of Hippasus 'the brave charioteer', is brought down by Odysseus' spear thrust through his back,

between his shoulder blades, the detail we connect with is that, in terror, he had 'turned and

started to run'.[223] In stark contrast to the gleeful cruelty of Logue's account of the killing of

Euphorbus/Thackta, Robert Fitzgerald's translation is factual: Menelaus drives his spear 'straight

through the tender neck' of Euphorbus, who thuds down to the ground, his armour clanging

about his body, and his long hair, 'fair as the Graces',/braided, pinched by twists of silver and

gold' becomes bathed in blood.[224] As he lies in the dust, he is compared to an olive sapling that

has been nurtured on the hillside until grown into a flourishing tree with shimmering green and

silver leaves that is suddenly uprooted and thrown to the ground in a mighty storm – 'so

beautiful/had Panthous' son, Euphorbus, been,/when Menelaus killed him…'.[225] The intensity

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[221] The 1970s saw the release of a number of provocative films, in particular those that linked sex and violence, for example *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), both of which contained controversial rape scenes. British Board of Film Classification <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/education-resources/student-guide/bbfc-history/1970s>.

[222] E. V. Rieu, *Homer: The Iliad* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1950]), p. 187.

[223] Ibid., p. 186.

[224] Fitzgerald, p. 301.

[225] Ibid.

and pathos of the simile ameliorates the horror of the killing and provokes a sense of catharsis in the reader. 'These infrequent moments of grace,' Simone Weil says, 'suffice to convey with deep regret just what violence has killed and will kill again.'[226] The selectivity of Logue's treatment of the *Iliad* finds no space for such moments.

What Logue was aiming for was a much starker, more irreverent and caustic representation of Homer's war, and one that was exclusively masculine. George Steiner argues that the centrality of the *Iliad* in English culture is that its themes reflect a 'lyric masculinity'[227] of 'the boys' school, the all-male college, the regiment and the club', which all present an idealised yet 'unflinching vision of masculinity, of an order of values and mutual recognitions' that are 'radically virile'.[228] The self-identification with Homeric heroes that echoes through the poetry of the First World War, Steiner suggests, reflects 'an organic and organising homoeroticism', which could be interpreted as 'a singularly British puberty of spirit'.[229] This homoeroticism is certainly present in Logue's account of Achilles' grief over Patroclus – 'Achilles,/gripping the body of Patroclus naked and dead against his own,/while Thetis spoke' (p. 279); the image of the 'half naked men' standing close, 'thigh in thigh, mask twisted over iron mask/like kissing' (p. 234) and, tacitly, the image of 'Upwards of 50,000 men/Asleep like spoons beside their lethal Fleet' (p. 9). This conjures the association of 'spooning', the Welsh tradition of exchanging carved wooden love spoons to denote betrothal, and permission for young lovers to progress to intimacies such as lying together with the woman's body, held from behind by the man, tucked closely against his. Packed tightly together in this way, the word invests the image of the sleeping troops with an erotic charge.

Linked to the homoeroticism is casual misogyny. Aphrodite, in 'Cold Calls', is seen 'dressed/in grey silk lounge pyjamas piped with gold/And snakeskin flip-flops' (p. 19), as though

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[226] Quoted by Neil Corcoran, *Poetry & Responsibility* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, March 2014), p. 182.
[227] Steiner, *Homer in English*, p. xix.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Ibid.

she is 'treading a camp catwalk rather than walking the fields of Elysium'.[230] On the next page,

she is described as 'Our Lady of the Thongs' and a little later, as she steps into the river dressed

only in a towel, the river god (Scamander) begs to kiss her 'little inkum-dinkum toes', then her

knees, then her 'Holy Bum! … /The Bum of Paradise' (p. 199). The moving scene between

Andromache and Hector, where the tall plumes on Hector's helmet frighten his baby son, is

omitted. Throughout, Andromache is referred to merely as 'the she'.[231] In 'Cold Calls', when

Agamemnon tries to appease Achilles with gifts to compensate him for stealing Briseis, he

acknowledges that he was 'mad to take the she' (p. 212). His conciliatory gifts include, along with

'saddled, bridled and caparisoned' horses, 'Six tall shes' (p. 213). Also omitted, as Stephen Scully

points out, are Hector's soliloquy, prior to facing Achilles in Book 22, which paints a picture of

peacetime with young men and women 'cooing together in a secluded corner', and a full account

of Achilles' shield with its 'life-renewing scenes of communities at peace and young men and

women dancing together'.[232] Scully comments that it is hard to believe the *Iliad* would have

gained its stature in Western literature 'without mortal women being part of the story'.[233] Alice

Oswald, arguing that the *Iliad* is a vocative poem which speaks as much to the dead as to the

living and which draws on both pastoral lyric and 'the Greek tradition of lament poetry',[234]

focuses exclusively on the pathos of the biographies and extended similes in what she describes

as her 'excavation' of the *Iliad*. Similarly, other contemporary retellings by women seek to

establish recognition and restitution of women's thoughts, feelings and values in the

masculinised epic tradition, the exclusion of which has contributed to the overwhelming

marginalisation of women in the patriarchal discourse over thousands of years.[235]

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[230] Neil Corcoran, 'In Retrospect,' *Poetry & Responsibility* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 183.
[231] Scully, p. 164.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid., p. 165.
[234] Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 1.
[235] For example, Emily Hauser, *For the Most Beautiful*; Emily Wilson, *The Odyssey*; Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls*; Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles*.

Weil wrote that 'the true hero … of the *Iliad* is force',[236] yet, says Corcoran, the *Iliad* would be virtually unreadable if it were a poem only about force. Its acts of violence, 'while always accepted as necessary in the ethical code espoused by both Greeks and Trojans', need to be interrupted 'by moments in which the corpse-strewn ground is cleared … for the expression of things not to be comprehended under the rubric of force'.[237] It is this need to find mental and emotional anchorage in the *Iliad,* interludes where we can reflect on the real cost of all the young lives lost in terms of parents and families destroyed by grief, and of the putative grandchildren that will now never exist, that has been spoken of so eloquently by a later generation of poets, especially those of the First World War. Wilfred Owen changed the title of one of his most famous sonnets from 'Anthem for Dead Youth', referring to the loss of a generation of young men, to 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', widening the reference to include the next generation that would never be fathered and the effect of that loss on the young women of that era.[238] As well as the grief of bereaved individuals, society as a whole had been deprived of those on whom its future depended, as is reflected in Owen's haunting final line, suggesting a household in mourning: 'and each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds'.

Michael Longley's Iliadic 'killing fields'

Of all the poets who have attempted to find universality and contemporary relevance in the *Iliad* it is perhaps Michael Longley, with his short lyric poems inspired by Iliadic moments, who brings us closest of all to the intuitive subtexts that lie under the violent surface of Homer's epic. Lorna Hardwick shows how Longley uses the *Iliad* to explore the relationship between 'domestic and public emotions, behaviour and values' by employing a 'distinctive personal response as a

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[236] Quoted by Neil Corcoran, 'In Retrospect'*,* p. 182.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Wilfred Owen, 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', in Jon Stallworthy (ed.), *The Poems of Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), p. 76.

catalyst for realigning apparently polarized positions',[239] whether these are defined by time, place, language or socio-cultural situation. Longley's sensitivity to the impact of the First World War on individuals and communities as well as on literature led him to 'explore analogies with the violence and pathos of the Troubles that re-emerged in the late 1960s in the Six Counties of Northern Ireland' that were still 'part of the United Kingdom and divided from the Republic of Ireland'.[240] The moment of Euphorbus' death, for example, made obscenely brutal in *War Music*, becomes, with Longley, a moving sonnet that is both true to Homer and, at the same time, completely relevant to a twenty-first-century reader. 'Boy-Soldier' starts:

> The spear-point pierces his tender neck.
> His armour clatters as he hits the ground
> Blood soaks his hair, bonny as the Graces',
> Braids held in place by gold and silver bands.[241]

We are then taken straight into Homer's extended simile of a sapling, this one reared in a beauty spot close to the home of the imagined reader, uprooted by a spring blizzard which 'blows in from nowhere'. This is Euphorbus, son of Pantheus, but he has also been uprooted from the battlegrounds of Troy to twentieth-century Ireland where he's a 'boy-soldier' in 'the London Scottish, say,/The Inniskillings, the Duke of Wellington's – '.[242]

As Hardwick says, Longley has made lyric, rather than epic, 'a major medium for the reception and rewriting of Homer'.[243] Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1939 of English parents, Longley read classics at Trinity College Dublin, so in terms of the translation of epic, he doesn't fit the mould of Chapman, Pope and Logue. Yet his importance in using Homer 'as a site for the reformulation of the relationships between translation and new work and between

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[239] Lorna Hardwick, 'Degrees of Intimacy: Michael Longley's Poetic Relationship with Homer', *Classical Receptions in Drama and Poetry in English from c. 1970–2005*, Open University. <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays/poetry/case-study-1-michael-longley> [accessed 14.7.2020], para. 7 of 14.

[240] Hardwick, para. 8 of 14.

[241] Michael Longley, *The Stairwell* (London: Cape, 2014), p. 29.

[242] Ibid.

[243] Hardwick, para. 5 of 14.

English and Irish literary traditions'[244] cannot be underestimated. His father fought in the First World War, and it is this strong identification, both with his father and with the First World War, that illuminates his Homeric work. 'When I read a poem like "Dead Man's Dump" by Isaac Rosenberg,' Longley says, 'I feel as though it's the young Aeschylus or the young Sophocles walking on the muddy duckboards …', an image that helped him 'to deal with the emerging nightmare of the Troubles'.[245] The fact that Longley, after living with his earlier experience of the classics for so many years, returned to the 'Homeric adventure'[246] in his fifties and sixties gives his work a welcome emotional maturity and ability to connect with difficult or emotional subject matter. Homer, he says, empowered him to comment obliquely on the Northern Irish Troubles and to push 'against the narrative momentum' and 'freeze-frame' passages to 'release their lyric potential'.[247] Examples of this are his two 'belated lamentations' for his parents, transposing Laertes from the *Odyssey* to a Tuscan hillside, where he becomes Longley's depressive father, tending his vines in his 'gardening duds', complete with 'a goatskin duncher' – the 'quaint Belfast dialect for a flat cap'.[248] In the second poem, 'Anticleia', where the speaker (Longley) meets his mother in Hades but is unable to embrace her, Longley says, 'I was not concerned with the narrative. I was looking for an intense lyric.'[249]

In 1994, Longley produced five 'reflections' of the *Iliad*, 'The Helmet', 'The Parting', 'The Campfires', 'The Scales' and 'Ceasefire'. At only two lines long, 'The Parting', describing the leave-taking of Hector and Andromache, is particularly intense. 'The pathos,' explains Longley, 'is in the brevity':[250]

> He: 'Leave it to the big boys. Andromache.'
> She: 'Hector, my darling husband, och, och,' she.

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[244] Ibid.

[245] Fran Brearton, '"Walking Forwards into the Past": An Interview with Michael Longley', *Irish Studies Review* 18 (Spring 1997): 35–9 (37).

[246] Michael Longley, 'Lapsed Classicist', p. 99.

[247] Ibid.

[248] Ibid., p. 100.

[249] Ibid., p. 101.

[250] Ibid., p. 103.

'The Helmet' adds a second layer of intimacy to the couple's domestic life with a description of the key scene where the nodding plumes of Hector's helmet frighten his baby son. In 'Ceasefire', the 200-line description of Priam's visit to the Greek camp to beg Achilles to return Hector's body is condensed into 14 lines and begins:

> Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
> Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
> Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
> Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.[251]

Longley moves the moment when, in tears, Priam kneels before Achilles and pleads for mercy, to the end of the episode:

> I get down on my knees and do what must be done
> And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.[252]

The poem was published by the *Irish Times* immediately following the IRA's declaration of a ceasefire on 31 August 1994. Its effect was 'dynamic and rippled through the community, both North and South'.[253] As Hardwick says, 'These poems … explore the destructiveness of cultures that are based on emulation of ancestors' capacity for killing.' The sequence culminates in 'recognition that the cycle of revenge can only be interrupted by acts of peace'.[254]A brilliant example of how poetry can and does have a place in politics.

Commenting on how Homer's 'magical simile' about the campfires of Troy has often reminded him of County Mayo where in 'light-free darkness one can gaze up into the depths of the Milky Way', Longley says it seemed natural to him to include place names and features from 'my corner of the Mayo landscape'.[255] His 'campfires scene' begins:

> All night crackling camp-fires boosted their morale
> As they dozed in no man's land and the killing fields.[256]

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[251] Ibid., p. 104.

[252] Ibid., p. 105.

[253] Ibid.; Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, in Noel Duffy and Theo Dorgan(eds), *Watching the River Flow: A Century in Irish Poetry* (London: Poetry Society, 1999), pp. 222–3.

[254] Lorna Hardwick, 'Degrees of Intimacy', *Classical Presences in Irish Poetry after 1960: The Answering Voice*, <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greekplays/poetry/case-study-1-michael-longley> [accessed 4/3/2021], para. 8 of 30.

[255] Longley, 'Lapsed Classicist', p. 104.

[256] Michael Longley, 'The Campfires', in *The Ghost Orchid*, p. xx.

Immediately, the poem brings us into the twentieth century with its reference to 'no man's land',

a medieval term that was re-instituted in the First World War for the stretch of land between the

trenches of opposing armies; and the 'killing fields' which referred to the Cambodian genocide

of 1975–9. Both these terms have profoundly disturbing psychological and societal resonances

for the post-1950s generations who have grown up used to seeing, in close-up, the terrifying

reality of war and genocide on their television and cinemas screens. Like Logue, Longley's poems

are anti-war, yet his approach is far subtler, contrasting the vulnerability of the men 'dozing' by

the cheerfully 'crackling' fire with the cold menace of the final seven words which stun like a

bolt. The lyricism of the half rhymes and the rippling 'l' sounds – 'All', 'crackling', 'morale',

'land', 'killing', 'fields' – cascades downwards through the following nine lines with 'balmy',

'constellations', 'resplendent, 'dazzling', 'clearance', unveils', 'boundlessness', 'all', 'hill-tops',

'headlands', 'Allaran', 'Killary', 'salmon', 'smiles', 'townland', 'sparkled', coming to rest, briefly, at

'Ilium' before spilling on to the end of the poem with 'relaxing', 'fire-light', 'shuffling' and

'barley'. Longley's method, he says, is to 'combine free rendition of source texts with original

lines'.[257] Knowing Greek gives him an advantage in terms of prosody. When Daniel Mendelsohn,

in his article in the *New Yorker* in 2011, 'Englishing the Iliad',[258] praises Robert Fagles's version of

lines from Book 13, an extended simile comparing the massed ranks of Trojan troops preparing

for battle to waves breaking on a shore during a storm at sea, it is because of how Fagles, being a

classicist, is able to capture the sound effects of the original which, like Longley's 'Campfires', is

full of liquid 'l's (*aellêi*, 'maelstrom'; *polla*, 'many'; *ep' alla*, 'others hard behind', *ep'alloi*):

> Down the Trojans came like a squall of brawling gale-winds
> blasting down with the Father's thunder, loosed on earth …[259]

The other great strength of Longley's version is its imagery. The 'boundless' elemental

spaciousness of the starry night sky, the landscape stretching out as far as the eye can see and the

[257] Longley, 'Lapsed Classicist', p. 110.

[258] Daniel Mendelsohn, 'Englishing the Iliad: Grading Four Rival Versions', *New Yorker*, 31 October 2011.

[259] Homer, trans. Robert Fagles, *The Iliad* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 367.

river running down to the sea are juxtaposed with homely, local details: the 'hill-tops' and

Scottish-Irish 'glens' of 'Tonakeera', the specificity of 'Allaran' and 'Killary' being the places

where the 'tide/Turns' (made by a sinuous enjambment into a wonderfully physical sensation for

the reader) and the salmon running homeward. Pope's 'conscious swains' have once more

returned to being a simple 'shepherd' on his way home at night, enjoying the lights twinkling in

the town. It's easy to imagine that, spread out before him, they look like 'a thousand fires' and

that round each fire are fifty men, as Homer has told us, and that the horses shuffling next to the

chariots are munching oats and barley that are 'shiny' (that one word meaning they are also

hard), so managing to give a rendering of the *Iliad* that captures the flavour of the original while

at the same time being utterly contemporary.

While Longley's versions of Homer may be the ones that many contemporary readers

will relate to most strongly, it has to be remembered that these are short lyric poems and so

cannot really be compared to epic in terms of the 15,000 lines of hugely complex, extended,

novelistic narrative that Chapman, Pope and Logue had to contend with. Nevertheless, as Lorna

Hardwick says, Longley's poetry 'creates a different perspective on the relationship between

translation and new work by using close translation as a poetic device *within* his rewritings and by

using Homeric images to trigger metapoetical reflections'.[260]

In determining how the poetic relationship with Homer is assessed, she suggests, we

should look at aspects which are 'internal' to the new work, such as 'how Homeric episodes and

poetics are embedded' in a way that allows room for the reader to 'actualise' meaning for

themselves. This is a requirement, for Homerists and non-Homerists alike, whether or not the

translator has a knowledge of the source text.

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[260] Hardwick, para. 3 of 14.

Chapter Three: Reflections on *Gilgamesh Retold*

Going back to my earliest drafts of the poem gives an idea of the early decisions that were made

and how they came about. In 2012, I started work on a transliteration of the Prologue of the *Epic*

of Gilgamesh into Akkadian, cleaving to the advice on p. 5 of Martin Worthington's *Complete*

Babylonian, 'How to Translate':

    i.   Copy out transliterated sentence

    ii.   Write down the vocabulary as you look it up

    iii.   Write down the normalization of the transliteration

    iv.   Leave plenty of space for notes

    v.   Allow half a side of A5 per five-word sentence

    vi.   Each sentence will take several minutes to start with

    vii.   Make a photocopy of the key and glossary

My first day's work yielded a few lines:

Line 1.

        sá | nag-ba | i-mu-ru | is-di |ma-a-tisá = which/who|nag-ba =
        everything/depth|i - mu- ru = he sees/ saw|is -di = foundations | ma-a-ti =
        land

Line 2.

        [al ka] . ti |i-du-a |ka-la-[a] | mu|ha-as-su
        [al ka] .ti = proper ways |i-du-a = knows |ka-la-[a] = entirety | mu = he?/ |ha-
        as-su = understands

Line 3.

        Gis -gím - mas | sa | nag-ba | i - mu - ru | is-di |ma-a-ti
        Gis – gím – mas = Gilgamesh |sa = who|nag-ba = everything/ the depths |i-
        mu-ru = sees/saw|is-di = foundations |ma-a-ti = land

Roughly strung together, this resulted in:

        Who sees/saw everything, land foundations
        Proper ways knows entirety he understands
        Gilgamesh who sees/saw everything, land foundations
        Proper ways knows entirety he understands.

Or as Andrew George puts it:

> He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation,
>   [who] knew …, was wise in all matters!
> [Gilgamesh, who] saw the Deep, the country's foundation,
>   [who] knew …, was wise in all matters.[261]

Or Benjamin R. Foster:

> He who saw the wellspring, the foundations of the land,
> Who knew […], was wise in all things.[262]

I realised that painstaking translation and finding slight alternatives for some words ('everything'/'Deep'/'wellspring') would be a fruitless task, resulting in a version like many others, with just a few slight changes. By 19 October 2013 (having just started my PhD studies at Goldsmiths), I was still trying to find anchorage in the Akkadian text. For the passage where Gilgamesh meets the tavern keeper, Siduri, translated by Andrew George as: 'My friend whom I loved so dear,/Who went with me through every danger.'[263] My slang version started:

> My best mate, my main man
> who stuck by me through thick and thin.
> Gilgamesh, my best mate, my main man
> who stuck by me through thick and thin.

I was still using copious amounts of repetition and producing a cut-up prose translation rather than a poem. Because of this, when it came to tackling the lead up to the sex marathon episode, p. 6 in George's version, I had to push myself out of my comfort zone to try to capture the coarseness of the trapper's father's advice to his son as to how to deal with the fact that Enkidu is emptying his traps:

> When the wild bloke comes
> to the waterhole, get her [Shamhat] to strip naked,
> lie down and open her legs – once he's
> fucked her, the herd will reject him,
> he'll be an outcast and easier to deal with.

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[261] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 1.
[262] Benjamin R. Foster (ed. and trans.), *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.), p. 3.
[263] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 55.

Again, this is not poetry, neither is it very good prose. I was still finding my way into the project,

and my eventual decision on this particular passage was to cut it altogether as I felt it didn't add

to the story or underlying symbolism. I realised that I would have to make the translation in the

same way that Ferry, Morgan, Chapman, Pope and Logue had done – by studying previous

translations and related texts. By December 2013, I was experimenting with a prose version and

looking at Ted Hughes's translations of Ovid to see how he uses terse, muscular diction to

energise his poetry. I compared his description of Chaos in *Tales from Ovid* with Dryden's 1717

translation – Book I, lines 7–12:

> Before the seas, and this terrestrial ball,
> And Heav'n's high canopy, that covers all,
> One was the face of Nature; if a face:
> Rather a rude and indigested mass:
> A lifeless lump, unfashion'd, and unfram'd,
> Of jarring seeds; and justly Chaos nam'd.[264]

Hughes's bumpy and more rugged free verse lines read:

> Before sea or land, before even sky
> Which contains all,
> Nature wore only one mask –
> Since called Chaos.
> A huge agglomeration of upset.
> A bolus of everything – but
> As if aborted.[265]

The lines 'A bolus of everything – but/As if aborted' became my benchmark for explosive

diction and economy of language. I applied it to my own prosody wherever possible. For

example, in Chapter 12 of *Gilgamesh Retold*, where Ur-shanabi the boatman instructs Gilgamesh

to chop down trees to make punting poles for their journey across the Sea of Death, the lines

'And each must have a bole of equal girth/and each be buffed and finished with a boss' were

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[264] Homer, trans. John Dryden, *The Metamorphoses* (California: CreateSpace, 2020), p. 5.
[265] Ted Hughes (trans.), *Tales from Ovid* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 3.

written with Hughes's plosive consonants ghosting beneath them. By January 2014, I was

thinking of adding material, an Introduction or Afterword on Sumerian customs, deities and

their relationship with mortals and on how sources such as Samuel Noah Kramer were directing

my approach. This reading greatly influenced my understanding of women's roles in Sumerian

society.

In February 2014, I had a breakthrough in that, with my collaborator, Adnan Al-Sayegh,

I was writing (and translating with Adnan from Arabic) some set pieces for a performance in the

Stevenson Theatre at the British Museum. One of the pieces, which I performed to oud music

specially composed by myself, was 'Ninsun's Prayer to the Sun God, Shamash', Tablet Three of

the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and my Chapter Five. I knew that Ninsun, a minor goddess and

Gilgamesh's mother, was known as 'Wild Cow Ninsun' and wondered why this should be

thought of as a suitable epithet. My first lines answered this:

> A wild cow in the wilderness
>   is a moving oasis
> a wild cow brings her shadow
>   a wild cow brings comfort.

By comfort, I meant companionship and milk, an animal milk float or Mr. Whippy. Although in

the final version, I cut these lines, they were at this early stage a way into the mythic qualities of

the verse. The fact that it was for performance was also key as I used repetition and alliteration:

> Seven times she went | into the sanctum
> Seven times crossed | the sacred threshold
> Seven times smoothed | herself with oils.[266]

There were also sung lines which were an invocation to the sun god, Shamash, which I heard in

my head as similar to English plainsong and provided a musical score for. This helped me to see,

or hear, the epic more in terms of sung prosody, or at least to continue to exploit more sonic

registers.

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[266] Lewis, *Gilgamesh Retold*, p. 41.

In May 2014, I have a note in my logbook saying, 'The performative aspects of the text become more and more evident, and this seems to be the way to go.' Another note suggests having a 'paean' or argument at the beginning of each chapter to set up the story in advance, getting rid of the need for a narrator, or for long narrative passages. Yet another note suggests trying to echo lines or half-lines from other versions (such as Andrew George's). One of these was the spine-tingling 'When may the dead see the rays of the sun?', Tablet Nine in Andrew George's version, p. 71, line 14. Another describes Enkidu as 'the … offspring of silence',[267] a line that directly influenced my own description of Enkidu, first appearing in a forest glade, in Chapter One, p.19, of *Gilgamesh Retold.* By November 2014, I had become preoccupied with the difference between lyric and epic/narrative voices. In my notes on 9 November 2014, I say, 'It is harder to get the intensity of lyric into epic, especially when performance is taken into account.' Then, 'Aristotle says "the writer (of plays) is a maker of plots" – what is needed are actions and consequences.' I found that Daljit Nagra's *Ramayana,*[268] while full of boisterous energy, lacked the mysterious power and interiority of earlier versions; but as a set text for schools (Nagra used to be a school teacher), it was accessible and even fun – the ideal introduction to the myth for young people and a way of opening up the text to a far wider readership. In a supervision session on the following day, I was asked to consider the following questions:

i.   Who is telling the story?

ii.   Who is it for?

iii.   Can it be told in any order?

iv.   Can there be different registers?

In the same week, I tackled George's Tablet Eight, the Death of Enkidu, where Enkidu's delirium creates a moving and unusual lyricism. 'O door of woodland that has no [sense]', he

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[267] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 5.
[268] Daljit Nagra, *The Ramayana* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013).

begins, then reproaches it for allowing him to sicken, curses it, and reduces Gilgamesh to tears as

his rambling diatribe, effectively broken up by many lacunae where tablets have been damaged,

moves on. Next he curses the trapper, then Shamhat, who, he predicts, will end her days as a

common prostitute, touting for trade at 'the junction of the highway', her feet skinned by thorn

and briar, abused by both drunk and sober customers. When Gilgamesh reminds his friend of

Shamhat's kindness to him, Enkidu relents and reverses his curse to a blessing that she will

always be desired and paid with 'lapis lazuli and gold!'[269]

This, for me, led to another breakthrough in style as I wanted to write a soundscape

suggestive of consciousness ebbing away towards death, as Enkidu first fights against, then

succumbs, to it. I wanted to create a sense of simultaneity, while being constrained by the linear

progression of text on a page. I also wanted it to be polyphonic, with sounds and answering

echoes:

It is almost beyond

　　　… it is almost beyond hearing
　　　light crowns, is born, a delicate shell
　　　a tentative cavity of mesh and strands[270]

Because the context is delirium, I felt that the 'storytelling' could be impressionistic,

interrupted by information about what was happening concurrently – '[Shamhat] dreams of

thorns and rags', 'his lungs are turning back into forests' – in the form of lists, prefaced by the

word 'while'.

I had now written several chapters in different styles and I liked the way that such

switching between modes kept the story fresh and lively. The easiest storytelling mode, I

discovered, was blank verse in iambic pentameter. The first chapter I translated in blank verse

was Chapter Twelve, 'Gilgamesh at the Edge of the World', where Gilgamesh meets the tavern

keeper, Siduri, a mysterious demi-goddess shrouded in veils. This is where myth meets fable as

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[269] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 55–8.
[270] Lewis, *Gilgamesh Retold*, p. 79.

Siduri is the equivalent of the old woman who lives in the forest in folktales and shows the

heroine or hero which way to go, giving them a talisman for luck. I had an incredibly strong

image of Siduri and her tavern, partly because of the way the scene in my play *After Gilgamesh*[271]

was dramatised by Pegasus Theatre. The combination of lighting, a visually powerful set and a

muslin-swathed actor playing Siduri left an indelible impression on me which influenced my

approach to writing the same scene in *Gilgamesh Retold*. This was the second chapter I wrote in a

mainly Anglo-Saxon register. This made it easy and effective to perform, and I did so many

times in different venues. After a conversation with the Iraqi poet and translator Dr. Salah

Niazi[272] about the importance of perspective in Gilgamesh, I started to see each scene in terms

of close-up, middle distance and long shot; and this filmic element was commented on by Hetta

Howes in her *TLS* Review of 21 December 2018, 'Lines of Blood and Baffled Eyes: Retelling

Great Stories from a Female Perspective': 'In her vivid, even cinematic translation, the poet

Jenny Lewis engages with her source text, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, on a "subliminal level" rather

than treating it with reverence as a historical artefact'.[273] Chapter 4 of *Gilgamesh Retold* is also told

in blank verse and uses perspective as Enkidu, leaving his forest for the first time, watches the

vista of hills and wooded valleys before him come to life with the rising sun:

> Ahead were hills that leaned against the sky
> At first dark green then pale and paler still
> And wooded valleys echoing with birds …[274]

At evening, Enkidu and Shamhat come to a shepherd's camp. They smell the scent of 'herbs and

roasting lamb' and come into the firelit circle where Enkidu is plied with beer until drunk.

Dancing tipsily, we're told, his 'monstrous shadow shrank/And lengthened with the flickering of

the flames': I saw and heard it in my mind with the vividness of film, or real life.

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[271] Jenny Lewis, *After Gilgamesh*, directed by Yasmin Sidhwa, Pegasus Theatre, Oxford, 2012. *After Gilgamesh*, script published by Cardiff: Mulfran Press, 2012.

[272] Dr. Niazi, the distinguished Iraqi poet and translator (of Shakespeare and of James Joyce's *Ulysses*), was Head of Arab Programmes at the BBC for 30 years.

[273] Hetta Howes, 'Lines of Blood and Baffled Eyes: Retelling Great Stories from a Female Perspective', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 December 2018 https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/lines-blood-baffled-eyes/ [accessed 22.12.2018], paragraph 9 of 17.

[274] Lewis, *Gilgamesh Retold*, p. 33.

During 2014 and 2015, I made several important decisions, including that of pressing on with my method of telling chapters in different forms as a way of reflecting different voices interpreting the tale over thousands of millennia. The forms I found hardest were *ottava rima* and *terza rima* because of the constraints of rhyme. In retrospect, I recognise what a monumental achievement Pope's elegantly rhymed couplets are, even though I have reservations about applying this form to material which is almost exclusively about war and violent action. This is why, to my mind, Chapman's faster, more headlong momentum, enabled through enjambment (which Pope's end-stopped lines curtail), is a better vehicle for the *Iliad*.

My work was delayed in 2015 when I had to take a six-month break to have a major operation. Once I'd resumed, in 2016, I took stock of the chapters I had already written: The Prologue, Chapters One, Five (which also included chanting), Eight, Eleven and Fifteen were in unrhymed quatrains – some with a caesura indicated by a vertical divider, and some using commas or the balance and flow of the words themselves as guides to pace and stress. For example, in Chapter Eight, 'Inanna and Gilgamesh', I wanted to be more flexible with the lines. When Inanna is seducing Gilgamesh, she speaks flowingly – 'Come, love, into my sweet-smelling chamber/In a golden chariot studded with amber' (p. 69). To have an indicated caesura would have interrupted the smoothness of the sentences. I'd also written Chapters Four and Twelve as blank verse, Chapter Two as *ottava rima*, Chapter Thirteen as *terza rima* and Chapter Nine as script or polyphony. Other chapters had been partially developed. It was then that I realised I needed to rationalise the 'voices' speaking their chapters in their own different ways, and a hugely influential decision was taken in relation to the structure of the book.

I have always been fascinated by chiasmus, or mirroring, as a pattern in poetry, including epic. One of the greatest examples in English is, perhaps, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. The central book, Book Three, is about consummation where, almost at the centre of the Book itself, Troilus and Criseyde become lovers. In turn, the idea of 'centre' is mirrored by the story itself which takes place in the centre of the city (within a siege), in the centre of a house (which is

surrounded by a moat, gardens and a maze), in the centre of the bedroom quarters of the house,

in the inner sanctum of the bedchamber, in the central moment of consummation, where

Criseyde winds herself round Troilus like sweet 'wodebyndne'.[275] On either side, the chapters fan

out, mirroring each other – in Chapter 1, the narrator tells the story and warns of the dangers of

love. In Chapter 5, the prophecies come true as love turns to tragedy – Criseyde is given as a

hostage to Deiphobus in the Greek camp, and afterwards as a common prostitute to a leper

colony. Troilus allows himself to be killed in battle. In Chapters Two and Four, there are

exchanges of letters. The plotting and wooing in Chapter Two results in reversals and

complications in Chapter Four, while in both chapters there are Boethian hymns.

In order to make the chiastic structure of *Gilgamesh Retold*, I had to understand the spatial

relationship visually (I originally trained as a painter), and I made several maps of the narrative

arc on A3 paper to decide on order, and then laid the chapter summaries out on the floor with

the pivotal rejection of Inanna scene at the dead centre (Chapter Eight). The lines:

> You! You're only two thirds god!
> I'll strike the part of you that's human[276]

provide the fulcrum between the two halves of the story, mirroring the Andrew George,

Standard eleven-tablet version, where this episode occurs in Tablet Six, with a further five tablets

to follow. What follows in both cases is the same terrible revenge exacted by Ishtar/Inanna in

the form of Enkidu's death and Gilgamesh's descent into the wildest reaches of grief,

compounded by intense fear about his own mortality. This is why the line 'You're only two-

thirds god!' is so important; had Gilgamesh been entirely divine, he would have been

automatically immortal. The fact that he is one-third human and therefore must eventually die

propels the narrative of the rest of the epic.

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[275] Geoffrey Chaucer, in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 530.
[276] Lewis, *Gilgamesh Retold*, p. 71.

This is why, for me, this key episode needed to be developed and 'shaped' as a narrative through a feminist lens. When Ishtar/Inanna complains to her father, Anu, about Gilgamesh's insults, she is chided by him: 'Ah, but was it not you who provoked King Gilgamesh,/so he told a tale of foulest slander?'[277] In *Gilgamesh Retold*, the omniscient narrator suggests that the insults were indeed gratuitously foul and offensive by evoking the horror of stoning and of military ambush to describe their effect on Inanna – 'Like a shower of stones his insults hit/Like enemy troops his words attacked.'[278] One of the key points in the narrative where I added material comes later in the same chapter. As Inanna reels from the shock of his insults, Gilgamesh calls on his champion, Shamash the sun god, to help destroy the Bull of Heaven. Informed by Theodore Ziolkowski's discussion of twentieth-century feminist writers and critics who were 'scrutinising the work as ancient evidence for the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy'[279] and re-evaluating Sumerian attitudes to women, the idea that Shamash the sun god sees this as an opportunity to challenge Inanna's power is clearly articulated in *Gilgamesh Retold*, both by Shamash himself: 'Shamash saw he had a chance/A chance to equal great Inanna.'[280] And earlier by Gilgamesh:

> Gilgamesh felt his powers grow strong
> His two thirds god surged up inside.
> Had he not killed the giant Humbaba?
> Now he would humble holy Inanna.[281]

In order to give Inanna the importance I felt she deserved, I made much more of her ascent to heaven than the original text does, using repetition to suggest the covering of vast distances of time and space. This is an inversion of an account of Inanna's descent to the underworld, one version of which, by Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer,[282] shows Inanna preparing to visit her sister Erishkagel, Queen of the Underworld, to take part in funeral rites for Erishkagel's

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277 George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 50.
278 Lewis, p. 70.
279 Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us*, pp. 196–7.
280 Lewis, *Gilgamesh Retold*, p. 74.
281 Ibid., p. 70.
282 Wolkstein and Kramer, pp. 53–60.

husband. We're told that first 'She placed the *shugurra*, the crown of the steppe, on her head.' She continues the ritual by tying on a necklace of lapis lazuli, wrapping a royal robe round herself, binding on a breastplate, applying precious ointment to her eyes, slipping on a gold bracelet and taking up her lapis measuring rod and line. When she reaches the underworld, in order to pass through seven portals, she has to discard these symbols of authority one by one until 'Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.'

Other elements of this key chapter include examples of contraction and omission that typify my approach throughout the book. Where Gilgamesh's insults continue for 47 lines in the Standard version,[283] including a longer list of the fates of Inanna's past lovers, in *Gilgamesh Retold* I condense them to 24 lines. I chose to keep in the *allallu-bird*, or Bright-Speckled-Roller-Bird (probably a hoopoe) because of his name and because, after she has injured him, he cries from the trees in onomatopoeia, 'my wing, my wing, my wing'; and Ishallanu, her father's slave, who brought her dates in a basket when she was a child and whom she attempts to seduce. In the Prologue, I have gone back to the earlier Mesopotamian myth of how the world was birthed. Tiamat is a primordial goddess of the ocean, mating with Abzû (the god of fresh water) to produce younger deities. She symbolises the chaos of creation. I have interpreted the phrase 'He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation' as 'He who knew how the world began.' As it is thought that the epic might have been performed as a temple piece, in Chapter 5, 'The Goddess Ninsun Prays to the Sun God, Shamash', I imagined lines 21–35 being sung or chanted with music similar to the plainsong 'call and response' pattern of the Christian liturgy. In Chapter 6, 'Journey to the Cedar Forest', dreams and omens were central to Mesopotamian belief systems. Dreams were interpreted in various ways, sometimes, as in this chapter, the worse the dream, the better the augury. In Chapter Twelve, 'Gilgamesh at the Edge of the World', Siduri speaks to Gilgamesh in *emesal* or 'women's language'.

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[283] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, pp. 48–50.

It is not known what 'women's language' actually indicates. Gordon Whittaker in his

'Linguistic Anthropology and the Study of Eme-sal as (a) Women's Language' (Göttingen)[284]

suggests various scenarios which range from 'a discrete women's language', an 'archaic form of

Sumerian', a 'professional or class jargon', 'regional speech', 'mannered speech', 'effeminate

speech' (used by men and eunuchs as well as women), 'a soprano singing voice', a 'fine speech'

(used as a literary register), a 'lyrical expression' (used by poets) or even 'scribal errors'. *Eme-sal* is

often put into the mouths of goddesses (especially Inanna) and women but also, in an 'Ersemma

of Dumuzi', it is spoken by a fly who says to the goddess:

> É-kas-a-ka   é-girin-na-ka dumu-mu-lu-kù-zu zu-ke-ne dè-mu-un-ti-le
> Let the young of the wise one live in the alehouse and in the house of fruit![285]

Trying to find equivalence to *emesal* with some kind of 'women's language', I considered Hélène

Cixous's *Coming to Writing and Other Essays,* where she experiments with ways of describing her

own sexuality: 'I have an animale. It's a nannymale, a species of meowse, a he-or-she-bird … it

makes its shame in my nest.'[286] Yet I felt that such an intellectually driven, arcane treatment

wouldn't be a sustainable vehicle for engaged storytelling intended to widen the audience for

Gilgamesh.

Chapters Seven and Nine, on either side of Chapter Eight, both concern deaths – the

killing of the giant Humbaba and the death of Enkidu. These chapters mirror each other, being

impressionistic, polyphonic and in the form of scripts. Chapters Six and Ten both use forms of

repetition. I wanted to include some instances of repetition as it is such a key rhetorical element

of the original text, but I felt that using it copiously throughout the epic would slow the story

down too much. This is confirmed by one *Goodreads* review in which the writer, while praising

the book generally, says she found Chapter Six, 'Journey to the Cedar Forest', difficult to read

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[284] Gordon Whittaker, in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East* (2002).
https://www.academia.edu/750427/Linguistic_Anthropology_and_the_Study_of_Emesal_as_a_Womens_Language [accessed 26.3.2021], pp.1-11.
[285] Ibid., p.5.
[286] Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 35.

because of the repetition. She solved the problem by skipping the repetitions and just picking

out new material related to Gilgamesh's dreams. In Chapter Ten, 'Enkidu's Funeral', I based

Gilgamesh's lament on early Mesopotamian poetry, including the biblical 'Song of Songs', using

nature imagery, such as 'Like a fawn in the thicket you laid yourself down', and bridal imagery as

Gilgamesh veils his dead friend's face. The repetition in this case was in the form of a specular

poem, the first lines of the poem being repeated, in shortened form, backwards at the end. For

this chapter, I used details from my reading of Sumerian beliefs and mythology from which

sprang Bibbu the butcher, Quassa-tabat and the elders, wise-women, cleaners and sweepers of

the underworld.

Chapters Five and Eleven are both written in dimeter with a caesura. Both contain sung

passages. Chapters Four and Twelve are in blank verse. Chapters Three and Thirteen are written

in *terza rima*. I had written the Flood episode earlier, and it had been translated into Arabic and

published, in a dual language edition, by Mulfran Press[287] and performed at several venues. It was

only by laying the chapters out that I realized I had to insert another chapter of *terza rima* – hence

the insertion of new material in the form of the conversation between Shamhat and Enkidu in

the forest. Chapter Two and Chapter Fourteen are in *ottava rima*. This, again, is a difficult form,

the temptation being to add 'padding' for the sake of a rhyme or sound effect, instead of staying

within a strict narrative discipline. While Chapter Two adheres fairly closely to the original text,

Chapter Fourteen includes a 'redemption' passage which is not in the original, stemming, as it

does, from Judeo-Christian morality. This is an anachronism (similar to Chapman's religious

investment of the *Iliad*) and was inserted to give the tale an ending that a contemporary

readership would expect and could relate to. In my mind, Gilgamesh has to acknowledge his

mistakes before he can repent and ask forgiveness from the deities he has offended. Only then

can he move on from the catastrophes of his youth and assume the mantle of a chastened and

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[287] Jenny Lewis, *The Flood*, with Arabic translation by Ruba Abughaida and Adnan Al-Sayegh, and woodcuts by Frances Kiernan (Cardiff: Mulfran Press, 2017).

more responsible leader. Chapters One and Fifteen are in four-beat quatrains with a caesura – a

good performance register. The Prologue and Epilogue mirror each other as they are two parts

of a specular poem, the Epilogue repeating key phrases from the Prologue in a radically

condensed form which ends with: 'Gilgamesh knew./He understood.' This seemed to be a

fitting summing up of the whole point of the epic – a rite of passage which questions the value

of the heroic in favour of the importance of learning, acquiring wisdom and understanding, and

being able to change.

In 'How You Tell It', the final chapter of his book *The Life of a Poem: Gilgamesh*, Michael

Schmidt compares nine versions of the sexual relations between Enkidu and Shamhat in Tablet

Two of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, including my own version from *Gilgamesh Retold*, which, he feels, is

'fanciful'.[288] Apart from the killing of Humbaba I found the sex scene between Enkidu and

Shamhat the most problematic to interpret and write. If the 'Campfires' or 'Nightpiece' can be

used as a 'spot test' for versions of the *Iliad* by Chapman, Pope, Logue and Longley, the

seduction of the wild man, Enkidu, by the temple prostitute, Shamhat, serves the same purpose

for the Gilgamesh epic as a barometer for the way the translator has approached the epic; so

Schmidt's chapter is highly relevant. Tracing what he calls 'an index of the evolving fashions in

translation' through a 'handful of modern versions', he shows how poets and scholars have dealt

with one of Gilgamesh's most 'awkward' themes – the civilizing of Enkidu through sex.

The comparisons start with Campbell Johnson's 'relatively chaste' account[289] where

Shamhat is described as 'The girl, displaying her bosom', who is without bashfulness as she

ravishes 'the soul of him'. Enkidu then 'dallies' with the 'courtesan-girl' for 'six days, (aye) seven

nights'.[290] There's a sense of decorum and restraint here, reflected in the archaic language and

euphemisms. In E. A. Speiser's 1955 'prim'[291] version, 'The lass freed her breasts, bared her

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[288] Schmidt, p. 153.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid., p. 148.
[291] Ibid.

bosom' and again she 'was not bashful'. In Nancy Sandars's bestselling 1960 version, for the first

time, as Schmidt points out, Shamhat is 'given more agency ("she made herself naked and

welcomed his eagerness"): the poem understands her gendered perspective.'[292] For myself, this

acknowledgement of the fact that Shamhat, elsewhere described as a 'whore', 'harlot',

'courtesan', and 'The mag | azine| girl' and 'top shelf | girl', is actually a person with a mind as

well as a body, rather than a nameless 'she' as found in Logue's *War Music*, was an important

aspect of Sandars's interpretation and of my own favourable reception of it.

In Terry's 'Globish' version,[293] which Schmidt believes to be the one that is truest to the

spirit of the original, Shamhat the 'top shelf | girl' is instructed to 'Open | you leg | show

WILD | MAN you | love box'. Later, we're told:

> He come | all ov | er she | face+++
> ++++++| all ov |er she | +++hair
> ++++++| all ov |er she | breast+++
> Six day | and se | ven night | WILDMAN |~~screw the~~ | ~~sex girl~~[294]

In some episodes of Terry's *Dictator,* including the desertion of Enkidu by the wild animals he

has lived with for so long (which ends the above sex marathon passage), the strange, broken-up

diction and limited vocabulary work at a subliminal level, echoing Ted Hughes's idea of 'moving

towards the foreign'.[295] Schmidt suggests that within certain licences that the translator has

allowed himself, Terry 'deploys exclusively the formal conventions of Standard Babylonian

verse'.[296] At the same time, in terms of translation, Stuart Gillespie alerts us to the importance of

reorienting our literary history 'to accommodate women writers';[297] and, I would add, women

readers and critics. I can't believe that many women would find Terry's 'Globish' sex scene

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[292] Ibid., p. 149.
[293] Terry explained, at a conference at St. Anne's College, Oxford in May 2016 that his version of *Gilgamesh* uses the 1,500-word vocabulary of Globish (from 'global' and 'English') assembled by Jean-Paul Nerrière as a business language for the third millennium.
[294] Philip Terry, *Dictator* (Carcanet Classics, 2018), p. 21.
[295] Gillespie, p. 165.
[296] Schmidt, p. 155.
[297] Gillespie, p. 21.

moving or funny, as Schmidt suggests it is, because of its aggressive use of pornographic imagery.

At the BCLA 2016 'Salvage' Conference in July 2016, held at Wolverhampton University, I myself looked at five versions of the sex scene (see Appendix 4) and compared them with my own casting of Shamhat as a *hierodule* – the Greek word for a 'holy prostitute' – and considered the difference between a courtesan of that status and a prostitute to be found touting for trade by the barracks or at the city gate. We see the latter clearly from Enkidu's deathbed curse: 'The shadow of the rampart shall be where you stand!/[Thorn and briar] shall skin your feet!';[298] which he later reverses when rebuked by Gilgamesh: 'No soldier [shall be] slow to drop his belt for you,/obsidian he shall [give you], lapis lazuli and gold!'[299]

Gardner and Maier's version starts: 'The courtesan untied her wide belt and spread her legs,/and he struck her wildness like a storm.' The stanza concludes, 'Six days and seven nights Enkidu attacked, fucking/the priestess.' Notice the brutality of the language: 'he struck her', he 'attacked'. Robert Temple's version tells us that 'She had no shame for this,' immediately bringing in a Judeo-Christian perspective of a woman's shame and debasement in engaging in sex that surely has no place in the original context of a temple priestess carrying out a votive act. I wanted Shamhat to be seen as a girl or young woman who may be experiencing fear at the prospect of having sex with a wild man whose body is 'coated in hair like the god of the animals'.[300] I imagined, having lived all his life among gazelles and wild animals, Enkidu would approach her quietly and 'gentle her' by stroking her hair and skin, as you might do to gain an animal's trust.

> Stroking her hair | like the fur of an animal
> Stroking her thighs | like the flanks of an animal
> As he caressed her | he sang to her softly.

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[298] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 58.
[299] Ibid., p. 59.
[300] Ibid., p. 5.

The idea of singing in this episode came from a poem by Dr. Bahaa Abdelmegid, an Egyptian academic who contributed to an anthology, *The Land Between: Twenty-seven Poets Respond to Mesopotamia.*[301] His poem, on p. 28, was titled 'Shamhat and Enkidu' and, in lines 2–4 of the second stanza Shamhat says, 'It was not desire but worship/Where I sang hymns while/He was embracing me.' This interpretation gives Shamhat not merely human agency; it links her, both in person and spirit, to divinity. In my final version it is Enkidu who sings to Shamhat, a switch of roles that shows how deeply uncomfortable I felt about this episode. Even imagining Shamhat as a more experienced courtesan who is embodying the goddess as she copulates for six days and seven nights with Enkidu wasn't enough for me to ignore what I know of women and, as a woman, about female sexuality. My final version was:

> Inanna looked down | blessing the lovers
> Six nights, seven days | their bodies were joined
> Six nights, seven days | their flesh was one flesh
> Six days, seven nights | their souls were one soul.

The idea of 'souls' came from another Arabic source, Dr. Salah Niazi. When I suggested that the idea of 'souls' was an anachronism, Dr. Niazi disagreed, saying that it is a word that conjures what we mean *today* when we speak of a person's essence – and therefore in his eyes a permissible modern substitute for the original Babylonian. Josephine Balmer puts it well when she says that concerns surrounding sexuality are problematic for the translator of ancient texts, 'with each new interpretation over the years holding up a mirror to its own culture's sexual mores rather than those of the past'.[302] What is reflected depends on who is holding up the mirror.

My critical reading of the *Iliad* began to feed into my creative project and affect my interpretative decisions. This applied also to related feminist texts I was reading, such as Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*, with its graphic description of the noblewoman, Briseis, captured

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[301] Jenny Lewis (ed.), *The Land Between* (Oxford: The Poet's House, Oxford, 2013).
[302] Balmer, p. 45.

from Troy by the Greeks and first given to Achilles, then taken by Agamemnon, who knew that

her probable fate would be to be handed round the group of elite men before being downgraded

to become a camp prostitute, used by soldiers of all ranks until she was too old or sick to carry

on.[303] Joan Acocella of the *New Yorker* has called my version of Gilgamesh 'the most tender, the

most tragic – the one, I think, that might be recommended by feminist scholars'.[304] Howes

describes it as continuing the tradition of Angela Carter in bringing female stories to the surface

and 'a testimony to a growing demand for narratives which read between, and disrupt, party

lines.[305] At the same time, I have tried to understand the impetus behind criticisms. Michael

Schmidt dislikes the notion of Inanna blessing the lovers and says that 'The sacramental should

not play out in quite this way.' He adds that the formal constraints I gave myself 'add to rather

than refine the content'[306] of that sequence. Stephen Mitchell, in his popular edition, *Gilgamesh*,

says of Shamhat that if we want to 'appreciate her role as an ancient Babylonian cultic prostitute,

our imagination needs to bypass any filters of romantic love, Judeo-Christian morality, male

lubricity or female indignation'. [307] Yet in version after version of Gilgamesh that I have read, it is

'male lubricity' that is definitely *not* bypassed. As a servant of *eros*, Mitchell continues glowingly,

Shamhat is 'a vessel for the force that moves the stars', the force that, in Dylan Thomas's words,

'through the green fuse drives the flower'.[308] In Mitchell's version of the scene, there are many

added details – Shamhat lies with her legs apart 'touching herself'[309] before touching Enkidu's

penis and putting it inside her. The final details, in which Enkidu, exhausted, tries to catch up

with the herd but cannot, ring true. Unlike in Terry's *Dictator*, Shamhat does have agency and

does drive the action forwards in Mitchell's account, but it is still a reconstruction of the events

that is strongly male-centred.

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[303] Compare with Crisyede's fate in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and the fate of girls and women taken by ISIS and Boko Haram in recent years in the twenty-first century.
[304] Joan Acocella, 'How to Read "Gilgamesh"', *New Yorker*, 7 October 2019.
[305] Howes, paragraph 16.
[306] Schmidt, p. 154.
[307] Stephen Mitchell, *Gilgamesh* (London: Profile Books, 2005), p. 13.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ibid., pp. 78–9.

My version of Gilgamesh is one that is in tune with the life I live and the societal and ideological contexts I believe in. Susan Bassnett and André Lefevre, general editors of *The Translator's Invisibility*, by Lawrence Venuti, say in their general editors' Preface:

> All rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation … and in its positive aspect can help in the evolution of a literature and a society.[310]

Conclusion

During 2016–2017, my search to find a more nuanced way to retell the story of Gilgamesh, considering the immense historical and cultural differences involved, was given a new direction by Lawrence Venuti's advice: 'Because translation traffics in linguistic and cultural differences, it ought never to maintain the cultural and social status quo but always to challenge it.'[311] This gave me the courage to progress more freely and boldly with my translation. Additionally and unexpectedly, I made a new discovery. Seven years of submerging myself in the two core texts – the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* – have taught me to see, and hear, my own craft in a new way. During the same period, I was encouraged, frequently, by Adnan Al-Sayegh to come to his own monumental anti-war epic, *Uruk's Anthem,* with fresh eyes and ears. As I learned more about Arab history, literature and culture – with tropes and forms dating back to the pre-Islamic culture of Gilgamesh – I also learned about classical Arabic poetics, including the two predominant metres used in *Let Me Tell You What I Saw.* These are Mutaqārib (meaning 'same', 'similar', 'close to'), which is a slower, smoother metre as in (phonetically) 'fa-**ou**-lon, fa-**ou**-lon, fa-**ou**-lon'; and Mutadarik or Muhdath (meaning 'sudden', 'new', 'innovative'), which is faster and more percussive as in (phonetically) 'fa-**al**un, fa-**al**un, fa-**al**un'. In terms of rhyme, these two lines of head rhyme, mid-rhyme and end rhyme give an idea of its phonetic intricacy:

From	a mistake	that saw	me right
min	ka*tar*in	ard*eyny*	lil-so*abi*

To	a regret	that saw	my ruin
ela	ne*dar*min	ard*eyny*	lil-kor*abi*

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[310] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. vii.
[311] Lawrence Venuti, 'Introduction', Translation Studies 4(2) (2011): 127–32 (131). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2011.560014> [accessed 24.3.2021]

Adnan's comprehensive knowledge of Arabic literature is almost matched by his knowledge of
the Western canon (in translation), informed particularly by poets such as Pound, Lorca,
Baudelaire, Whitman and Eliot. *Uruk's Anthem* is made up of a montage of different styles and
voices, what Niall Munro describes as an 'epic phantasmagoria'.[312] Often the most lyrical is set
beside the most obscene, the most prosaic beside the most surreal, in an attempt to disorientate
the reader and suggest a deranged and alienated mind. In my introduction, I suggest that the
nearest text in English is probably David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, sharing the same 'hotch-potch'[313]
of effects (Jones's own description) and heteroglossia, as well as the copious endnotes which
both Jones and Adnan encourage their readers to refer to. I tried to deflect Adnan from using all
but the most essential endnotes but, as the project was coming to a close, I realised that, despite
being emphatically unfashionable in current English-language poetry, they did indeed serve a
purpose, which was to propagate a slower, more thoughtful way of reading, which involves
reading, pausing to read about, then coming back and reading again, as a better way of
understanding and assimilating a complex text and the culture it represents, especially when it is
in translation.

As my collaboration with Adnan progressed, we found that events and performances
were a way in which I could feel my way towards the ebb and flow of the free verse versions I
was attempting. Influenced by Adnan's own musical reading style, I shaped my translation in
response, using my intuition as a poet and songwriter to find cadences that gave the words (now
my words) their own, different drive, humour or pathos, evaluating success by the reaction and
feedback from audiences. As I struggled to express the concepts and idioms of a masculine mind
– that of a one-time soldier, tortured prisoner and displaced and alienated exile – Adnan would
say to me, reminiscent of Pound, 'Forget about the words, just get hold of the meaning, and say
it however you want to say it in your own language.' That trust in me as a poet led to the first
book in English of substantial extracts of Adnan's major work,[314] a great responsibility for me
but one with rich rewards. David Constantine puts it well when he says that the craft of
translation can be an educational task, 'helping [poets] not only to perfect their own craft, but
also to find their own voice by adopting others'.[315] With specific regard to epic poetry, Josephine
Balmer agrees that, by moving 'the surviving poetry of dead languages out of the past … the
translator, too, can be transformed as a writer, finding their own voice by revoicing those of the

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[312] Niall Munro, in Adnan Al-Sayegh, *Let Me Tell You What I Saw: Extracts from Uruk's Anthem*, trans. Jenny Lewis et al. (Bridgend: Seren, 2020), p. 205.
[313] David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. xiii.
[314] Al-Sayegh, *Let Me Tell You What I Saw* (Bridgend: Seren, 2020).
[315] Balmer, p. 52.

past.'[316] Like Alice Oswald, who explains how her 'reckless dismissal' of seven-eighths of Homer's *Iliad* was compatible with the spirit of oral poetry 'which was never stable but always adapting itself to a new audience as if its language, unlike written language, was still alive and kicking',[317] I feel that my own engagement with foreign texts and the discoveries I made while writing this thesis have changed me cognitively, kindling a fresh creative urge to make poetry that is new and different, and opening up new avenues and modes of thought for myself, both as a writer and a teacher.

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[316] Balmer, p. 63.
[317] Oswald, p. 2.

Appendix 1: Timeline Chronology of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

2700	Historical evidence for Gilgamesh of Uruk	Early Dynastic II Period, 2700–2500 BC
2500	Epic about Lugalbanda, father of Gilgamesh	Early Dynastic III Period, 2500–2300 BC
2300	Poetry of Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon	Akkad Period, 2300–2200 BC, Sargon of Akkad
2100	Sumerian epics composed	Third Dynasty of Ur, 2100–2000 BC, King Shulgi
1800	Earliest tablets of Sumerian epics	Old Babylonian Period, 1800–1600 BC, King Hammurabi
1700	Akkadian epic composed: Old Babylonian Version	
1600		Middle Babylonian period, 1600–1000 BC
1500	Middle Babylonian version: Hurrian, Hittite translations	
1300–1200	Sin-liqe-unninni, author of the Standard Version	
1000		Neo-Assyrian Period, 1000–612 BC; Neo- and Later Babylonian Periods, 1000–125 BC
800	Oldest tablets of Standard Version	
700–600	Royal libraries at Nineveh, King Ashurbanipal	Aramaic replacing Akkadian
500	Earliest Neo-Babylonian copies	
200–100	Latest copy of the Gilgamesh epic	
600 AD		Latest dated cuneiform tablets

Appendix 2: The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, The Flood, Tablet 11

i)   Andrew George

At the very first glimmer of brightening dawn,
   there rose on the horizon a dark cloud of black,
and bellowing within it was Adad the Storm God.
   The gods Shullat and Hanish were going before him,
bearing his throne over mountain and land.

'The god Errakal was uprooting the mooring-poles,
   Ninurta, passing by, made the weirs overflow.
The Anunnaki gods carried torches of fire,
   scorching the country with brilliant flashes.

'The stillness of the Storm God passed over the sky,
   and all that was bright then turned into darkness.
[He] charged the land like a *bull* [*on the rampage*,]
   he smashed [it] in pieces [*like a vessel of clay*.]

'For a day the gale [winds *flattened the country*,
   quickly they blew, and [*then came*] the [*Deluge*.]
Like a battle [the cataclysm] passed over the people.
   One man could not discern another,
nor could people be recognized amid the destruction.

'Even the gods took fright at the Deluge,
   they left and went up to the heaven of Anu,
lying like dogs curled up in the open.
   The goddess cried out like a woman in childbirth,
Belet-ili wailed, so sweet of voice:

'The olden times have truly turned to clay,
   because I spoke evil in the gods' assembly.
How could I speak evil in the gods' assembly,
   and declare a war to destroy my people?

'It is I who give birth, these people are mine!
   And now, like fish, they fill the ocean!'

ii)   Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet 11, Babylonian
      Transliteration

97	*mimmû	shēri	ina namāri*	3
98	*īlamma	ishtu ishid shamê || urpatu	ṣalimtu*	4
99	*Adad	ina libbīsha	irtammamma*	3
100	*Shullat	u Ḫanish || illakū	ina maḫri*	4

101	*illakū	guzalû || shadû	u mātum*	4
102	*tarkullī	Irrakal	inassaḫ*	3
103	*illak	Ninurta || meḫrī	ushardi*	4
104	*Anukkū	ishshû	diparāti*	3

105	*ina namrirrīshunu	uḫammaṭū	mātu*	3
106	*sha Adad	shuḫarrassu || ibā'u	shamê*	4
107	*mimma	namru || ana da'ummati	utterru*	4
108	*irḫiṣ	māta || kīma alpi	iḫpīsha*	4

109	*ishtēn ūma meḫû* [. . . . .]	3
110	*ḫanṭish izīqamma* [. . .]*shi shadâ a*[*būbu*?]	4
111	*kīma qabli	eli nishī || ubā'u	[kashūshu]*	4
112	*ul immar	aḫu	aḫāshu*	3

113	*ul ūtaddâ	nishū	ina karāshi*	3
114	*ilū	iptalḫū	abūbamma*	3
115	*itteḫsū	ītelû || ana shamê	sha Ani*	4
116	*(ilū) kīma kalbi	kunnunū || ina kamâti	rabṣū*	4

117	*ishassi	ishtar	kīma ālitti*	3
118	*unambi	Bēlet-ilī || ṭābat	rigma*	4
119	*ūmu	ullû || ana ṭiṭṭi	lū īturma*	4
120	*ashshu anāku	ina puḫur ilī || aqbû	lemutta*	4

121	*kī aqbi	ina puḫur ilī	lemutta*	3
122	*ana ḫulluq nishīya	qabla	aqbīma*	3
123	*anākumma	ullada	nishū'āma*	3
124	*kī mārī nūnī	umallâ	tâmtamma*	3

iii) David Ferry

In the early hours of the next morning dawning
there was a noise of Adad in the clouds

that rose and filled the morning sky with blackness.
Shullat the herald of the dread Adad

moved out over the mountains and over the valleys,
bellowing; Hanish the herald of the dread

Adad moved over the plains and over the cities;
Everything turned to darkness as to night.

From time to time the Annunaki blazed
Terrible light. Then rain came down in floods.

Beneath, the god of the Underworld, Nergal,
broke down his own doorposts and opened the earth.

Ninurta, god of chaos and war
opened the dikes, and other floods burst forth.

The South Wind rushed in flooding over the mountains.
Brother could not see brother in the welter;

none of the gods in heaven could see the earth;
the land was shattered like a shattered pot;

confusions of dread Adad were everywhere.
Terrified gods got themselves up as high

As they could go, nearest the highest heaven,
Cringing against the wall like beaten dogs.

Ishtar cried out like a woman in her birth pangs,
The sweet-voiced lady cried: 'The days that were

have now become as featureless as clay
because of what I said when I went to the gods

in heaven, bringing calamity down on those
whom now the sea engulfs and overwhelms,
my children who are now the children of fish'.

iv) Edwin Morgan

At the first light of dawn, instead of the sun
a black cloud mounted up from the horizon.
The storm-god rumbled thunder from the cloud,
sent his heralds to boom over peak and plain.
The ruler of the Netherworld opened his sluice-gates,
the war-god shot holes in all the dikes,
the judges of the heavens raised their torches
to flash and flare across the cowering earth.
There was a chaos in the sky, as light
became darkness, darkness became light.
The broad land was shattered like a pot.

One whole bad day the gathering south wind
blew a wall of water mountain-high,
overwhelming everything in its path.
No one could recognize his neighbour.
All were seething struggling water-wraiths.
Even the gods were terrified by the force
they had unleashed, and scuttled to the sky,
they crouched like dogs, the gods, at heaven's door.
Then Aruru the mother-goddess shrieked
like a woman in childbirth, cried out strongly:

'The old times and the good times are mere clay!
I spoke out of turn in the divine congregation.
How could I speak evil in the divine congregation?
How could I battle for the death of my people?
I battled for their life, gave birth to them.
Now they are like fish, twisting in the sea!'
The other gods wept with her, they sat,
they sobbed, their lips were parched and tight.

So for six days and seven nights the Flood
blustered and devastated that early world.
On the seventh day the storm itself was in labour
giving painful birth to calm. The sea
grew still, the wind dropped, the Flood stopped.
I looked out all day long. Everything was so quiet.
The whole of humanity had turned to clay.
The seascape was one dead flat roof.
I opened a window and my cheek felt the light.
I sank to my knees and sat there, weeping,
the tears streaming down over my face.

I looked around for land, in the expanse of sea,
and at thirty miles an island-top emerged.
We drifted towards Mount Nimush, grounded there.
The first and second day, held fast.
The third and fourth day, not the last.
The fifth and sixth day, safely past.
And on the seventh day I released a dove.
It flew off, found no land, came back to me.
After the dove I released a swallow.
It flew off, found no land, came back to me.
After the swallow I released a crow.
It flew off, found land, flapped around,
pecked and ate and never came back to me.
The waters fell. I sent birds to the four winds.
I made offerings at that ziggurat of a mountain.
I set incense-vessels up in sevens,
made a smoke of sweet cane, myrtle, cedar.
The nostrils of the gods twitched, the fragrance
pleased them, the sweet smoke rose to please them,
they gathered like flies over the sacrifice.

Appendix 3: *The Iliad*, Book 8, The 'Nightpiece' or 'Campfire' Scene

i)   George Chapman

This speech all Trojans did applaud; who from their traces los'd
Their sweating horse, which sev'rally with headstalls they repos'd,
And fast'ned by their chariots; when others brought from town
Fat sheep and oxen, instantly, bread, wine; and hewéd down
Huge store of wood. The winds transferr'd into the friendly sky
Their supper's savour; to the which they sat delightfully,
And spent all night in open field; fires round about them shin'd.
As when about the silver moon, when air is free from wind,
And stars shine clear, to whose sweet beams, high prospects, and the brows
Of all steep hills and pinnacles, thrust up themselves for shows,
And ev'n the lowly valleys joy to glitter in their sight,
When the unmeasur'd firmament bursts to disclose her light,
And all the signs in heav'n are seen, that glad the shepherd's heart;
So many fires disclos'd their beams, made by the Trojan part,
Before the face of Ilion, and her bright turrets show'd.
A thousand courts of guard kept fires, and ev'ry guard allow'd
Fifty stout men, by whom their horse ate oats and hard white corn,
And all did wishfully expect the silver-thronéd morn.

ii)   Alexander Pope

The troops exulting sat in order round,
And beaming fires illumined all the ground.
As when the moon, refulgent lamp of night,
O'er heaven's pure azure spreads her sacred light,
When not a breath disturbs the deep serene,
And not a cloud o'ercasts the solemn scene,
Around her throne the vivid planets roll,
And stars unnumber'd gild the glowing pole,
O'er the dark trees a yellower verdure shed,
And tip with silver every mountain's head:
Then shine the vales, the rocks in prospect rise,
A flood of glory bursts from all the skies:
The conscious swains, rejoicing in the sight,
Eye the blue vault, and bless the useful light.
So many flames before proud Ilion blaze,
And lighten glimmering Xanthus with their rays.
The long reflections of the distant fires
Gleam on the walls, and tremble on the spires.
A thousand piles the dusky horrors gild,
And shoot a shady lustre o'er the field.
Full fifty guards each flaming pile attend,
Whose umber'd arms, by fits, thick flashes send,
Loud neigh the coursers o'er their heaps of corn,
And ardent warriors wait the rising morn.

iii)   Christopher Logue

Eat by your fires.
Two hundred fires! Around each fire
Five hundred men!
    'The sound of grindstones turning through the night,
The firelight that stands between our blades,
So let King Agamemnon's Own hold hands
And look into each other's frightened eyes.
    'True God! Great Master of the Widespread Sky!
If only you would turn
Me into a god,
As You, through me,
Tomorrow by their ships
Will see Greece die'.

iv)   Michael Longley

All night crackling camp-fires boosted their morale
As they dozed in no man's land and the killing fields.
(There are balmy nights – not a breath, constellations
Resplendent in the sky around a dazzling moon –
When a clearance high in the atmosphere unveils
The boundlessness of space, and all the stars are out
Lighting up hill-tops, glens, headlands, vantage
Points like Tonakeera and Allaran where the tide
Turns into Killary, where salmon run from the sea,
Where the shepherd smiles on his luminous townland.
That many camp-fires sparkled in front of Ilium
Between the river and the ships, a thousand fires,
Round each one fifty men relaxing in the fire-light.)
Shuffling next to the chariots, munching shiny oats
And barley, their horses waited for the sunrise.

Appendix 4: Tablet 1, Comparative Versions

The goddess Aruru has created Enkidu, a huge wild man 'coated in hair like the god of the animals', as a friend and equal for Gilgamesh. But first he must be lured to the city. Gilgamesh sends the hierodule *or 'holy prostitute', Shamhat, to seduce him and bring him to Uruk. She is taken on a three-day hike into the wilderness where she is told to strip naked and lie down by the water hole.*

i) Andrew George, 2003[318]

'Shamhat unfastened the cloth of her loins,
she bared her sex and he took in her charms.
She did not recoil, she took in his scent:
            she spread her clothing and he lay upon her.

She did for a man the work of a woman,
            his passion caressed and embraced her.
For six days and seven nights
            Enkidu was erect and coupled with Shamhat.'

ii) N. K. Sandars, 1960[319]

'… She made herself naked and welcomed his eagerness; as he lay on her murmuring love she taught him the woman's art. For six days and seven nights they lay together, for Enkidu had forgotten his home in the hills.'

iii) John Gardner and John Maier, 1997[320]

'The courtesan untied her wide belt and spread her legs,
            and he struck her wildness like a storm.
She was not shy; she took his wind away,
Her clothing she spread out, and he lay upon her.
She made him know, the man-as-he-was, what a woman is.
His body lay on her;
Six days and seven nights Enkidu attacked, fucking
            the priestess.

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[318] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.
[319] Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
[320] Maier, John, quoted in *Gilgamesh: A Reader*, p. 32.

iv) Robert Temple, 1991[321]

She had no shame for this,
Made herself naked,
Welcomed his eagerness
Incited him to love,
Taught him the woman's art.
Six days and seven nights,
That time lying together,
Enkidu had forgot his home
Had forgot the hills.

v) Stephanie Dalley, 1989[322]

Shamhat loosened her undergarments, opened her legs
                And he took in her attractions.
She did not pull away. She took wind of him,
Spread open her garments, and he lay upon her.
She did for him, the primitive man, as women do.
His love-making he lavished upon her.
For six days and seven nights Enkidu was aroused
                and poured himself into Shamhat.

vi) Jenny Lewis, 2016[323]

Shamhat was sitting | quiet by the pool's edge
Watching the flickering | fish in the shallows
When all of a sudden | he stood before her
The wild man was suddenly | standing before her.

The *hierodule* gasped | as he bent to touch her
Stroking her hair | like the hair of an animal
Stroking her thighs | like the flanks of an animal
Shamhat sang praise songs | to holy Inanna.

Inanna looked down | looked down at the lovers
Six nights, seven days | their bodies were joined
Six nights, seven days | their flesh was one flesh
The bonding was urgent | for Shamhat and Enkidu.

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[321] Robert Temple, trans. *He Who Saw Everything, a Verse Translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Rider, 1991).

[322] Dalley, trans. *Myths from Mesopotamia.*

[323] Jenny Lewis, 2016.

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