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Examining Rivkah Harris' "Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic"

In the epic of Gilgamesh, the women become movers of the story and plot, and though they are not the main characters in this story, they still play a significant role. However, the literary discourse about the image of women in the *Gilgamesh* epic has mainly gone unnoticed. This gap in reports on *Gilgamesh* is the focus of Rivkah Harris' article "Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic." Harris states that the images of women "has received no more than a passing comment or an occasional footnote," and throughout her article she tries to rectify this by exploring the portrayal of women in the story (208). Rivkah Harris argues in her article that the purpose of women in the Gilgamesh epic is to be supporting characters for the men (specifically Gilgamesh), making the image of women in the story to be largely constructed around their needs.

The images of women in the epic, according to Harris, are constructed in a way that expresses the needs of males. Harris explains that "what we find in the epic are essentially male attitudes toward women, both human and divine" (209). The images of women are constructed based around what "male attitudes" desire. This is made evident when she starts her argument by establishing that "the importance of women in the epic relates to their relationship with Gilgamesh" and that the image of women is constructed to "incorporate the anxieties, longings, fears, and wishes of men," specifically Gilgamesh (Harris 209). The women who are portrayed

in the epic are created to serve as a response to these anxieties, longings, and fears, and their purpose is to try to waylay these issues as they appear for Gilgamesh.

In order to support her claim that the images of women are constructed around their ability to support Gilgamesh, Harris examines the different types of women in the *Gilgamesh* epic. One of the types of women that Harris looks at is the image of the married woman, and how married women are used to support Gilgamesh in the story. The married woman in *Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim's wife and the Scorpion-man's wife, "are unnamed, anonymous characters," and their position is "like that of Mesopotamian wives generally: relational, given definition as wife or daughter" (Harris 213). Utnapishtim's wife is representative of the typical Mesopotamian wife because she is a passive figure who remains in the background for most of the story. Utnapishtim's wife moves out of her passive role when she "speaks and acts on behalf of Gilgamesh" (Harris 214). Harris says that Utnapishtim's wife plays an intercessory role that is "a not-uncommon feminine and maternal role in Mesopotamian literary texts" (214). The use of this defined role helps construct the image of the woman as being a supportive, subsidiary character. The Scorpion-man's wife also becomes active when she corrects her husband comments that Gilgamesh is of divine flesh, instead saying that "(Only) two thirds of him are divine, one third is human" (Harris 214). Harris concludes that the wife's intercession "may have been instrumental in having her husband assist Gilgamesh on his way," which further proves the image of the supportive woman (214).

The image of the mother figure, like the image of the married woman, is another type of woman who is created in order to fulfill the needs of men by acting as a supportive figure that allows Gilgamesh to continue on his heroic journey. She provides Ninsun, Gilgamesh's mother,

as an example of how the mother figure aids men. Ninsun is “all that a mother should be: caring, nurturing, and assisting her son in his quest, anxious though she is about it” and she is the most direct example of constructing the female character to be of service to the male (Harris 210). The mother is a figure that is supposed to take care of and aid their offspring, as Harris points out, so the use of the mother in the *Gilgamesh* adds to the image of the woman being a subservient character, which strengthens Harris’ argument.

Shamhat and Siduri act as mother figures as well, however, they are made into mother figures through a reversal of roles. Harris believes that an important part of *Gilgamesh*, which is linked to its images of women, is “the frequent use of symbolic inversion, especially status and role reversal, in the depiction of women” (209). She points out that women like Shamhat and Siduri, a prostitute and tavernkeeper respectively, are usually the “low repute of society,” but she says they are transformed into mother figures in this story (Harris 211). Being a prostitute, Shamhat would have had a bad reputation in the “real-life” of Mesopotamian society, but Harris points out that this is the reverse in *Gilgamesh*. Shamhat is depicted “through her actions and words, as a maternal, beneficent, wise woman and not as a deceitful, lustful seductresses” (Harris 211). Shamhat aids Enkidu into transforming him from a savaged man to a civilized man through sex, and Harris notes that sexual intercourse and prostitution “[constituted] the norms of civilized life” (211). Sexual intercourse with Shamhat civilizes Enkidu, and through Shamhat’s care and nurturing Enkidu learns about the world. The tavernkeeper, Siduri, also becomes an aid to men in the epic, which again reverses the typical “real-life,” Mesopotamian role of a tavernkeeper. Harris writes that she too is “represented as a supportive figure who assists Gilgamesh in his dangerous journey to find Utnapishtim, after proffering him words of advice” (213). Siduri

becomes a mother figure in this way as she helps ensure the safety of Gilgamesh. Her portrayal as a mother figure is further emphasized as she is concealed by a veil, which Harris points out was similar to how a “modest wife” would be covered, as a tavernkeeper would not be. The use of role reversal to turn Shamhat and Siduri into mother figures, who by nature are supportive and nurturing of their children, strengthens Harris’ argument that the images of the women in the epic are constructed to help and fulfill the needs of men, though Harris’ herself does not make this connection directly.

Harris’ article is valuable to the literary discourse because it does give a targeted focus of images of women in *Gilgamesh*, a topic which is passed over in scholarly works about *Gilgamesh*; however her claim that role reversal is a significant aspect in the image of women in the story does not reach a convincing conclusion. She introduces the idea of role reversal and provides two good examples in the characters of Shamhat and Siduri, but she fails to draw out her analysis enough to link her examples back to her argument. She mentions that the use of role reversal must have made for humor and comedy which would have “had great appeal to ancient audiences,” but this does nothing to support her assertion that what is “Central to the *Gilgamesh Epic* are the concerns and activities of men, with women functioning as supporting and subsidiary characters in the cast” (Harris 217, 209). Her article would benefit from a more direct correlation between how the use of role reversal is a way that the epic uses women to act as supporting characters for men. She does point out that role reversal is an important aspect of the portrayal of women, but she does not directly relate how role reversal facilitates the image of the woman being in the story for the purpose of supporting men, like Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Mentioning that women like Siduri and Shamhat being turned into the helpful, nurturing, mother

figure is *specifically* done so they can be aids to Gilgamesh would have strengthened her use of role reversal as a supporting claim for overall argument.

In the article, Harris puts the women in the story into the aforementioned three categories, but the goddess Ishtar seems to sit outside of her argument. Harris' herself states that "Ishtar alone departs from the paradigmatic feminine role in the *Gilgamesh Epic*," which makes it seem that Harris did not exactly know how to place Ishtar inside her argument (214). The fact that Ishtar deviates from the paradigmatic role means that she also deviates from the paradigm of the image of women that Harris is using to support her argument. Harris says that Ishtar behaves like a man by "proposing marriage" and "offering [Gilgamesh] gifts" (215). While Ishtar's behaving like a man does help explain why Gilgamesh rejects her, this explanation is useless in being support for Harris' argument.

In conclusion, Rivkah Harris' article is successful in bringing attention to the images of women in the *Gilgamesh* story. Her report is valuable to the literary discourse because it offers a new way for the *Gilgamesh Epic* to be explored. However, some of her supporting arguments for the overall thesis of this paper fall short. She sometimes fail to link her examples and analysis directly to her main argument, which is not helped by the fact that she rarely uses any direct quotations to support her claims. However, the examples and analysis she does provide that support her argument more directly give insight into how women may have been viewed at that time. She does recognize that the "correlation between the epic's images of women and actual women will not be a 'simple unambiguous one of direct reflection or representation'" (Harris 209). What can be concretely said is that Harris' shows how women were used to progress the

plot of the epic of Gilgamesh, making them a significant part of the story even if they are subsidiary.