PASSWORDS
Approaching *Gilgamesh*

King-Boasts and Hero-Talk

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the "epic" as a "species of poetical composition, represented typically by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which celebrates in the form of a continuous narrative the achievements of one or more heroic personages of history or tradition." For the most part, I'm tempted to agree. But the ancient Babylonian epic poem "Gilgamesh"—as well as the *Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*—invites an additional sentence, something along these lines: "An epic is a heroic structure designed to make room for elements that call into question the very nature of the heroic." While such a brief essay can't hope to make a thoroughgoing case for this amendment, it can offer you a few instances of what I mean.

To set the stage, I'd like you to consider the giant steles (the enormous bas-reliefs of kings) that were erected throughout the kingdom of Babylon. If you were to read what was engraved on those steles, you would find a series of royal boasts, saying things like:

> I fought with them (assisted) by the mighty power of Nergal, my leader, by the ferocious weapons which Ashur, my lord, had presented to me, (and) I inflicted a defeat upon them. I slew their warriors with the sword, descending upon them like Adad when he makes a rainstorm pour down. In the moat (of the town) I piled them up, I covered the whole plain with the corpses of their fighting men, I dyed the mountains with their blood like red wool.

> I spread my wings like the (swift-)flying storm (bird) to overwhelm my enemies.... the terror (-inspiring sight) of the great gods, my lords, overwhelmed them and they turned into madmen when they saw the attack of my strong battle array. Ishtar, the Lade of Battle, who likes me (to be) her high priest, stood at my side breaking their bows, scattering their orderly battle array. And then they spoke among themselves: 'This is our king.' Upon her lofty command they went over in masses to me and rallied behind me. Like lambs they gamboled and (recognized) me as their lord by praying (to me).

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The first passage of the Gilgamesh poem bears a striking resemblance to such epic king-boasts:

> This is Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh
> the Wild Ox, son of Lugalbanda, son
>
> of the Lady Wildcow Ninsun, Gilgamesh
> the vanguard and the rear guard of the army,
>
> Shadow of Darkness over the enemy field,
> the Web, the flood that rises to wash away
>
> the walls of alien cities, Gilgamesh
> the strongest one of all, the perfect, the terror.[1]

But unlike the king-boasts, the poem informs us from the outset that it is going to foster elements contrary to our expectations. "The Story // of him who knew the most of all men know; who made the journey; heartbroken, reconciled...." The poem is going to make us revise our definition of the heroic and what it is we celebrate.

Of course, there's no question that the poem intends to celebrate Gilgamesh's heroic characteristics in the first and simplest sense. He's a conqueror, terrible in battle and terrifyingly beautiful, overwhelmingly frightening to his enemies. "There was no withstanding the aura or power of the Wild Ox Gilgamesh." His own people find his powers so fearful that they call on the gods to create a kind of double—the wild man Enkidu—to keep Gilgamesh in check. A wrestling match ensues between the two, and Enkidu is defeated. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu become companions, and like brothers, set out together on heroic enterprises. The first of their journeys takes them to the Cedar Forest, where they fight Huwawa the Guardian Demon, and finally, with the help of thirteen winds, Enkidu vanquishes him: "Then the two of them together seized the demon/ and by the tongue pulled all his insides out, // and so he died." After that victory, Gilgamesh

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rejects the advances of the goddess Ishtar, who persuades Anu—the sky god, her father—to send down the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh and his friend. But they manage to kill the beast and to fling its haunch at the enraged goddess.

> The people of the city gathered to bless them
>
> and watch them in their progress through the streets.
> Gilgamesh spoke and said, "I am the strongest
>
> My fame will be secure to all my sons.
> The city scorns the goddess and shouts in praise
>
> of Gilgamesh because he has won the glory."
> That night there was dancing and singing in the palace
>
> in celebration of the victory.

This is the turning point. They have gone too far, and the gods decide that one of them must go, so Enkidu falls sick, and after much suffering, dies. It is this that brings home to Gilgamesh, as he sits mourning beside Enkidu's body and watches the worm fall out of his nose, the reality of death. When they had set out for the Cedar Forest and the elders of the city had tried to dissuade Gilgamesh from that dangerous venture, he had confidently uttered the following king-boast noises:

> Who is the mortal
> able to enter heaven? Only the gods
> can live forever. The life of man is short.
>
> What he accomplishes is but the wind.
>
> [...]
>
> If I should fall, my fame will be secure.
> "It was Gilgamesh who fought against Huwawa!"
>
> It is Gilgamesh who will venture into the Forest
> and cut the cedar down and win the glory.
>
> My fame will be secure to all my sons.

While these heroic noises seem to recognize—even to defy—human mortality, in characteristic heroic fashion, they are really oblivious to it. Gilgamesh, like those shameless kings on the steles, doesn't understand what he is saying. But when Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh sits by the bed of the corpse:

> Seven days and nights I sat beside the body,
> weeping for Enkidu beside the body,
>
> and then I saw a worm fall out of his nose.
> Must I die too? Must Gilgamesh be like that?
>
> It was then I felt the fear of it in my belly.
> I roam the wilderness because of the fear.
>
> Enkidu, the companion, whom I loved,
> is dirt, nothing but clay is Enkidu.
>
> Weeping as if I were a woman I roam
> the paths and shores of unknown places saying:
>
> "Must I die too? Must Gilgamesh be like that?"

This is the fall of Gilgamesh from his unself-knowing idiom (his invulnerable hero-talk). That worm falling out of Enkidu's nose inaugurates a new and desperate heroic enterprise, heroic in another sense. Still resisting the applicability of mortality to himself ("Must I die too?") he sets out to find Utnapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, the only man who has been granted immortality by the gods, because he contrived to survive the Great Flood. And in his journey, Gilgamesh experiences fully his human vulnerability. In his grief and anxiety, he wears the skins of beasts and comports himself like a wild man. He suffers humiliation at the hands of the Tavern-Keeper he encounters by the sea:

> I wore the skins of beasts I had hunted down,
>
> There was no sleep for me in the deserts or mountains.
> The tavern keeper shut her door against me.
>
> I lay in the dirt as if I were a beast.

He punts his way across the Waters of Death, breaking one pole after another, and finally "stripped himself and as a sail / held up the animal skin he had been wearing." He reaches Utnapishtim, who tells him the story of the Flood but tells him that he, Gilgamesh, has no chance for immortality. Utnapishtim scornfully gives him a test: "Let there be now a test of

Gilgamesh. / Let him but keep himself awake for a week, // six nights and seven days to show his worth. / So Gilgamesh sat down to begin the test."

This poem keeps confirming and reconfirming its greatness at every step of its progress from beginning to end. Never more so than in the rueful comedy of this test:

> Almost as soon as Gilgamesh the king
> sat down to test himself, a mist of sleep,
>
> as ocean mist comes over the shore from the waters,
> came over his eyes, and so the strongest slept.

And the test of the comedy, that binds us in our humanity to this formerly boasting king, goes on. Utnapishtim tells his wife to bake a wafer and put a mark on the wall for every day that Gilgamesh lay sleeping. She does so, and on the seventh day:

> as Utnapishtim touched him on the forehead
> Gilgamesh said: "I had almost fallen asleep
>
> when you reached out and touched me and kept me awake."

But Utnapishtim says to Gilgamesh: "Look at the wafers and look at the marks on the wall...," and Gilgamesh, aware now of his self-deception, says:

> "What shall I do?
> Who takes us away has taken hold of me.
>
> Death is in my chamber when I sleep;
> and death is there wherever I set foot."

But the poem has one more practical joke to play on him. As a kind of consolation prize he is given the chance to carry home with him the rejuvenating (not immortality-conferring) plant How-the-Young-Man-Once-Again-Becomes-a-Young-Man. He embarks with pitiable exultation, but on the way home he stops at a spring to bathe. A serpent, spotting the plant, carries it off—shedding its skin as it goes. Gilgamesh says:

> "What shall I do? The journey has gone for nothing.
> For whom has my heart's blood been spent? For whom?
>
> For the serpent who has taken away the plant.
> I descended into the waters to find the plant
> and what I found was a sign telling me to
> abandon the journey and what it was I sought for."

He returns to Uruk and, with rueful pride, heartbroken, reconciled, in a passage that echoes the opening passage of the poem, he shows his city to the boatman who has accompanied him:

> "Study the brickwork, study the fortification.
> climb the great ancient staircase to the terrace:
>
> study how it is made, from the terrace see
> the planted and fallow fields, the ponds and orchards.
>
> One league is the inner city, another league
> is orchards, still another the fields beyond.
>
> over there is the precinct of the temple.
> Three leagues and the temple precinct of Ishtar
>
> measure Uruk, the city of Gilgamesh."

The poem continues to be a celebration of the achievements of a heroic personage, but the nature of those achievements has turned out to be very different from the king-boasts lead one to expect.

1. All citations from the Gilgamesh poem are taken from David Ferry's translation, *Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992).