Queering the Epic of Gilgamesh

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There is a wide range of academic discussion amongst scholars about the exact nature of the sexualities and relationships presented in the Ancient Mesopotamian work "The Epic of Gilgamesh". For example, Shoulders (2022) calls this a "Proto-Homosexuality". Both academics and readers in general are curious to try and understand the nature of the relationship between the Epic's protagonists—Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Shoulders points out that many readers see it as "an example of romantic love between two men" (ibid.).

Other scholars, such as Cooper (2002) and Nissinen (2010), provide specific examples of places in the text of the Epic which could be read as homosexual. However, they are quick to contextualize and subsequently minimize these readings. It is not useful, they claim, or even meaningful to argue for homosexuality existing in the Epic of Gilgamesh. As Cooper says, the work is not explicitly "about homosexuality." It is primarily a piece of epic literature, and is thus more concerned with the plight of Gilgamesh, his goal of becoming immortal, or in other words, it is "about the constraints of desire and human fate" (Nissinen, 2010, p. 74). On top of this, both scholars argue that *homosexuality* is entirely anachronistic if applied to the ancient world.

Therefore, while readers will perhaps identify the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as "homosexual", and there is actual historical and textual proof that their relationship could have been homoerotic, scholars are quick to point out that the label of "homosexuality" is not applicable in this case, as in many cases throughout the ancient world. In this essay, I will attempt to resolve this apparent dilemma, between the individual readings of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the scholarly historical work done on the work. I argue that, while it is certainly not particularly useful to label relationships "homosexual" in a historical sense, there is still a literary and artistic dimension to the issue which needs to be acknowledged and explored, and that the theoretical framework to undertake this task should be Queer Theory.

Homosexuality in the Epic of Gilgamesh

Cooper (2002) inspects the text of the Epic of Gilgamesh to provide examples of homosexual readings. Firstly, in scenes where Gilgamesh exerts his tyrannical power over Uruk. Cooper references a line in which Gilgamesh "mounted on the hips of a group of widow's sons." He notes that the verb "to mount" can also be used for animal copulation. The play-on-words and its sexual subtext is self-evident. Furthermore, Cooper notes the dreams of Gilgamesh about Enkidu. When Ninsun remarks on Gilgamesh's dreams she says that "the axe which you saw is a man, / You will love him and 'embrace' him like a wife." This metaphor of the axe in Gilgamesh's dream is probably the most explicit reference to some kind of romantic or sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the text.

However, as Cooper (2002) himself argues, similarly to Nissinen (2010), this does not prove the existence of homosexuals (in our modern understanding of that label) in the Epic. To support this claim, they both cite the Assyrian laws which would have been enforced around the time that the work might have been first composed. In these laws, we see that the people of the ancient world understood sexual acts between two men through the lens of domination and power. A "penetrated" male was equated to a woman, understood to be feminine and weak, his property and family could be made to serve the dominant male. From this, it can be argued that homoeroticism was not seen as a legitimate form of romantic or sexual expression in the ancient world, but as a tool of domination in a patriarchal society.

The work of Stone (2001) is helpful in understanding this distinction. The scholar works to try and understand the Bible's "view on homosexuality" and concludes that it does not have one. This conclusion is relevant to the Epic of Gilgamesh, and as such, Nissinen cites Stone as an example of a voice who argues against homosexuality in the ancient world. Stone makes the

argument that homosexuality in the ancient world was *heteronormative*. In other words, since homoerotic relationships between men in the ancient world were still based on dominance and power, these relationships were still part of patriarchal systems of oppression, inequality, and violence present in heterosexuality. A more helpful way of looking at sexuality in the ancient world, Stone argues, would be by using Queer Theory.

Towards a Queer Gilgamesh

Is it possible to "queer" the Epic of Gilgamesh? Pearson (1999) defines "queer" as a concept which "suggests a move not just towards a different conception of sexuality, but also towards a different understanding of subjectivity and agency." In other words, to queer the Epic of Gilgamesh, we need to reconceptualize the ways sexuality manifests in the text. We will also need to inspect our subjective views of the Epic, and our agency in the act of "queering" itself.

Firstly, we will look at sexuality. Nissinen (2010) claims that the Epic of Gilgamesh "plays constantly on boundaries such as those between men and gods, humans and animals, man and woman, man and man, life and death, constructing "queer" relationships and transgressions of categories." However, the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is only ever platonic. They can be read as homosexual only through subtext. As Cooper (2002) says, there is "no overt homosexual behavior in the Gilgamesh Epic." Therefore, to queer the Epic, it is necessary to inspect our personal subjectivities, as well as the work's subtext, interpretations, and hidden meanings.

At the very beginning of this essay, I cite Shoulders (2022) who claims that many readers see the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as homosexual. This is especially important to consider when setting out to queer the work. Queer theory is deeply concerned with individual

subjectivities, and cultivates individual agency when attempting understanding text within a particular socio-political or cultural context. If contemporary readers can broadly interpret the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu either as homosexual, or queer, or homoerotic, or even "an example of romantic love between two men," then these interpretations are crucial to queering the work.

Literature, history, and queerness are not monolithic. They cannot be monolithic, because they are deeply human, and deeply subjective categories. Queerness takes pleasure "in resisting attempts to make sexuality signify in monolithic ways" (Pearson, 1999). We cannot say definitively whether Gilgamesh or Enkidu were or were not "homosexual" because all sexuality is subjective and personal. There is no historical, textual, or theoretical proof that will give us the "right answer". Our own, subjective answer will have to be correct.

While many of the scholars cited above take a nuanced view of the Epic and its portrayal of homosexuality (or lack thereof), I argue that their views are still limited. In trying to historicize the Epic of Gilgamesh, treating it purely as an artifact of ancient Mesopotamian culture, we diminish the role of our subjective understanding of the Epic as a work of literature, and as a work of art. Neither the Epic of Gilgamesh itself, the physical text, nor the texts of the ancient Assyrian Laws, nor any piece of history holds some innate "truth" about homosexuality in the ancient world. This truth is what we choose it to be—and our choice is supplemented by our own subjectivity. This subjectivity can be as simple as identifying with Gilgamesh and Enkidu, or as complex as placing the Epic in the context of the entire historical context of the ancient world.

John Berger's landmark work "Ways of Seeing" (2008) is helpful in making sense of this subjectivity of history. In Berger's conception, the past is never static, "never there waiting to be

discovered" (ibid.). Instead, history consists of the present, and its relationship to the past. Trying to look to the past for "truth", citing ancient Assyrian laws to "prove" that Gilgamesh and Enkidu could not have been homosexuals is only another kind of subjectivity. The process of understanding that we observe the past through the lens of the present, is the beginning of queering history itself.

None of this is to say that the work of historians is unproductive. On the contrary, the historical research and archeological work required to make claims about Assyrian laws from millennia ago is significant. It is only that, in attempting to answer the question "are there homosexuals in Ancient Mesopotamian literature", as Nissinen (2010) does, for example, historians tend to favor finding "truth" or "objectivity" where none is possible. The first step in understanding the value of history, and using it for the benefit of the individual, is understanding the subjectivity of history.

Let us imagine the world in which The Epic of Gilgamesh was composed. Much like today, there were undoubtedly people in those times who were attracted to the same sex. Those people did not think of themselves as homosexuals, perhaps, but they had similar experiences, desires, and suffered under a similar patriarchal system as LGBTQ+ people today. Just like today, homosexual acts were socially stigmatized, in some places they were punishable by law or by death. Despite the fact that ancient Mesopotamians saw homoeroticism totally differently to how we see it today, there are still commonalities between our world and the ancient world. Much like our modern world, the ancient world was heteronormative and patriarchal. And while the people in that world did not identify themselves as homosexuals, what is much more important is that people in this modern world are able to identify themselves with those ancient

people, with the characters in their stories, their struggles, and find subjective meaning in them that resonates with modern sensibilities.

While it is important to inspect and understand the facts of history, we should not stray into the realm of what Berger (2008) calls *cultural mystification*, or "explaining away what might otherwise be evident". In striving for exactness in historical discovery and theory, we should not "explain away" the genuine reactions of people to the art of the ancient world. While the ancient Mesopotamians did not write their literature with contemporary ideas about sexuality in mind (Nissinen, 2010), contemporary ideas of sexuality can still be applied to ancient sources. It is possible, even desirable, to queer the Epic of Gilgamesh, and we can and should use literary analysis, historical analysis, and our own subjectivities to do so.

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