“Hierarchies in Equillibrium”

In our culture, a pair of scales often symbolizes the intangible concept of balance. Order, we imagine, can only be established when two like sides hang in perfect equilibrium. For example, struggle must compliment pleasure, logic must compliment creativity, and most importantly, two-sided relationships must bear an equal load of power. However, in The Epic of Gilgamesh, the most ordered relationships occur between one dominant and one slightly subordinate force—when a voice of authority exists between two nearly-matched competitors. In Tablet I, lines 94-133 of the epic, Enkidu’s introduction illustrates multiple key instances of this relationship, in the ties between civilization and nature, and between Gilgamesh and Enkidu themselves. These central themes of dominance and unity appear throughout the span of the narrative. The Epic of Gilgamesh stresses a state of balance in which nature is marginally subordinate to civilization, and although Enkidu briefly upsets this state, he ultimately reinforces it by taking a similarly subordinate position to Gilgamesh.

To analyze the relationship between civilization and nature, one must first define each term. In Tablet II, as Uruk citizens introduce Enkidu to their human lifestyle, he struggles to comprehend social norms. Acts as simple as eating bread and ale baffle Enkidu. Even so, after learning of his fated partner Gilgamesh, he "[knows] by instinct, he should seek a friend." (Tablet I, line 214). Enkidu even cries when Ninsun reminds him that “he was born in the wild and has no brother,” illustrating that interpersonal relationships mark his most basic perception of human life (Tablet II, line 117). Thus, I define civilization as societies in which friendship and familial bonds are valued. Nature, in contrast, will be defined as societies which lack demonstrated emotional bonds. Enkidu’s initial family, the gazelles of the forest, abandon him with no apparent regret after his union with Shamhat, evidencing their lack of such emotional

connections. These definitions simplify the distinction between nature and civilization in the epic.

The passage about Enkidu's creation first illustrates civilization's dominance over nature. Enkidu frightens and torments the hunter by destroying his traps, preventing what the hunter calls "the work of the wild" (Tablet I, line 34). This phrasing shows the expectation of humans to dominate wild animals, to follow through on their assigned social roles. The Uruk citizens also take pride in the traits which separate them from wild beasts, evidenced for example by the acts of shaving and washing which often occur when characters enter the city. After Shamhat has sex with Enkidu, she begs that he "cast aside [his] sinful thoughts" and join civilization, so he travels Uruk, where he is shaved, clothed, and taught to eat human-prepared food (Tablet I, line 240). Compared to his inherently sinful life in the wild, joining civilization is presented as an ascendance of social hierarchy.

The degree of importance placed on family also emphasizes the superior state of civilization. Notably, the hunter does not rely on his own knowledge to overthrow Enkidu, but turns to his father for guidance, profiting from the older man's wisdom. The narrative specifically includes this extra character to emphasize the familial bonds which civilized humans find value in. Enkidu lacks these bonds, having been created from "a pinch of clay" thrown into the wild by the goddess Aruru (Tablet I, line 102). Only after Enkidu joins civilization does he gain an adoptive mother and brother, assuming the valued family roles that make human beings stronger. Though nature can provide great and defining challenges, such as the battle with Humbaba, civilization always triumphs in The Epic of Gilgamesh. Even the Deluge sent to destroy all living creatures is endured by every species thanks to a handful of human beings, who use their skills of advanced thought and teamwork to "build a boat… and seek survival" (Tablet XI, lines 24-25).

This conflict humbled mankind, regardless; Uruk citizens speak in awe of Gilgamesh's "tale of before the Deluge" (Tablet I, line 8). Civilization and nature balance one another in the epic, even though mankind retains a position of superiority.

Although The Epic of Gilgamesh reports a dominate role of civilization over nature, Enkidu briefly upsets this balance when he adopts a misplaced allegiance to the wild, further proving the importance of the social hierarchy. In the passage immediately following his creation, Enkidu clearly does not belong in his assumed role as "god of the animals" (Tablet I, line 109). Notably, when this phrasing is invoked, readers may imagine him as the human embodiment of a lion, tiger, or another animal known to physically dominate over other creatures. After all, physical subordination would come naturally for the "mightiest in the land," (Tablet I, line 124). The passage notes twice, however, that Enkidu joins gazelles at the waterhole, always "[grazing] on grasses," two remarkably peaceful activities (Tablet I, line 110). Rather than dominating over nature with his incredible strength, Enkidu serves as its protector, filling pits, pulling up snares, and otherwise disrupting the job of the hunter. While he focuses on the wellbeing of the animals, the text itself fixates on the hunter's sorrow. Enkidu's role is treated as misplaced and unjust. The hunter turns to his father for the advice that would draw Enkidu from the forest, noting that his new opponent's strength "is as mighty as a rock from the sky" (Tablet I, line 125). This specific phrasing foreshadows the fated and properly balanced relationship Enkidu would later develop.

The epic's motif of balanced-but-hierarchical relationships, as found between nature and civilization, is mirrored in Enkidu and Gilgamesh's friendship. Both men were created by gods, and both possess superhuman strength. Gilgamesh's dreams prophesize their partnership, as explained in Tablet I, lines 247-250:

“’The stars of the heavens appeared above me,

like a rock from the sky one fell down before me.

I lifted it up, but it weighed too much for me,

I tried to roll it, but I could not dislodge it.’”

This passage paints Gilgamesh and Enkidu as two forces trapped in stalemate, but this is not the case. When they first battle in the streets of Uruk, Gilgamesh wrestles Enkidu to the ground and “[breaks] off from the fight” (Tablet II, line 230). Whether he breaks off out of physical superiority or acceptance of their equal strength, in doing so Gilgamesh establishes authority. He later proves this power by convincing a reluctant Enkidu to join him in battling Humbaba. Even after Enkidu’s death, the significance of their partnership continues. For the first time, Gilgamesh questions his own mortality, leading to his important consideration and acceptance of death. Regardless of its inequality, the partnership of Gilgamesh and Enkidu fosters a state of balance. Just as Enkidu had initially terrorized the hunter by defending wild animals, Gilgamesh terrorized his own people. He lets “no son go free to his father” and “no girl go free to her bridegroom” (Tablet I, lines 68 and 76). By creating Enkidu as “a match for the storm of [Gilgamesh’s] heart,” Aruru produces a partnership that humbles the oppressive king, leading to a more stable leadership (Tablet I, line 97). Gilgamesh and Enkidu compliment one another in other ways, as well; for example, when Gilgamesh is plagued by nightmares foreshadowing their fight against Humbaba, Enkidu interprets them each as “good [omens]” (Tablet IV, line 28). He encourages the more-contemplative Gilgamesh to put aside his weighty thoughts before battle. Even Enkidu’s death prompts the most significant transformation in Gilgamesh: his consideration, and ultimate acceptance, of mortality. This revelation marks the king’s “[wisdom] in all matters,” his final growth (Tablet I, line 4).

Ultimately, the heroes' relationship symbolizes the balance between nature and civilization. Enkidu humbled Gilgamesh, symbolizing how forces of nature, such as Humbaba or the Deluge, humbled mankind. The epic's contributors look down upon the "sinful thoughts" of wild beasts, but nature's importance to civilization cannot be denied, and even the hunter relies on its resources to maintain his living (Tablet I, line 240). Enkidu and Gilgamesh, as well, play valued roles in each other's lives by offering emotional support and challenging ideas. A leader is needed in both relationships: civilization fosters social advancement by dominating over nature, and Gilgamesh avoids drives the journey forward when convincing Enkidu to fight Humbaba. Rulers maintain order, and as a result, progress can be made.

In The Epic of Gilgamesh, hierarchies are not only accepted, but valued. They maintain a necessary state of order that allows both dominate and subordinate forces to thrive. It is no mistake, therefore, that although the passage of Enkidu's creation describes him as a perfect "match" for Gilgamesh, he narrowly loses their battle in the streets of Uruk. Furthermore, the passage deliberately complements this idea with a comparable relationship, the one between man and nature. It would be difficult for most Westerners today to imagine themselves as superior or subordinate to their best friends. One may scrutinize the worth of a relationship with a necessary inferior, but to the contributors of Gilgamesh, such a power dynamic came naturally. This acceptance of social hierarchy, they believed, maintained the order that allowed relationships to develop, function, and endure peacefully.