

Proverbs and *Gnōmai* in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

Bernardo Ballesteros

Institut für Klassische Philologie, Mittel- und Neulatein, Wien, Österreich

Abstract This essay discusses proverbial expressions and wisdom sayings in the *Gilgamesh* tradition. It contends that certain critical strategies developed for ancient Greek poetry can be applied to Babylonian epic, particularly the analysis of poetic *gnōmai* and narrative irony. I begin by isolating the type of expression at issue, building on a flexibility in scholarly definitions of proverbs, *gnōmai* and sayings that goes back to antiquity (§ 2). The core of the paper (§§ 3-5) charts and comments on wisdom sayings in the first-millennium Standard Babylonian (SB) *Gilgamesh* with reference to the earlier poetic tradition. After some concluding remarks (§ 6), I include an indication of potential comparative avenues involving Homeric epic (§ 7).

Keywords Gilgamesh. Proverbs. Wisdom. Narrative irony. Homer.

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1 Introduction

Scholars are increasingly interested in reading Greek and Babylonian epic side by side, but a comparison of the poetic deployment of proverbial sayings and sentencing has not been pursued, at least to my knowledge.¹ This article centres on the role played by pithy wis-

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dom expressions as part of the narrative and thematic infrastructure of SB *Gilgamesh*. It argues that proverbs and sayings contribute to connecting the Humbaba adventure to Gilgamesh's encounter with Uta-napishti, and to the broader theme of accessible and inaccessible knowledge. Throwing into relief how the characterisation of Enkidu and Gilgamesh changes as the plot unfolds, sayings are one important way in which the poem emphasizes shifting degrees of authority and wisdom.

Graeco-Babylonian epic comparisons often rely on important analogies in plot and theme between the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*, including the pairs Achilles/Patroclus and Gilgamesh/Enkidu, the death of the minor partner and the discourse on life, death and the gods. Such thematic ramifications have prompted the question whether Homer was on some level dependent on the Babylonian poem.² "Proverbial wisdom by its very nature transcends boundaries of time and space",³ and thus crosses cultural and linguistic barriers too.⁴ But this paper does not take a cross-cultural reception approach; my focus falls on the *Gilgamesh Epic* as a case-study of the creation, deployment and manipulation of wisdom sayings in mythological narrative poetry.

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1 For comparisons of early Greek and Near Eastern poetry Burkert 1992; 2003 and West 1997 remain fundamental; papers in Kelly, Metcalf 2021 reflect the current state of the field; also below fn. 2.

2 Recently Currie 2016, ch. 5; Matjevic 2018; West 2018; Clarke 2019; Ballesteros 2021; Sironi, Viano 2022; Davies 2023. Influence-free comparisons include Haubold 2013, 1-72 and subsequent publications; Ballesteros forthcoming, part II.

3 Hallo 2010, 611.

4 On ancient Mesopotamia and the Classical world see Moran 1978; Currie 2021; Lazaridis 2007 on demotic and Greek proverb collections. Theognis and the Book of Proverbs: Brown 1995, 290-309; Legaspi 2018, 165. Wide-ranging comparative view: Wilson 2022.

2 Proverbs and *Gnōmai*

This preliminary section addresses three points: first, the sense in which the Greek term *gnōmē* (pl. *gnōmai*) is used in this article; second, intertextuality, including between poetic texts and ancient proverb collections; and finally, how the first two points affect literary interpretation.

2.1 Definitions

Gnōmē is a semantically complex Greek word whose root is visible in *gignōskō* ‘I know and discover’ (and in English ‘knowledge’). In the sense that interests us, it is usually translated as ‘maxim’, rather than simply ‘opinion’.⁵ Distinguishing a *gnōmē* from a proverb is not always straightforward. In the abstract, the difference is that a ‘maxim’ need not be a ‘traditional saying’. The problem is that, if successful, a *gnōmē* frequently becomes a ‘traditional saying’. Proverbs, in turn, notoriously resist definition, and Assyriologists and Hellenists face similar terminological difficulties.⁶ It is not surprising that the boundaries between proverb (roughly Greek *paroimia*) and *gnōmē* were fluid in antiquity too. Relevant ancient Greek concepts were as multifarious and flexible as our own. Discussing the Aristotelian terminology, Lardinois remarks:⁷

It appears that by the time of Aristotle a number of terms existed which described different kinds of generalizing expressions or sayings: *gnōmē* (‘generalizing statement about particular human actions or the gods, often newly coined’), *paroimia* (‘traditional, popular sentence or phrase, sometimes metaphorical’), *upothēkē* (‘instruction, sometimes in the form of a direct command’) and *apophthegma* (‘short generalizing statement or retort, tied to a particular historical figure’).

At the same time, there was considerable scope for overlap – much as in English, where *dictum*, ‘adage’, ‘saying’, ‘proverb’, ‘maxim’, ‘precept’ and so on are all arguably distinct but frequently interchangeable.⁸

⁵ See relevant entries in *GEW*, *EDG*; *LSJ* s.v. 3.3, *CGL* s.v. § 6.

⁶ Paroemiological work in the anthropological sense first deployed by Taylor 1931, which concentrates on the morphology of proverbs and how they can deepen understanding of the societies that produce and deploy them, has been notably pursued, among Assyriologists, by Alster 1996; 1997; Alster, Oshima 2006; for the Greek world see Lelli, Tosi, Di Donato 2009-11; Lelli 2008; 2017.

⁷ Lardinois 1995, 19.

⁸ Lardinois 1995, 19 fn. 67.

In ancient Mesopotamia, Akkadian *tēltum* could indicate a “proverb, riddle, a saying, adage”,⁹ and Sumerian had several words for this semantic field, as we gather from lexical lists: *i-bi-lu* (utterance, saying), *ár* (also ‘word of praise’, ‘glory’), *enim-tar* (perhaps ‘wide-spread [dispersed] word’ or ‘established word’).¹⁰ Like classicists, students of Mesopotamian proverbs routinely remark on the protean features of their material: in Wasserman’s words, “[i]t is often not easy to distinguish proverbs from sentences of a gnomic character”; Durand remarks that “il est difficile de faire une distinction a priori entre un énoncé authentique et une formulation qui ait un schéma rhétorique de proverbe”.¹¹

Because this article seeks above all to elucidate rhetorical effects in poetry and how poets manipulate the wisdom content of sayings, it seems useful to adopt a definition of *gnōmē* based on (but not necessarily coinciding with) that given by Aristotle, who writes:¹²

ἔστι δὴ γνώμη ἀπόφανσις, οὐ μέντοι οὔτε περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἕκαστον, οἷον ποῖός τις Ἴφικράτης, ἀλλὰ καθόλου, οὔτε περὶ πάντων, οἷον ὅτι τὸ εὐθὺ τῷ καμπύλῳ ἐναντίον, ἀλλὰ περὶ ὅσων αἱ πράξεις εἰσὶ, καὶ <ᾗ> αἰρετὰ ἢ φευκτά ἐστί πρὸς τὸ πράττειν

Now a *gnōmē* is a statement neither about particulars – such as what kind of man Iphikrates is – but about generalities, nor about what applies to everything, such as that the straight is contrary to the crooked, but about the quality of actions, and <that which> is worth pursuing or avoiding in respect to acting.

We can thus say that, for the purposes of this paper, a *gnōmē* is a pithy statement of general validity meant to induce or discourage from a course of action. What is crucial is the ethical and paraenetic

⁹ Wasserman 2011a, 22; cf. *CAD* s.v.; Durand 2006, 18-21, who tentatively compares Arabic *tāla* ‘charmer’.

¹⁰ Wasserman 2011a, 20-1; *CAD* s.v.; Alster 1996, 6-7 fnn. 26-30.

¹¹ Wasserman 2011a, 21; Durand 2006, 10. Alster 1996, 4 and fn. 3: “One might argue that it is futile to try to decide whether or not the sayings known to us [viz. from the ‘Proverb Collections’] are genuine proverbs. There is some truth in this. [fn. 13:] The argument would be the fact that some ancient so-called proverb collections contain few genuine proverbs, and rather consist of sententious sayings of literary origin”. Cf. Alster 1997, XXXI; Hallo 2010, 618 sets out criteria to identify proverbs in literary texts: (1) incongruity to context; (2) presence of ‘they say’ statements; (3) parallels in proverb collections; (4) recurrence in non-wisdom corpora.

¹² Arist. *Rh.* 1394a21-5, text Ross. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author. On the passage’s context, where Aristotle adduces several poetic examples, see Rapp 2002, 735-40; Gastaldi 2014, 502-8. Grimaldi (1988, 260-1) collects relevant ancient discussions.

aspect.¹³ In narrative poetry, as will be seen, the action-content (what is encouraged or not) may emerge from context as much as from the saying *per se*. I emphasize that using the word *gnōmē* does not negate that the saying at issue could also be a ‘folk proverb’, or an ‘instruction’ (*upothēkē*).

2.2 Poetry and Proverbs

This fluidity has advantages. It has long enabled Hellenists to concentrate on literary effects and set aside the dilemma whether a *dictum* occurring in a literary text was already a proverb – and recognized as such by audiences – or not (in which case it was meant to be perceived as a venerable saying nonetheless).¹⁴

That question is especially difficult for archaic Greece because the earliest surviving Greek proverb collections are dated to the Hellenistic age.¹⁵ In archaic times, Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and the corpus Theognideum, for instance, attest to early systematisations of wisdom sayings as part of poetic compositions. Coincidence in diction and meaning across texts frequently suggests that the saying was older than any of its occurrences. The point, and its complications, may be illustrated by two brief *dicta* in Homer and Hesiod, the earliest preserved corpora of Greek poetry: “for (only) the fool understands after the deed” (ῥεχθὲν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων)¹⁶ and “for (only) the fool understands after suffering” (παθὼν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνων).¹⁷ What is remarkable is that re-creation (*pathōn* for *rhekththen*) goes hand in hand with traditionality, so that deciding whether this is the ‘same’ proverb (or *gnōmē*) becomes difficult.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the distinction between *gnōmē* and proverb remains a potentially important one. By looking at the poets’ sophisticated creation of sayings and use of proverbs we can, again potentially, shed light on the varying intersections between the two poles of ‘folk’ and ‘high’ culture – though this is probably best conceptualized as a spectrum. That interface was perceived in Greek antiquity: Isocrates

13 Contrast the broader definitions by Lardinois 1995, 12 on *gnōmē*: “a generalizing statement about a particular action” and Mieder 2004, 4 on proverbs: “proverbs [are] concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk”.

14 Lardinois 1995; 1997; 2000; 2001 on Homer; Stenger 2004 on Bacchylides; Boeke 2007 on Pindar; Ellis 2015 on Herodotus; Manousakis 2019 and Van Essen-Fishman 2020 on tragedy.

15 Rupprecht 1949; Tosi 1994; Lelli 2021; it seems that collections of sayings independent of poetic composition began as early as the fifth century BCE.

16 Hom. *Il.* 17.32, 20.198.

17 Hes. *Op.* 218.

18 Cf. Pl. *Symp.* 222b. Lardinois 1995, 23-6, with ethnographic comparisons.

differentiates between the *gnōmai* that could be excerpted from the works of the wise poets of the past and what would be appealing to the general public.¹⁹ Aristotle's interest in proverbs and folk-wisdom may have been criticized by Isocrates' student Cephisodorus.²⁰ The fragments of Aristophanes of Byzantium's treatise on proverbs (third-second century BCE) show that the question whether a literary *gnōmē* should count as a proverb was discussed.²¹ Although a difference between literary *gnōmai* and folk proverbs was perceived, wisdom sayings taken from poets were nonetheless excerpted to become part of proverb collections.

In Mesopotamia, proverb collections are attested from Early Dynastic times (twenty-sixth century BCE), and they were important in education from early on – earlier, that is, than the time at which a poem such as the SB *Gilgamesh* took shape.²² However, this does not make the task of distinction any easier, because poets could draw on proverb collections, and proverb collections could include, as in Greece, poetic maxims.²³ I will present a case-study in § 4 (maxim [2]), with sayings in *Gilgamesh* paralleled in several literary sources as well as proverb collections. One can make inferences from probability, but ultimately, we may have no way of ascertaining which way the traffic originally went. What interests me here is that, insofar as the SB *Gilgamesh* is a relatively later source, the parallels illuminate the creative process of literary re-use and artistic adaptation.

Thus, we know that the boundaries between proverbs and pointed literary sayings were crossed in both the Babylonian and the Greek intellectual cultures. This cross-over was conscious and deployed for aesthetic and discursive purposes. Intertextuality opens further – and no less interesting – questions beyond the identification of proverbs and the definition of types of sayings.

2.3 Sayings and Narrative

How, then, should we study proverbs and *gnōmai* in the literary context of epic and narrative poetry? It is profitable to look once again at the fluid boundary between proverb and *gnōmē*. In his influential work, Lardinois applied to *gnōmai* the insights of proverb

19 Isoc. *ad Nic.* 42-9.

20 Athen. *Deipn.* 2 [56] 60e; the passage is difficult: Curnis 2009, 165-7, with fn. 5.

21 Tosi 1993; cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1395a18-33.

22 Sources in Alster 1997; on 'proverbs', literature and education see Hallo 2010; Veldhuis 2000; Alster 1997, XIX-XXIII; 2005, 25-6; Taylor 2005; Alster, Oshima 2006; Veldhuis, *infra*.

23 Above fn. 11.

anthropology and sociolinguistics.²⁴ Like proverbs, *gnōmai* occurring in narrative poetry only make sense in a context where characters speak. It is thus important to concentrate on their pragmatics: who addresses whom, for what purpose, and how the saying reverberates against a broader background of previous knowledge. Narratologically, one interesting result of previous research here is that in Homer (unlike in Hesiod) *gnōmai* addressed by the poet to the audience are extremely rare, something which reinforces the objective character of the narration.²⁵ Much the same applies to SB *Gilgamesh*, where none of the sayings I have charted is uttered by the narrator. For present purposes, this confirms that epic *gnōmai* exist above all in a dynamic context of dialogue and action. I will therefore concentrate on the role of the speaking agents and addressees in the *longue durée* of the story, and on the narrative irony generated by the mismatch between what the characters believe and how things turn out to be (see further below § 3). The proverbs in *Gilgamesh* are best assessed against the narrative background of the entire poem. At the same time, when the sayings can be situated within a textual network extending beyond the SB text, this proves particularly useful to illuminate the poem's cohesive programme.

3 Aspects of Wisdom Poetics in SB *Gilgamesh*

In contrast to other genres of Babylonian wisdom literature, narrative poetry attaches wisdom to full-rounded characters, rather than to stereotypical figures.²⁶ Based on the maxims collected in Table 1, the lion's share of gnomic utterance in SB *Gilgamesh* goes to Enkidu. Besides Gilgamesh himself, who holds a special position since he is the poem's protagonist, all the gnomic speakers are figures of authority and wisdom: the elders who see the heroes off before their expedition; Humbaba, a divine creature and Enlil's protégé; Uta-napishti, the immortal sage and flood hero; and Ea, god of wisdom.²⁷ Because their gnomic sayings, as I argue, are best understood as a function of the poem's overall narrative development, it is useful to offer some context on the poetics of wisdom and knowledge in the epic.

Starting at least from the OB Sumerian tradition, Gilgamesh is said to have recovered pre-diluvian wisdom, including principally

²⁴ Lardinois 1995; 1997; 2000; 2001.

²⁵ Lardinois 1995, 157-61.

²⁶ Cohen, Wasserman 2021, 124-5.

²⁷ 6× Enkidu (1× to Shamhat, 5× to Gilgamesh); 3× Gilgamesh to Enkidu; 1× elders/officials to Gilgamesh (repeated twice); 2× Humbaba to Gilgamesh; 1× Uta-napishti to Gilgamesh; 1× Ea to Enlil.

knowledge related to cult. This emerges from a central passage in the *Death of Gilgamesh* in which the gods address Gilgamesh in their assembly (DG M 57-61, eighteenth century BCE):²⁸

you reached Ziusudra in his abode!
The rites of Sumer, forgotten there since distant days of old,
the rituals and customs – you brought them down to the land.
The rites of hand-washing and mouth-washing you put in good order,
[after the] Deluge had drowned the settlements of all lands.

The recovery of knowledge theme frames the SB version in a ring composition, connecting the proem to the king's final encounter with Uta-napishti (Sum. Ziusudra), the immortal flood hero and protégé of the wisdom god Ea. The proem dwells on what Gilgamesh has seen, on the depth of his knowledge (I 1-6); he "saw the secret (*niširta*) and uncovered the hidden | he brought back lore (*ṭēma*) from before the Flood" (I 8); Gilgamesh is said to have written down his profound, manifold sufferings on a stele (I 9-10). The majestic buildings of Uruk, especially its mighty walls, are connected both to the king and to prediluvian wisdom. Audiences are invited to go up on to the walls, admire them and pick up a lapis lazuli tablet to read out "all that Gilgamesh went through, each of his sufferings" (I 28). That tablet lies within a precious tablet-box of cedar, and the "door of its secret" (*bāba ša niširtišu*) must be disclosed for it to be accessed (I 26).²⁹

When Gilgamesh finally meets the Flood hero, Uta-napishti introduces his tale of things long past as a "word of secret" (*amāt niširti*), a "mystery of the gods" (*pirišta ša ilī*), and later on he uses the same words to offer Gilgamesh the plant of rejuvenation, which the king, however, will inevitably fail to utilize (XI 10-11 = 281-2). This intra-textual connection revolving around knowledge as a revealed secret (*niširtu*) matches a second long-distance echo involving the mighty walls of Uruk, which Gilgamesh praises upon his return at the end of the poem and whose construction rests, as noted above, on prediluvian knowledge (XI 323-8 ≈ I 18-23). Gilgamesh becomes "wise in everything" at the end of his journey. The knowledge that Uta-napishti imparts and which is contained in the lapis lazuli tablet (I 26) is one of suffering (I 28): Gilgamesh learns that death is unavoidable, as is the chasm between gods and mortals.

²⁸ Transl. George 2020, 153; text in Cavigneaux, Al-Rawi 2000.

²⁹ The term 'audience(s)' will occasionally synthesize the cumbersome but more precise 'audiences and/or readers'; cf. Worthington 2019, 105 fn. 298.

This is well-trodden ground for Assyriologists.³⁰ Much less attention has however been paid to the fact that the theme of knowledge, far from being confined to the quest for immortality and Uta-napish-ti's appearance in Tablets X-XI, is eminently present in the first, heroic half of the epic too, where indeed most gnomic expressions concentrate.³¹ As will become clear, shifting degrees of wisdom before Enkidu's death constitute a *fil rouge* which connects the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, between the heroes and their city, and between the pair and their fated travel to the Cedar Forest. What is more, there is scope to argue that the theme of knowledge constitutes a strong tie between the Uta-napishti episode and the Humbaba legend.³² Proverbs and *gnōmai* offer an excellent vista on this structural connection.

It is thus worth recalling what is at stake in the epic's first half, especially regarding Enkidu. It revolves around Enkidu's integration in Uruk as Gilgamesh's helper and their expedition against Humbaba (Huwawa in the older sources), the guardian of the Cedar Forest appointed by the chief god Enlil. After the heroes kill Humbaba, they clash with the goddess Ishtar, and the first half of the poem concludes with the death of Enkidu, condemned by the gods. Enkidu is a creature of knowledge and wisdom. The ramifications of this theme deserve discussion.

Enkidu, created by the gods as a match for an initially reckless Gilgamesh, becomes his counsellor (*māliku*), effectively appointed as such by the elders – themselves advisers – to stand at the king's side during the expedition. Enkidu comes from the wild, a liminal space granting a specific form of knowledge suited to their adventure outside the civilized space of the city.³³ After being civilized through sex by Shamhat, he is adopted by Ninsun, Gilgamesh's divine mother. With Ninsun, Enkidu shares the ability to interpret divine-sent dreams (esp. SB 4; OB Schøyen₂, OB Nippur, OB Harmal, MB Boğ₂). Ninsun "is wise in everything"; she understands Gilgamesh's dreams and predicts Enkidu's friendship and role as protector of Gilgamesh;

30 E.g. Moran 1991; George 2003, 445-6; 2012; Lenzi 2008, 106-21 for context on ante-diluvian wisdom and first-millennium religious experts; Maul 2008, 346-50; Sallaberger 2008, 55; Zgoll 2010; Worthington 2019, 264-5 (on XI 197 ≈ XI 10); Machinist 2020, 324-9; also below § 5 on sayings [13]-[14].

31 But see Foster 1987 on knowledge and love and, more recently, Sonik 2020 on emotion and counsel.

32 Helle 2020, 198-201, with previous scholarship, on the epic's bi-partition.

33 VI 26 ≈ IV 107 (OB Harmal₂, rev. 47 ≈ OB IM 19), V 190-1; cf. also saying [1] and SB II 237-40, III 7 = 221 ≈ 78; OB III 24-5, 106-7, 151-2, 253-4, 275-6. His association with Enki/Ea, ingrained in Enkidu's name, is confirmed by MB Priv₁ (George 2007a). See Zisa 2022, 699-706 on the liminal implications of the Huwawa adventure in OB sources, here (on Enkidu) esp. 706-7 fn. 63.

the fact that Ninsun adopts Enkidu reinforces his authority as counsellor, and constitutes a further mark of wisdom.³⁴ Importantly, the civilising of Enkidu by Shamhat also entails an increase in knowledge, marking his achievement of human status.³⁵ But it also entails his “forgetting about the steppe”, that is, precisely the knowledge that underpins his appointment by the elders.³⁶ Enkidu decisively helps Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, but he should have known better, for that killing inevitably enrages the gods. Enkidu is aware of the risk until the end, but he deludes himself into thinking that Enlil might be propitiated.³⁷ The wisdom of Enkidu is thus ultimately misdirected or, at best, partial. Crucially for the poem’s narrative economy, the ultimate result of the expedition is utter disaster: the heroes “reduce the forest to a wasteland” (SB V 303), as Enkidu puts it; Enlil’s protégé is killed despite his repeated pleas for mercy; Enkidu is punished and dies; Gilgamesh cannot face death and leaves his city.

The heroes’ excess and punishment may be compared to dramatic trajectories in Greek tragedy and epic connected with *hubris* (roughly: ‘inconsiderate arrogance’).³⁸ Similarly to Greek poetry, the *Gilgamesh* narratives elicits several questions surrounding the moral explanation of disaster, particularly concerning character knowledge and responsibility. To what extent are characters responsible for the evils that befall them? Could disaster have been avoided? Were the characters in an epistemic position such that they could have taken a different course of action? One way in which poetry develops and engages with these themes is by interlacing layers of knowledge and irony: the narrator (or dramatist), the characters and the audience display different degrees of knowledge compared to each other, which often shift as the narrative proceeds. Some things are true and wise on one level, but they are revealed not to be so in retrospect. The characters’ limited knowledge and delusion is foregrounded,

34 Ninsun (*kalāma īde*): SB I 257-8 = 284-5, III 17-18, [117]; Enkidu’s wisdom and knowledge: SB I 200; I 212 = II 32, cf. II 59; I 294-5; OB CUNES obv. 1-3 (George 2018), SB VII 70. Fleming and Milstewa (2010, 32-40) survey the material as part of their argument for a lost proto-Huwawa narrative in Akkadian.

35 Shamhat’s status as giver of counsel (*milku*) is stressed at OB II 67-8, which is not extant in the equivalent passage at SB I 211-12; Enkidu’s initial lack of knowledge: SB I 106, 231, II 48; OB II 90-1.

36 OB II 47, again not extant in the equivalent SB I 192-4. Enkidu’s alienation from the wild is nonetheless amply emphasized at SB I 197-202 too; also SB VII 130-1 (MB Nippur 39-40).

37 SB V 199-202 = 268-71 (the poet emphasizes the contradiction, since it is precisely in these lines that Enkidu gives the decisive advice to kill Humbaba); V 303-4, 312-19.

38 Van Dijk 1960, 81 (‘hybris’); cf. Zisa 2022, 705 (‘tracotanza’).

thus generating a range of audience reactions, including sympathy, pity and terror.³⁹

We will see that the use of *gnōmai* exemplifies the existence of comparable strategies in Babylonian epic. Interrogating the wisdom-value of *gnōmai* in their narrative context and against the background of what the audience knows or will find out to be the truth enhances our understanding of characterisation as well as of plot and thematic development. The *gnōmai* referred to are listed in the table below, which is footnoted by a brief explanation, based on context, of the course of action they encourage or discourage.

Table 1 Sayings in SB Gilgamesh⁴⁰

No.	Lines	Speakers	Translation
[1]	I 221	Enkidu to Shamhat	[one] born in the wild is mighty, strength he possesses
[2]	II 234-5	Gilg. to Enkidu	As for humankind, [its days] are numbered, all that ever it did is but [wind]
[3]	III 4-5 = 218-19	City-elders/ <i>šakkanakkū</i> to Gilg.	The one who goes in front saves (his) comrade, one who knew the road protected his friend
[4]	V 49	Gilg. to Enkidu	The one who went first protected his person, let him bring the companion to safety!
[5]	V 75-80	Enkidu to Gilg.	One friend is one alone, but [two are two!] Though they be weak, two [...] [though one alone cannot climb] a glacis slope, two [...] Two triplets [...] a three-ply rope [is not easily broken] As for a strong dog, [its] two pups [will overcome it(?)]
[6]	V 116	Humbaba to Gilg.	Let fools, Gilgamesh, take the advice of an idiot fellow

³⁹ This framework goes back to Aristotle's much-discussed concept of *hamartia* ('error'), *Poet.* 1452b31-1453a17. A comparative application (*Iliad* and Sam 1) is Gerhards 2015. Narrative ('tragic') irony in Homer: especially Rutherford 1982; Redfield 1994; Battezzato 2019; Johnston 2022. In Greek tragedy: e.g. Goldhill 2012; Rutherford 2012, 323-64; Johnston forthcoming. In *Gilgamesh*, as in Greek literature, sympathy is enhanced by the transience of partial divine support: Shamash unwaveringly helps the heroes, but is then ousted by Anu and Enlil; Ballesteros forthcoming, ch. 7.

⁴⁰ [1]: therefore, it is best not to defy me/think one can overcome me. [2]: therefore, let us establish our fame with glorious deeds. [3]: therefore, trust Enkidu. [4]: therefore, you go first. [5]: therefore, let us do this together. [6]: therefore, do not heed Enkidu's advice. [7]: therefore, let us finish the deed. [8]: therefore, spare my life. [9]: therefore, do not worry about Humbaba's auras, let us attack him. [10]: therefore, trust my determination to intercede for you. [11]: therefore, do not place hope on your praying to the gods. [12]: therefore, consider how miserable I am. [13]: therefore, do not hope to overcome death. [14]: therefore, practice moderation. This list does not aim to be comprehensive; for instance, one could add SB V 40, a few lines before [4], which displays the same syntactic structure as I 221 [1] and III 5/219 [3]. I do not treat Ishullanu's rhetorical questions to Ishtar at SB VI 72-3, considered to contain proverbial material by Foster 1987, 35; cf. Hallo 2010, 617. George 2003, 838, with a different interpretation.

[7]	V 133-5	Enkidu to Gilg.	Already the copper pours into the mould! To stoke the furnace for an hour? To <i>blow</i> on the coals for an hour? To send the Deluge is to crack the whip!
[8]	V 171-2	Humbaba to Gilg.	Never, O Gilgamesh, did a dead man <i>please</i> his lord, but [<i>a slave</i>] alive [<i>brings profit</i>] to his lord.
[9]	V 250-1	Enkidu to Gilg.	My friend, [catch a bird], and where [can its hatchlings go?]
[10]	VII 75-6	Gilg. to Enkidu	To the one who survived grieving was left the [<i>deceased</i>] left sorrow to the one who survived.
[11]	VII 86-7	Enkidu to Gilg.	[What he (viz. Enlil)] uttered, he did not [erase] again [what] he <i>proclaimed</i> , he did not erase again
[12]	VII 266	Enkidu to Gilg.	My friend, one who [<i>falls</i>] in combat [<i>makes his name</i>]
[13]	X 316-18	Uta-napishti to Gilg.	The captive and the dead, how alike they are! They cannot draw a picture of death. The dead do not greet man in the land.
[14]	XI 187	Ea to Enlil	Slack off, lest it be snapped! Pull taut, lest it become [slack!]

4 Sayings in SB *Gilgamesh*: The Tragedy of Enkidu

In Tablet I, Enkidu plans to defy Gilgamesh, and tells Shamhat [1] (SB I 219-21):⁴¹

[*ul-tar?*]-*ri-ih ina libbi(šà) uruk(unug)^{ki} a-na-ku-mi dan-nu*
[*x x*]-*um-ma ši-ma!?-tú ú-nak-kar*
[šá i-n)a 'šēri(edin)¹ i'-al-du [da-a)n i-mu-qí i-šú

[*I will vaunt*] *myself* in Uruk, saying I am the mightiest!
[*There*] I shall change the way things are ordered:
[one] born in the wild is mighty, strength he possesses.

The proverbial overtone of the saying at I 221 is marked by the ‘gnomic preterit’, which Werner Mayer saw as equivalent to the Greek gnomic aorist.⁴² The maxim rings true, for Enkidu will indeed show mighty strength. Yet at the same time, the narrative shows just how wrong he is: Enkidu will not win the challenge of strength with Gilgamesh in Uruk, nor indeed will he change the order of things (accepting George’s reading *šīmatu* at 220).⁴³ In fact, he ends up accepting Gilgamesh’s kingship in the most solemn way (OB II 239-40). The *dictum* ultimately serves the theme of Enkidu’s fragility and error,

⁴¹ All *Gilgameš* texts and translations after George 2003; 2020 and now George et al. 2022, integrating the new material published hitherto, noting alternative restorations and with updated line-numbering.

⁴² Mayer 1992.

⁴³ Nurullin 2012, 202-4 reads *ši-giš-tú ú-nak-kar* ‘will change the (course of) fighting’, which is equally ironic, since the clash between Enkidu and Gilgamesh will result in a stalemate.

which will culminate in his death. Audiences and readers are immediately alerted to the theme, since in this early dialogue Enkidu misses Shamhat's point about knowledge: she rightly replies that Enkidu is "ignorant of life" (I 233), that Gilgamesh is more powerful and that the king has the epistemic advantage. Gilgamesh counts on the great gods who have "broadened his wisdom" (I 240) and on his divine mother, "wise in everything", who recently elucidated to Gilgamesh the dreams about Enkidu (I 240-98). The wider context of Enkidu's first *gnōmē* can thus be understood to be a deeply ironic one. There is truth-value to the saying, but the intention for which it is deployed (defying Gilgamesh) proves misdirected. Importantly, a wisdom figure (Shamhat) unsuccessfully tries to dissuade the speaker of the saying, with the attempt foreshadowing that speaker's delusion. We will now see that this pattern is deployed, on a large scale, to frame the Humbaba expedition, which in turn proves that Gilgamesh is in no way as wise as Shamhat puts it.

Albeit clearly limited in knowledge, as befits a mortal, the civilized Enkidu soon gains his new status as the counsellor of Gilgamesh that the king had longed for (SB I 295-7). Initially, and at length, Enkidu tries to dissuade Gilgamesh from his plan of setting out against Humbaba, the protégé of Enlil; so do the city elders (SB II 216-29, 274-99). These authoritative and knowledgeable figures are correct, of course, because there seems to be no real need potentially to enrage Enlil save for seeking glory, and the consequences will be disastrous. Yet Gilgamesh emerges as fearless and ambitious, especially thanks to the existential *gnōmē* (more fully preserved in the OB source) which he uses to spurn Enkidu's remarks about the divinely determined danger that awaits whoever defies Humbaba ([2], SB II 232-5):

am-me-ni ib-ri pi-is-nu-[qiš ta]-qab-bi
 ù pi-i-ka ir-ma-am-ma t[u-lam-man l]ib-bi
 a-me-lut-ti ma-nu-^rú¹ [u₄-mu-šá]
mim-mu-ú e-te-ep-pu-šu š[ārū(im)^{meš?}]-ma 235

Why, my friend, do you speak like a weakling?
 With your feeble talk you have vexed my heart!
 As for humankind, [its days] are numbered,
 all that ever it did is but [wind]. 235

Cf. OB III 140-3:

ma-an-nu ib-ri e-lu-ú ša-^rma¹-[i] 140
 i-lu-ma it-ti ^dŠamšim(utu) da-ri-iš ^ruš¹-[bu]
 a-wi-lu-tum-ma ma-nu-ú u₄-mu-ša
mi-im-ma ša i-te-né-pu-šu ša-ru-ma

Who is there, my friend, that can climb to the sky? 140
Only the gods have [dwelled] forever in the sunlight.
As for humankind, its days are numbered,
whatever it might do, it is but wind.

In these striking metaphors, the unreachable sky exemplifies humankind's fragility; the fluctuating wind, the transience of its achievements. Life's limited span prompts Gilgamesh to seek immortal glory through his deeds. The sky-metaphor is widely attested in various forms in Babylonian literature, beginning in the OB Sumerian forerunner *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (*GH*); in OB proverb collections and the wisdom text *Nothing is of Value* (*nîĝ-nam*), in the OB *Ballad of Early Rulers*, and finally in the *Dialogue of Pessimism* attested in the first millennium. The wind-metaphor is paralleled in *Nothing is of Value*. These passages illuminate the intertextual matrix out of which the pointed literary use in SB *Gilgamesh* emerges. As such, they help us understand that Gilgamesh's existential *gnōmē* in fact undermines the king's plans.⁴⁴

- **GH A 25-33:** I raised my head on the rampart, my gaze fell on a corpse drifting down the river, afloat on the water: I too shall become like that, just so shall I be! (Even) the tallest one cannot reach the sky | (even) the broadest one cannot compass the Netherworld (kur). Since no man can escape life's end, I will enter the mountain and set up my name. Where names are set up, I will set up my name, where names are not yet set up, I will set up gods' names.
- **nîĝ-nam A 5-10 ≈ D 18-22** (vanity of sacrifice): (Even) the tallest one cannot reach the sky | (even) the broadest one cannot compass the Netherworld (kur) | (even) the strongest one cannot [compass] the Earth (ki) | The good life, let it be defiled in joy! | Let the 'race' be spent in joy!
- **nîĝ-nam B 6:** That plan - its outcome was carried away by the wind!
- **SP 17 sec. B2 1-2** (SP = Sumerian Proverb Collections): (Even) the tallest one cannot reach the sky | Even the broadest one cannot lift (himself) to earth (ki).
- **Ballad of Early Rulers SS 11-18:** Where is Gilgamesh, who, like Ziusudra, sought the (eternal) life? | Where is Huwawa, who was caught in submission? | Where is Enkidu, whose strength was not defeated (?) in the country? | Where are those kings,

⁴⁴ *GH* A 28-9 (25-33, cf. *GH* B 5-14), ed. Edzard 1990; 1991; 1993; Peterson 2011, 81-2; transl. George 2020 ≈ *Nothing is of value* (*nîĝ-nam nu-kal*) A 5-7, D 19-20, ed. and tr. Alster 2005; SP 17 Sec B2 1-2 ≈ SP 22 vi 38-40, ed. and tr. Alster 1997; *Dialogue of Pessimism* 82-3, ed. and tr. Lambert 1960. Translations slightly modified to emphasize overlapping diction.

the vanguards of former days? | They are no longer engendered, they are no longer born. | Like the remote heavens, has my hand ever reached them? | Like the deep underworld (or: earth) (ki b̄uru-da-gin₇), no one knows them. | All life is an illusion.

- **Dialogue of Pessimism 75-84:** “Do not perform, sir, do not perform [viz. a benefit for your country]. | Go up on to the ancient ruin heaps and walk about; | see the skulls of high and low. | Which is the malefactor, and which is the benefactor?” | “Slave, listen to me”. “Here I am, sir, here I am”. | “What, then, is good?” | “To have my neck and your neck broken | And to be thrown into the river is good. | Who is so tall as to climb to the heavens? | Who is so broad as to compass the underworld [or: earth] (KI)?”.

It is difficult to say whether the poet of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* took the saying from current proverbial wisdom, or whether the non-narrative wisdom texts drew on the Sumerian literary tradition about Gilgamesh.⁴⁵ The imagery of sky and earth/netherworld as impossibly vast dimensions for a mortal to encompass also appears to respond to a topos of Sumerian religious poetry, emphasising the gods’ majesty as reflected in their dominion over sky and earth.⁴⁶ What seems certain is that a contextual reading shows important differences in the passages about humans collected above. Especially revealing is the fact that the Sumerian epic appears as the outlier here. In *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, unlike in the SB version, the adventure does not end tragically. The heroes kill Huwawa, and Gilgamesh emerges in triumph as the king who established his name for eternity.⁴⁷ In all the other sources, on the other hand, the sayings have a markedly pessimistic tone – rather than promoting action, they invite audiences to accept the limits of humankind and recognize the vanity of things. The *Dialogue of Pessimism*, the latest of these sources, uses the saying to interpret the story of Gilgamesh in precisely that manner,

⁴⁵ Alster 2005, 294-7; Hallo 2010, 621-2. To Metcalf 2013, 261, “both [*GH* and the *Dialogue of Pessimism*] draw on the same proverbial wisdom”.

⁴⁶ E.g. *Gudea Cyl.* A 4.14-15, V 13-17; *Inana B* 123-4, *Inana F* 10-11; Metcalf 2013, 257-60, with further examples.

⁴⁷ It is true that at *GH* A 181-91 Enlil is displeased that Huwawa has died. However, although the heroes have offered him Huwawa’s head, the chief god does not take revenge, and instead assigns new roles to Huwawa’s ‘auras’ – showing that the enterprise becomes aetiologically functional. Enkidu’s death in *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* is not connected to the Huwawa adventure. Hence I disagree with Alster 2005, 295 who takes the lines in *GH* as “refer[ring] to the futility of Gilgameš’ ambitions”. The negative implications seem only to apply in the later instantiations. The poems about Gilgameš set out to demonstrate that the king did establish his renown; cf. Radner 2005, 90-2; Zgoll 2010; Metcalf 2013, 261; Franke 2023, 19.

and so does, even more explicitly, the earlier *Ballad of Early Rulers*.⁴⁸ These intertexts, then, suggest that the deployment of the saying in the Akkadian versions of the epic is ultimately one of pessimism – for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, their triumph will indeed amount to nothing but loss. The Akkadian epic ultimately recasts the older Sumerian forerunner by making the saying resonate with the pessimistic tone that was also current in later eras. The diachrony of the tradition illustrates the point well. *GH* only contains the ‘sky and earth’ theme, *OB Gilg.* significantly adds the ‘vanity’ wind image, the only one retained in the *SB* version, which, notably, utilizes a gnomic preterit (*iteppušu*). But there is more to this sophisticated operation, for narrative irony comes into play. In the specific context of the scene, Gilgamesh does emerge as the bold and heroic king, and he will persuade Enkidu. At the same time, a cultivated audience – and those who knew the whole story – would not have failed to detect the irony: the heroic deed will bring loss, despair and a sense of vanity. In this way, Gilgamesh’s heroic saying ultimately reinforces the broader pattern of misguided confidence which we have encountered in the previous exchange between Enkidu and Shamhat. Like Enkidu, Gilgamesh will meet disaster as he does not listen to the correct advice of a more knowledgeable figure.

The next *gnōmē* [3] is uttered first by the city-elders (*mālikū rabūtu*), then by the *šakkanakkū*-officials. It marks and, by virtue of being repeated, frames the civic appointment of Enkidu as the protector of the king ahead of the expedition (*SB III 2-5 = 216-19*):

[I]a ta-tak-kil ^{1a}GIŠ¹-gim-maš a-na 'gi-mir' e-'mu-qí-ka' 2/216
 [i]-na-ka liš-ba-a mi-ḫi-iš-ka tu-k[il]
 'a¹-lik maḫ-ri tappâ(*tab.ba*)a ú-še-ez-z[eb]
 ša tú-du i-du-ú i-bir-šú iṣ-ṣu[r] 5/219

Do not trust, O Gilgamesh, in the fullness of your strength, 2/216
 let your eyes be satisfied, strike a blow to rely on!
 He who goes in front saves (his) comrade,
 one who knew the road protected his friend. 5/219

⁴⁸ *Dialogue of Pessimism* 76 does, in my view, parody *SB Gilg.* I 18 ≈ 11.323; cf. George 2003, 526; Alster 2005, 295 with fn. 39; Wasserman 2011b, 7-11. Metcalf 2013, 263 persuasively argues that the parody need not imply a humorous effect, but remains sceptical concerning the intertextual nexus (as was Lambert 1960, 140-1). I would insist that verses *SB Gilg.* I 18 (≈ XI 323) and *Dial.* 76 match precisely in diction and meter: to *elī-ma ina muḫḫi dūri ša uruk itallak* responds *elī-ma ina muḫḫi tīlāni labīrūti itallak*. Further, the *SB Gilg.* lines are exceptionally prominent in the epic, since they encircle its trajectory (above fn. 30, below fn. 72), and thus make for an easily recognisable allusive target. Finally, the *Dialogue*'s reference to the wall at 76-7 forms a cluster with the ‘sky and earth/underworld’ theme (*Dial.* 83-4), which is again prominent in the Gilgamesh tradition.

The second couplet has been recognized as proverb-like thanks to the gnomic preterit.⁴⁹ The saying (III 4-5, 218-19) highlights the importance of trusting the counsellor and companion, whilst stressing the collaborative aspect of the enterprise: Gilgamesh's blow must be reliable for his companion (*miḥiṣka tukkil*, III 3/217). What bears emphasis is, once again, the narrative-ironic purpose to which the proverb is put. For when the heroes eventually face Humbaba, Gilgamesh, who was so bold, is paralyzed and terrified (SB V 27-30), and the poet has him re-use the saying to convince Enkidu to go first and confront Enlil's creature at [4], SB V 47-50 (IV 245-8 in George 2003):⁵⁰

mu-u-tú mi-ši-ma 'ba-la-tu' [še-'-i?]
[šá i]na idi(á) pal-lu pit-qu-du a-'me-lu'
[šá ina] 'pāni(igi)' illaku(du)^{ku} pa-gar-šú iṣ-ṣur tap-pa-a li-šal-lim
[ana u₄-me r]u-qu-ti šú-nu šu-ma iš-tak-nu 50

Forget death and [seek] life!

One who, at one's side, moves forward, is a careful man

The one who went first protected his person, let him bring the
companion to safety!

It is they who have established a name [for] future [time!]. 50

In the moment of truth, Gilgamesh proves to be rather unworthy of the heroic ideals he had expressed (explicitly evoked at SB V 50, cf. 203-4, 271-2). Notably, in spurning Enkidu's wise advice, Gilgamesh had said – at least in the OB version (III 146-7) – that he would be the one to go first and protect his less courageous companion. But here the king is happy to send Enkidu forward. It is up to Enkidu the counsellor to reply with a series of gnomic statements which reinforce the elders' advice that the pair should instead act in concert ([5], SB V 74-80):

ib-ri ḏum-ba-ba x [...]
ib-ri iš-tén iš-tén-ma š[i-na ši-na-ma] 75
lu-ú ma-ku-ma 2-t[...]
lu-ú muš-ḥal-ši-tum-ma u[l ...] 2 m[u- ...]
[šit-'ta' taš-ka-a-ta x [...]
áš-lu šu-uš-lu-šú [...]

⁴⁹ George 2003, 214-15, 809.

⁵⁰ The building-blocks of verse SB V 49 are found at SB III 9-10, 224-5: *ḏen-ki-dù ib-ri li-iṣ-ṣur tap-pa-a li-šal-lim* | *a-na šēr(edin) ḥi-ra-a-ti pa-gar-šú lib-la* 'let Enkidu protect (his) friend and keep safe (his) comrade! | Let him bring his person back to his wives!', which in turn echo the version of *gnōmē* [3] as found in OB III 255-6: *[a-li]k maḥ-ra tap-pa-a ú-ša-lim* | *[ša i]na-šu šu-wu-ra 'pa-gār-šu i¹-š[ú-ur²]* 'He who went in front kept his comrade safe; | The one whose eyes were peeled (lit. gleaming) [protected] himself'.

[1 <i>kalb</i>](ur.gi,) <i>dan-nu 2 mi-ra-[nu-šú ...]</i>	80
My friend, Humbaba [...]	
One friend is one alone, but [two are two!]	75
Though they be weak, two [...]	
[though one alone cannot climb] a glacis slope, two [<i>will succeed!</i>]	
Two triplets [...]	
a three-ply rope [<i>is not easily broken</i>]	
As for a strong dog, [its] two pups [<i>will overcome it</i>].	80

Particularly interesting is line SB V 79, where the alliteration reinforces the gnomic character. Here we find another strong intertext with the Sumerian version, *GH* A 106-10 (Gilgamesh to Enkidu):⁵¹

Set to, O Enkidu, two men together will not die: a raft of reed cannot sink, no man can cut a three-ply rope, a flood cannot sweep a man down from a wall, fire in a reed hut cannot be extinguished! You join with me, I will join with you, what can anyone do to us then?

We will return to this dense set of sayings, whose focus on the nexus between collaborative values and fragility is central to the SB poem (below § 5 on [14]). For present purposes, the passage is remarkable because it confirms the programmatic nature of the narrative irony. A strong inversion of roles takes place in the Humbaba adventure as portrayed in the SB version: unlike in the older Sumerian poem, it is Enkidu, and not Gilgamesh, who acts as the courageous one who utters the *gnōmē*. Importantly, the OB Akkadian tradition in OB Schøyen₂, unlike the late Bronze Age Hittite adaptation, displays a courageous Gilgamesh and a fearsome Enkidu. We can thus recognize here an innovation that may postdate the OB period.⁵²

The process of ironic inversion continues. Despite Enkidu's advice, Gilgamesh continues to hesitate. Enkidu reproaches the king with the very words Gilgamesh had used when spurning Enkidu's wise advice against confronting Humbaba (V 130-1 = II 232-3). It is again

⁵¹ Transl. George 2020, 110, cf. Civil 2003, 81-2; Edzard 1991, 202-4. Also compare Eccles. 4:9-12: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken". The parallel has, in fact, enhanced understanding of SB V 79: George 2003, 467 fn. 84 (previous literature); Samet 2015, 279-82, from whom I quote the biblical passage.

⁵² OB Schøyen₂ 63-80, CTH 341.III.1 H.6'-12' (Beckman 2019). The action sequence in SB 5 has been considerably clarified after the publication of MS ff: Al-Rawi, George 2014. Note that SB 4.227-50 in George 2003 are now understood as SB V 29-52, with Enkidu as the speaker at V 31 = *olim* IV 229.

the counsellor's task to try to persuade the king with a complex gnomistic metaphor ([7], SB V 132-7):⁵³

*e-nin-na-ma ib-ri iš-ta-at [(x)]-¹pi?¹-[x]
ina ra-a-ṭu ^{lu}nappāḫi(simug) e-ra-(a) šá-ba-šá-¹a¹
tu-ú-ru ana 1 bēr(danna)^{am} na-pa-ḫu na-pi-iḫ-tu ana 1 bēr(danna)^{am}
šá-¹lu-ú¹
šá-par a-bu-bu iš-tuḫ-ḫu la-pa-tu 135
[e] ¹ta¹-as-suḫ šēpī(gīr)^{min}-ka e ta-tu-ur ana ár-ki-ka
[e-nin-na ki-i-ma l]abbi(ur.maḫ) mi-ḫi-iš-ka du-un-nin*

Now, my friend, but one is [our task]
Already the copper pours into the mould!
To stoke the furnace for an hour? To *blow on* the coals for an hour?
To send the Deluge is to crack the whip! 135
[Do not] pull back your foot, do not make a retreat!
Make your blow mighty, [like that of a] lion!

The metaphors of metalcraft at V 133-4 have been persuasively elucidated by George, who interprets them as suggesting that once a potentially dangerous process has been set in motion, hesitation can only make things worse.⁵⁴ I would add that the reference to the Flood (VII 135), by looking forward to the encounter with Uta-napishti and so to the conceptual resolution of the poem, also casts the completion of the enterprise under a dark light. Just as the Flood was brought about recklessly and disastrously, so will the killing of Humbaba prove damaging for the heroes (see further below § 5 on [14]).

Enkidu's ability is also manifest as he gives excellent proverbial advice regarding Humbaba's auras, about which Gilgamesh should not worry, concentrating instead on Humbaba himself ([9] SB V 250-1):⁵⁵

ib-ri [i-šú-ra-am ba-ar-ma] | e-ša-am [i-la-ku wa-at-mu-šu]

My friend, [catch a bird], | and where [can its hatchlings go?]

It may be observed that the identification of Humbaba as a parent contributes (ironically) to creating empathy towards Enlil's appointee, much like the description of the "monkey mothers" singing aloud

⁵³ The passage is paralleled in (and restored thanks to) MB Ug₂ b, where the speaker is seemingly Gilgamesh. George 2007b, 250 deems this "a corruption", but it is possible that the peripheral source reflects an older version where, as in *GH*, OB Schøyen₂ and the Hittite texts, the inversion of roles was not as pronounced as in the SB text.

⁵⁴ George 2003, 823-6.

⁵⁵ Restored with OB Ishchali 15'; identified as a proverb and compared to Deut. 22:6 by Wasserman 2011b, 12.

for Humbaba alongside their younglings (SB V 24-6) – an important part of the sympathetic depiction of Humbaba’s domain, which will be destroyed and cause Enkidu’s “ecological regret”.⁵⁶ After Enkidu is punished with death, Gilgamesh will himself suffer “like a lioness deprived of her cubs” (VIII 61).⁵⁷

The ironic inversion of roles, with Enkidu taking the lead, culminates as the counsellor decrees Humbaba’s death, leading Gilgamesh brutally to stab the divine creature in the neck (V 197-204 = 266-72). At the same time, the fact that, in doing so, Enkidu accomplishes the task he was entrusted with by the city-elders shows that the role-inversion is just one aspect of the narrative irony of Tablet V. Enkidu proves up to the task: without his knowledge and advice (stressed by Humbaba at V 190-1), the enterprise would have failed. The larger and most important irony is, of course, that Enkidu’s persuasive advice to kill Humbaba will ultimately lead to disaster. Humbaba’s insulting address to the two heroes ([6] SB V 116) is instructive:

lim-tal-ku lil-lu ^aGIŠ-*gím-maš nu’-ú a-me-lu mi-na-a tal-l[i-ka] a-di*
’maħrī(igi)-ia’

Let fools, Gilgameš, take the advice of an idiot fellow, why have you come [here] into my presence?

Humbaba’s attempt to undermine Enkidu has the general validity of a *gnōmē*, and utilizes stereotypical figures (the *lillu* ‘fool’, the *nu’u* ‘idiot’) which recur in wisdom texts and in Tablet X.⁵⁸ The insult is however misdirected, since Enkidu will be effective and Humbaba will die – indeed, Humbaba’s insult arguably reinforces Enkidu’s determination, and contributes to a crescendo effect between maxims [5] and [7]. Enlil’s appointee, moreover, is also wrong in connecting the expedition to Enkidu’s initiative. Unlike the audience, he does not know that Enkidu had in fact advised against the idea: this mismatch could draw the audience’s attention to the inversion of roles, and to the question of responsibility. For in the long run, Humbaba is right that Enkidu’s advice is ultimately wrong-headed.

The second of Humbaba’s maxims serves, in its immediate context, his plea for mercy, as he proposes to become Gilgamesh’s servant ([8], SB V 171-2, cf. MB Ug₂ b+10):

[ma-ti-m]a ^aGIŠ-*gím-maš mi-i-ti ’ul’ x-tar-ri [b]e-lu*
[ár-du? bal-ṭ]u ana be-lí-šú [it-tur?]

⁵⁶ So, perceptively, Al-Rawi, George 2014, 74; see Zisa 2022, 703-5.

⁵⁷ On this simile and *Il.* 18.316-22 see Davies 2023.

⁵⁸ See below on [13], with fn. 62.

Never, O Gilgamesh, did a dead man *please* his lord,
but [a *slave*] alive [*brings profit*] to his lord.

It seems likely that these lines offer a foreshadowing of Enkidu's death, especially since Humbaba bitterly stresses Enkidu's status as Gilgamesh's hireling (V 261-2).⁵⁹

Thus, the poem's pervasive emphasis on Enkidu's knowledge turns out to be ironic. Specifically, Enkidu's otherness, his superior knowledge and his appointment as counsellor unveil, on the one hand, the weakness of Gilgamesh, and on the other, the vanity of the two heroes' enterprise against the power of Enlil.

We can start to take stock of the discussion so far. The manipulation of proverbs and *gnōmai* by the poet exploits the differing degrees of knowledge of the characters about the ultimate effects of their actions. In the end, Gilgamesh's *dictum* about the vanity of humankind's agency proves correct, though he was crucially wrong in his attempt at making it a function of successful heroism. The principal instrument of this chain of error is Enkidu, sent down by the gods and taken away by them. He is a good counsellor, and an effective companion throughout, thanks to his divinely derived knowledge. But this is not enough to save him.

It is only after understanding that divine retaliation is upon them, in Tablet VII, that the heroes' gnomic statements turn to the acceptance of the absolute power of the gods, and of humankind's fragility. The irony ends, their maxims become truthful. Reacting to the revelation of Enkidu's imminent death, Gilgamesh is correct in predicting, in yet another occurrence of the gnomic preterit, that suffering will stay with him ([10], SB VII 69-72, 75-6):

[*ib-ri* ...] x x x [...] x *šu-pu-u*
[*šá u*]z^{nī}(geštu)^{min?} *ṭè-mu ra-šu-ú šá-na-ti-ma* [...] x x [.]
[*am-m*]i-ni *ib-ri id-bu-ub lib-ba-ka šá-na-^ti¹* [...] 72
[*šu-ut-tu₄ š*]u-qu-rat-ma *pi-rit-tu₄ ma-^r ¹-da-^tat¹*
(...)
ana bal[^t]i i-zi-bu na-sa-sa 75
[x *mi?-i?-t₄*]u₄ *ana bal-ṭi ni-is-sa-ta ^ri¹-zib*

[My friend, ...] (...) [...] manifest,
[who] has *understanding* and sense, [...] *profanities*?
Why, my friend, did your heart talk *profanities* [...]?
[the dream] was precious and the apprehension was much, 72
(...)

⁵⁹ Cf. *GH* 175-7, with George 2003, 468-9.

To the one who survived grieving was left!
the [deceased] left sorrow to the one who survived”.

75

Enkidu too is right that Enlil will not change his mind regarding his fate ([11], SB VII 86-9, again with gnomic preterits):

[šá i]q-bu-u ul i-tur ul i[p-šit]
[šá] ul!-ŠI-ed-du-u ul i-tur ul ip-šit
[ib-ri uš-šu¹-[ra ...]
[i¹-[na l]a šimāti(nam)^{meš}-ši-na nišū(ùg)^{meš} il-[la¹-ka

[What he (viz. Enlil)] uttered, he did not [erase] again
[what] he *proclaimed*, he did not erase again
My friend, [my destiny is] drawn,
people do go prematurely to their fate.

And it is up to Enkidu, if we accept George’s interpretation of the lacunose text, finally to articulate the vanity of their heroic enterprise. He echoes – and subverts – the terms of Gilgamesh’s heroic discourse, thus unleashing the second part of the epic ([12], SB VII 266-7, Enkidu to Gilgamesh):⁶⁰

ib-ri šá ina tāḥ[āzi(mè) im-qu-tú ...]
[a¹-na-ku ina t[āḥāzi(mè)?.....]

My friend, one who [falls] in combat [makes his name]
But I, [I do not fall] in [combat, and shall not make my name.]

5 Sayings in SB *Gilgamesh*: The Wisdom of Uta-napishti

The contexts of the two last *gnōmai* to be considered here, both heard by Gilgamesh in Uta-napishti’s voice, have been widely seen as conceptual cores of the epic. The first passage comes at the end of Uta-napishti’s sapiential speech in SB X 266-322, and centres on the inevitable, unfathomable and definitive nature of death ([13], X 312-22):

im-ma-ti-ma nāru(id) iš-šá-a mīla(illu) ub-lu
ku-li-li iq-qé-lep-pa-a ina nāri(id)
pa-nu-šá i-na-aṭ-ṭa-lu pa-an ^dŠamši(utu)^š
[ul¹-tu ul-la-nu-um-ma ul i-ba-áš-ši mim-ma
šal-lu ù mi-tu₄ ki-i pī(ka) a-ḥa-meš-ma

315

⁶⁰ Cf. *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* 229/237 // SB XII 62, and see George 2003, 484.

šá mu-ti ul iṣ-ṣi-ru ṣa-lam-šú
lullâ(lú.u₁₈.lu)^a mītu(lú.ug₇) ul ik-ru-ba^{ka-ra-bi} ina māti(kur) (thus mss. bf)
^da-nun-na-ki ilū(dingir)^{meš} rabûtu(gal)^{meš} paḥ-ru
^dma-am-me-tu₄ ba-na-at šim-ti itti(ki)-šú-nu ši-ma-tú i-ši[m-[ma]]³²⁰
iṣ-tak-nu mu-ta u ba-la-ṭa
šá mu-ti ul ud-du-ú ūmī(u₄)^{meš}-šú

At some time the river rose, it brought the flood,
the mayfly was floating on the river:
its face was gazing at the face of the Sun,
then, all at once, nothing was there. 315
The captive and the dead, how alike they are!
They cannot draw a picture of death.
The dead do not greet man in the land.
The Anunnakī, the great gods, were assembled,
Mammītu, creatress of destiny, decreed a destiny with them: 320
death and life they did establish,
the days of death they did not reveal.

This passage closes the Flood hero's reflections on the transience of humankind's efforts (X 301-18). What comes before is severely fragmentary, but it appears that the train of thought proceeds from a reproachful commiseration for Gilgamesh's present condition (X 267-79), to a description of celestial movements (280-5, perhaps reflecting humankind's alternating circumstances) and a mention of the provisions for the gods, for which Gilgamesh was traditionally famous (286-94, see above § 3).⁶¹

We must ask whether our *gnōmai* (X 316-18) connect Uta-napishti's discourse to the early part of the epic. Uta-napishti makes no explicit reference to what happened in the poem's first half. Yet his commiseration for Gilgamesh at least makes clear that the king, who is part human and part divine (X 267-9), was not supposed to have fallen so low. Gilgamesh, meanwhile, had made clear that the killing of Humbaba preceded Enkidu's death (X 230). Arguably, the implication is that the inevitability of death and human miseries are not to be countered – as per Gilgamesh's earlier perspective – through excessive, reckless and impious heroic behavior. An important sign of this connection may lie in the enigmatic exordium of Uta-napishti's speech, which concerns a stereotypical figure in Babylonian wisdom discourse, 'the fool' (*lillu*) (X 268-77):

⁶¹ On Uta-napishti's speech see George 2003, 504-8; Haubold 2013, 46-51; Helle 2017; Maul 2020, 36-7, 182-3; Nurullin 2020; Sibbing-Plantholt 2020, 336 fn. 7.

šá ina šīr(uzu) ilī(dingir)^{meš} u a-me-lu-ti bal-¹la¹-t[a]
šá kīma(gin₇) abī(ad)-ka u ummi(ama)-ka ¹ú¹-šep-pe-¹šú¹-ka-m[a?] 270
ma-ti-ma ⁴GĪŠ-gím-maš ana li[l-li] i-pu-¹uš¹ ē[kalla(é.gal)]
^{giš}kussá(gu.za) ina puḫri(ukkin) ¹id¹-du-ú ti-šab iq-bu-¹ú¹-[šú]
na-ad-¹na-áš¹-šú ana lil-li šu[r-š]um-ma [šikari?] kīma(gin₇)
himēti (i.nun) šam-¹na gu-un-na¹
tuḫ-ḫ[i] ¹ú¹ ku-uk-ku-šá kīma(gin₇) [...] 275
la-biš [m]aš-ḫa-an-da kīma(gin₇) [...] 275
ù šá-a-šú kīma(gin₇) né-bé-ḫi e-b[e-eḫ] [...] 275
áš-šú la i-šu-ú ¹ma¹-[li-ki?] [...] 275
a-mat mil-ki la i-š[ú-u] [...] 275

[You], who are a mix of divine and human flesh,
whom they [made] like your father and your mother!
Did they ever, Gilgameš, build a [palace] for the fool, 270
place a throne in the council, and tell [him.] “Sit!”?
To a fool (only) the dreg of [beer(?)] is given, instead of ghee,
cheap oil, 270
bran and grist instead of [*best flour*.]
He is clad in a rag, instead of [*fine garments*.]
instead of a belt, *he is girt* [*with old rope*.] 275
Because he has no advisers [*to guide him*.]
(because) he has no words of counsel [...]

The ‘fool’ is contrasted with a royal (or at any rate high-status) figure, which is what Gilgamesh is supposed to be.⁶² Thus the fool’s miserable outfit (X 274-5) evokes Gilgamesh’s unbecoming appearance (X 6-9, 40-5 = 113-18 = 213-18, cf. XI 251-70); his poor diet contrasts with the food and drink Gilgamesh expects for himself (VI 25-8, cf. VII 135-6). Most crucially, unlike the fool, and as a king, Gilgamesh should have access to counsel (*milku*). While Uta-napishti’s exordium thus boosts his own authority, audiences are also reminded of Enkidu the counsellor. The association is encouraged because Humbaba himself said, as seen above ([6]), that Gilgamesh would be a fool (*lillu*) if he were to take advice from Enkidu (V 116, *limtalkū*), these being the only two occurrences of the word *lillu* in the preserved parts of the poem.

What is the significance of this long-distance textual connection? I suggest that the discourse on advice is contrastive: the counsel that Gilgamesh really needs is not Enkidu’s – at least, not the one Enkidu

62 On the ‘fool’ as a low-status person see George 2003, 504, with Lambert 1960, 18 fn. 1. For *lillu* as a stereotypical figure of wisdom texts, including proverbs, see the passages quoted by CAD L 189, esp. *Babylonian Theodicy* 79, 262; *Dialogue of Pessimism* 33 (with apparatus, and cf. Lambert 1960, 117); compare *Bilingual Proverbs* 3.13-14 (*nu’u*) (all edited by Lambert 1960).

gave resulting in Humbaba’s death – but Uta-napishti’s. The final position of the set of *gnōmai* [13] serves Uta-napishti’s concluding emphasis on human transience. Gilgamesh, to be sure, had not been unaware of that condition. It was precisely the fragility of human life and achievements that prompted him to seek heroic glory ([2]). But his present condition shows the inadequacy of that perspective, whose consequences proved to be excessive, reckless, even impious heroic behavior. Though the fragmentary text precludes certainty, Uta-napishti’s wisdom does not seem to connect human limits to a search for personal glory. Rather, it directs awareness of death’s inevitability towards the careful performance of the ritual duties of kingship (X 286-93), which crucially include accepting sound advice (X 270-7).⁶³

Moving on to the paradigmatic story of the Flood in Tablet XI, it is significant that it centres on precisely these two themes – religious awareness of one’s limits, and acceptance of advice. Uta-napishti achieved the perpetuation of human civilisation by behaving piously towards his god Ea, whose difficult advice he was able to accept and execute.⁶⁴ While this is not the place to discuss the theology of the Flood story,⁶⁵ we must note that the last *gnōmē* [14], spoken among the gods, illustrates how Uta-napishti’s principles inform the divine world too. Ea, the counsellor god, reproaches the ruler Enlil for the disproportionate destruction caused by the Flood, saying that Enlil ‘lacked counsel’ (*lā tamtalik*). The implication is that even the divine ruler (like Gilgamesh) must accept advice, and avoid excessive behavior [14] (SB XI 181-7):

é-a pa-a-šú īpuš(du)ma iqabbi(du₁₁.ga)
izakkar(mu)^{dr} ana qu-ra-di éen-[líl]
at-ta apkal(abgal) ilī(dingir)^{meš} qu-ra-du
ki-i ki-i la tam-ta-lik-ma a-bu-bu taš-k[un]
be-el ár-ni e-mid ħi-ṭa-a-šú 185
be-el gíl-la-ti e-mid gíl-lat-[su]
ru-um-me a-a ib-ba-ti-iq šu-du-ud a-a i[r-mu]

Ea opened his mouth to speak,
saying to the hero Enlil:
“You, the sage of the gods, the hero,
how could you lack counsel and cause the deluge?
On him who commits a sin, inflict his crime! 185
on him who does wrong, inflict [his] wrong-doing!
Slack off, lest it be snapped! Pull taut, lest it become [slack!]

⁶³ This interpretation builds on George 2003, 504-8.

⁶⁴ Ramifications and complications of Ea’s advice: Worthington 2019.

⁶⁵ I have tried to do so in Ballesteros forthcoming, ch. 7 § 2.4-5 and ch. 9.

In this way, the *gnōmai* uttered by Uta-napishti crystallize the same wisdom of moderation which underlay the ironic narrative development of the first part of the epic, which centred on Enkidu, his ambiguous position as wise adviser and his ultimate failure and death.

The text gives another indication of how Uta-napishti's wisdom coheres with the narrative of the Humbaba expedition, helping us perceive the wisdom content of the advice that rulers need. This wisdom content concerns the collaborative values qualifying the king's action as worthy, and emerges from a textual thread revolving around the symbolism of water as a metaphor of transience.

Uta-napishti, as noted, preserves humankind by relying on his god and leading his citizens to build the ark to escape the Flood. That is a remarkable collective and collaborative effort which is given pride of place in his tale (XI 48-75). The ark, in turn, escapes the watery destruction by finding, at long length, an anchoring on Mt Nimush (*ana šadî nimuš itemid eleppu* XI 142). On that mountain, gods and humans will convene for the sacrifice and Uta-napishti will be made immortal. The importance of this mooring, stressed by a fourfold repetition in lines XI 143-6, lies in the fact that it counteracts, resists the destructive power of water. The resonance of water as a symbol of transience and death has been amply developed in the epic, notably in Uta-napishti's famous mayfly metaphor (X 312-15, quoted above, where the Flood is also evoked).⁶⁶ Crucially, the motif of anchoring (or proper mooring) returns in Ea's *gnōmē* addressed to Enlil in the divine assembly: "Slack off, lest it be snapped! Pull taut, lest it become [slack!]" (XI 187 [14]). The point is that a ruler must exercise restraint in governing a vessel's course in perilous waters - if the rope is pulled too tightly, it may break; if it is kept too loose, the ship will float uncontrollably. It does not seem to have been recognized that the imagery of that *dictum*, already attested in the OB period (cf. *Atr.* OB III vi 24), can be connected to Gilgamesh and Enkidu's confrontation with Humbaba. We have seen that in saying [5] Enkidu calls for a joint effort with the image of the three-ply rope, which in turn goes back to the Sumerian *GH* A. The older version makes the connection with vessels, water and death explicit in a passage partially quoted above, which is now worth reading more fully (*GH* A 106-15):⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Watery destruction in Old Babylonian literary imagery: Chen 2013. Mayfly metaphor: George 2012, 232-41; Helle 2017.

⁶⁷ Transl. George 2020; for the text see Edzard 1991, 202-4, cf. Civil 2003, 81-2.

Set to, O Enkidu, two men together will not die: a raft of reed cannot sink, no man can cut (ku₅) a three-ply rope (eše₂ 3 tab-ba), a flood cannot sweep a man down from a wall, fire in a reed hut cannot be extinguished! You join with me, I will join with you, what can anyone do to us then? After it sank, after it sank, after the boat from Magan sank, a raft of reed was the boat that saved lives, it did not sink! Set to, let us go to him, let us set eyes on him.

Parallels clarify that the Sumerian word for ‘rope’ at *GH* A 107 (eše₂) is specifically a ‘towing rope’ (*Šulgi R* 34, *InEb* 85, cf. *EnlNinl* 42).⁶⁸ It seems significant that *batāqu* ‘snap’, the verb used at [14] (SB XI 187) is the standard Akkadian equivalent of the Sumerian verb ku₅ ‘cut’ used at *GH* 107.⁶⁹ The traditional (proverbial?) nature of the imagery seems confirmed by a parallel in a curse at *Maqlu* III 133: “let its (ship’s) mooring rope be cut”.⁷⁰ Importantly, the strong metaphorical connection between water, death and the Humbaba adventure emerges from two further intra-textual links. First, Gilgamesh’ claim that thanks to the rope “water cannot wash someone away from a wall!” (*GH* A 109) refers back to the vision that prompted his heroic quest in the first place (“I raised my head on the rampart, my gaze fell on a corpse drifting down the river” *GH* A 25-6, quoted above on [2] – walls as safety, water as death). And second, the heroes’ encounter with Humbaba in SB *Gilg.* contains several references to the Flood, the most explicit being at [7], where Enkidu refers to their enterprise as “to send the Deluge” (SB V 135).⁷¹ This complex network of resonances, I suggest, contributes to linking the two parts of the SB epic, insofar as they illustrate the *fil rouge* that connects (a) Gilgamesh’s heroism (straightforward in *GH*, mis-guided in SB *Gilg.*), (b) the theme of transience associated with water and (c) the collaborative values that are central to success, whether it be it mis-directed and impious (as in the tragic Humbaba adventure in SB *Gilg.*) or pious and positive (as in the Flood story).

Finally, it is significant that the narrative pattern according to which failure to follow wise advice leads to error should recur in Tablet XI. Just as Enkidu did not heed Shamhat’s advice (above [1]), and just as Gilgamesh did not listen to Enkidu and the city-elders (above [2], [3], [4]), so too Gilgamesh fails to accept Uta-napishti’s admonition

68 GSF 363 s.v. “éše”.

69 CAD B 165.

70 Quoted by CAD B 165.

71 Gilgamesh’s exhortation to Enkidu to “forget death and [seek] life!” (*mūta miši-ma balāta* [še’i?]) SB V 47 [4]) reminds one of the exordium of Ea’s speech to Uta-napishti, where the Flood is announced (11.25-6: *muššir mešrāmma še’i napšāti* | [m]akkūra zērma napišta *bulliṭ* ‘Abandon riches and seek survival! | Spurn property and save life!’). The nexus is reinforced by MB Emar₁ 5’b-6’a = SB VI 131, cf. XI 35.

about the inevitability of death. Accordingly, the king's attempt to bring home the plant of rejuvenation – following the suggestion of Uta-napishti's wife – does not succeed (SB XI 281-318). The epic concludes with the king admiring Uruk's mighty walls, his own royal work, repeating lines found in the proem (SB I 18-23 ≈ XI 323-8). Scholars have interpreted the walls as a symbol of the correct way for a king to obtain (figurative) immortality, through civic and religious deeds.⁷² If so, then Gilgamesh did bring home positive advice concerning collaborative values and the duties of kingship. But the wisdom of Uta-napishti cannot cancel the pain of fragility and mortality, because that pain constitutes the foundation of his wisdom.

6 Conclusion

The gnomic poetics of *Gilgamesh* contribute to its wisdom of moderation, one which aligns the poem to the strand of Babylonian literary discourse that scholars classify as 'wisdom literature'.⁷³ In particular, the emphasis on the limitations of the royal figure is a central aspect the SB poem shares with several compositions of a non-narrative character.⁷⁴ It is worth adding that much Babylonian narrative poetry, too, is concerned with the dialectic between the potential failure of rulers and wise, moderating advice. A prominent theme here is the dialectic between the wisdom god Ea and divine rulers and warriors, particularly Enlil, Ninurta and Marduk.⁷⁵

More specifically, and looking at poetic technique, our central conclusion is the recognition of the narrative irony developed through the wisdom sayings, especially before Enkidu's death. At stake is the definition of wisdom in a religious dimension, since the pattern of unheeded advice and error in the poem consistently involves a misjudgement of divine plans. Enkidu was created by the gods to confront Gilgamesh, but not to defeat him. Gilgamesh egregiously disregards the possibility of Enlil's retaliation, and, until the end, does not accept that the gods have placed strict limits on human lifespan. Wisdom is then defined as an acceptance of one's limits as set by the gods, including ignorance of the future and of the moment of death ([13] X 316-22, cf. [11] VII 86-9). This general discourse is enacted dramatically, and its lifeblood runs in the evolving characterisation of the heroes. The characters experience pain and death because of

⁷² E.g. Tigay 1982, 140-9; Maul 2008; George 2012; Clarke 2019, 97-100.

⁷³ *Gilgamesh* and wisdom literature: George 2007c, also Michalowski 1999; Ballesteros forthcoming, chap. 6 §§ 3-4.

⁷⁴ Finn 2017; Fink 2020.

⁷⁵ Ballesteros forthcoming, chs 8-11; compare also Ishum and Erra in the *Epic of Erra*.

their mistakes, and audiences are made to partake in that experience. Narrative irony, I have argued, is key to this process, helping us better to understand Enkidu and Gilgamesh, and why the text has struck readers as ‘an epic that undermines itself’,⁷⁶ that is to say, one that foregrounds human fragility.

The thread of *gnōmai* casts the king’s error and the tragedy of Enkidu into sombre light. Enkidu is a figure of wisdom, but his wisdom is limited and ambivalent, and leads to suffering and death. His wisdom makes him foresee the problematic nature of the expedition. But once appointed as counsellor, Enkidu complies with his duty and so cannot but become the key agent in Humbaba’s killing. For this, he is punished by the same gods who created him to flank Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh, in turn, appears to be placed at a level of knowledge and wisdom far below Enkidu’s. The pain of Enkidu’s death comes for him with all the violence of the unexpected. The depth of the king’s delusion, then, becomes a function of his search for the wisdom of immortality. Yet, what he finds at the end of his quest is the very wisdom of moderation that was implicit in Enkidu’s tragedy, and to which Uta-napishti gives, for the king and the audience, a prototypical, primeval sanction. Placed at the multi-dimensional interface between what the external and internal audiences know, as well as the characters’ limited awareness of the future, the *gnōmai* illuminate, and are illuminated by, the full trajectory of the poem’s narrative arch.

7 Coda: Homeric Vistas

Let us quickly return to Hellenic poetry, especially the *Iliad*. Rather than a systematic comparison, I offer an outline of parallels which seem to reflect an international wisdom discourse visible well before Alexander’s conquests.⁷⁷ They confirm the legitimacy of the comparative approach and may stimulate future research.

We may begin with the well-intentioned wisdom by a senior figure that is ultimately conducive to disaster. The city-elders’ advice to Enkidu that he should wisely guide Gilgamesh can be compared to old Nestor’s advice to Patroclus at *Iliad* 11.762-803. Nestor suggests that

⁷⁶ Machinist 2020, 333.

⁷⁷ On current thinking about the historical relation between Homer and *Gilgamesh* see above § 1. On cross-cultural ‘wisdom discourse’ in the Near East and East Mediterranean see De Martin, Furlan forthcoming. For a recent discussion and a Hellenistic case-study see Cohen 2021; Johnston 2019 compares *Ludlul* and Solon fr. 13 West; on *Ahiqar*, an Aramaic composition with a Babylonian setting and background, attested first in late-fifth century BCE Egypt and ultimately influencing Greek wisdom literature (particularly the *Life of Aesop*) see Konstantakos 2008-13.

Patroclus should enter the fight in Achilles' stead if the latter refuses to return. The senior figures' advice is enacted after both themselves (elders/Nestor) and the counsellor (Enkidu/Patroclus) try to dissuade the protagonist, in vain.⁷⁸ Both decisions ultimately lead to the helper's death, which is the key denouement of the plot.

Second, the ironic use of *gnōmai*: we repeatedly saw that sayings may be right or wrong in the circumstances in which they are uttered, but prove to be the opposite in hindsight. In the *Iliad*, one example of this phenomenon concerns Hector, whose error flanks that of Achilles in shaping the plot. At *Il.* 12.243 Hector uses a *gnōmē* which, as we learn from Aristotle (*Rh.* 1395a13), was proverbial:

εἷς οἰωνὸς ἄριστος ἀμύνεσθαι περὶ πάτρης

One bird-omen is best, to fight for one's country

Hector pronounces it to dismiss the counsel of the seer and counsellor Polydamas, who suggests military caution. Hector is right in the immediate circumstances, but his death will come about after he misinterprets Zeus' intentions at *Il.* 18.293-5, disregarding Polydamas' advice. This is pivotal in the plot of the *Iliad*, insofar as Zeus' help to Hector and the Trojans represents the central action-content of the poem. Crucially - and tragically - Hector does not realize that divine favor is bound to be limited for him and his city.⁷⁹

Third, and more broadly, both the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* revolve around the 'wisdom of alternation', as defined by the Hellenist Douglas Cairns.⁸⁰ This refers to the idea that no human life is free of suffering. The best one can expect is a mixture of good and bad fortune.⁸¹ One complicating component of this idea are the mistakes that humans make due to limited knowledge or hubris, and, accordingly, how human error should be judged. The gods will inevitably allot a portion of evil to humans, but how far can we prevent our actions from generating 'further' pain?⁸² How far are humans able to 'know' what to do? In this perspective, the question of access to (divine) knowledge and authority feeds into the ironic structure of the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh*. The fact that Achilles and Gilgamesh are both part-divine and enjoy privileged access to the gods through their immortal mothers (Thetis and

⁷⁸ Nestor tries to dissuade Achilles from clashing with Agamemnon at *Il.* 1.277-81; he proposes the vain embassy of Book 9 (*Il.* 9.103, 163-72).

⁷⁹ On the 'tragedy of Hector' see above fn. 39.

⁸⁰ Cairns 2014, with comparative perspectives, including *Gilgamesh*; now Johnston forthcoming, ch. 1.

⁸¹ Esp. Hom. *Il.* 24.522-51.

⁸² Hom. *Od.* 1.32-43.

Ninsun) makes their errors all the more sensational. It also makes their ignorance, which is predicated on their humanity, all the more painful.

We may consider another parallel involving advice by senior figures. Gilgamesh and Achilles are both requested to desist from a reckless course of action. The Homeric passage introduces a piece of counsel by Odysseus, the wisest Greek hero, who correctly suggests that leading a tired army to fight would be injudicious.⁸³

ἐγὼ δέ κε σεῖο νοήματί γε προβαλοίμην
πολλόν, ἐπεὶ πρότερος γενόμεν καὶ πλείονα οἶδα

but in counsel I would surpass you
by far, for I am the elder-born and understand the more

This invites comparison to the elders' words to Gilgamesh, on not embarking on the Humbaba expedition (SB II 289-90):

[š]e-eh-re-e-ti ^dGIŠ-gím-maš libba(šà)-ka na-ši-ka
ʽúʽ mim-ma šá ta-ta-mu-ú ul ti-i-de

You are young, Gilgamesh, carried away by enthusiasm,
and the thing that you talk of you do not understand.

In both cases older age is a mark of wisdom, and in both cases it serves to restrain a young warrior's incautious excess. In wider perspective, what seems interesting is that, in fact, both Gilgamesh and Achilles have - thanks to their immortal mothers - a much closer access to divinely derived knowledge than the older people who counsel them. And yet, this does not prevent error and sorrow from befalling them. This mismatch is critical, inasmuch as it enhances the dramatic impact of the heroes' reversal of fortune - the greater the potential for divinely derived knowledge, the greater the impact of failure to control events.

Ultimately, *gnōmai* and proverbs contribute to the ironic structure of the plots, and to the ambiguous paths of wisdom. Gnostic wisdom is not to be taken at face value; it is not free-standing. In Homer as in the Gilgamesh tradition, it serves sophisticated plots that ultimately advertize humankind's ignorance, but also its efforts.

83 Hom. *Il.* 19.218-19. Cf. esp. *Il.* 9.438-43, 11.786-9.

Abbreviations

- CAD = Gelb, I. et al. (1956-2011). *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. Chicago.
CGL = Diggle, J. et al. (2021). *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*. Cambridge.
EDG = Beekes, R. (2010). *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. With the assistance of L. van Beek. Leiden.
GEW = Frisk, von H. (1954-72). *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Heidelberg.
GSF = Attinger, P. (2021). *Glossaire sumérien-français: principalement des textes littéraires paléobabyloniens*. Wiesbaden.
LSJ = Liddell, H.S.; Scott, R.; Jones, H.G. (1940). *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th edition. Oxford.

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