'Gilgamesh' like you've never read it before

Sumerian story of old flows with lyricism in new translation

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Publication Date: November 28, 2004 Page: K5 Section: Lifestyle Edition: Final

Translations bear the mark of the translator as well as the author; what the translator brings to the table -- a love of iambic pentameter, an attachment to sentimental tales -- has a profound impact on the text. Part of the pleasure of reading different versions of a work is to see how each translator shapes it. Stephen Mitchell's new version of the ancient Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh is still a story about a great warrior king, but it is marked by sexuality and sensuality. It is rife with tangible earthy objects and a delight in them.

Mitchell prefers the term "version" to "translation" because he was true to the spirit but "free(r) with the letter," pulling from various scholarly translations and using his own imagination to fill in gaps in the story, all of which are noted. But the story still follows the arrogant king Gilgamesh, "a wild bull of a man," and his friend Enkidu, an equally strong hero created by the gods to balance out Gilgamesh. Together they attack and slay the monster Humbaba, though Enkidu advises against it, and kill the bull of heaven. When Enkidu dies shortly thereafter, Gilgamesh plunges into grief. His coming to terms with mortality -- a journey that takes him through forests, across poison rivers and to a man who has survived the Great Flood (a Noah-like tale, though Gilgamesh was written more than a thousand years before the Bible) -- eventually leads him back to his own city, Uruk, where he will presumably be a better, wiser leader.

For some readers, this story has been about loss and grief; for others, the nature of friendship; for still others, imperialism and hubris. In Mitchell's version, each of the great themes is present and crucial, but it's the language -- gorgeous, dramatic, laden with objects -- that is most striking.

Compare his version of the prologue to the stark verse of Herbert Mason, whose scholarly translation I read in high school.
Mason:
It is an old story
But one that can still be told
About a man who loved
And lost a friend to death
Mitchell:
Find the cornerstone and under it the copper box
that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid.
Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read
how Gilgamesh suffered all and accomplished all.

Mitchell, the great translator of Rilke, has a gift for choosing exactly the right object and setting it in a very plain sentence to create maximum effect. Talking about grief, Gilgamesh says, "For six days and seven nights I mourned him,/until a maggot fell out of

his nose." That one word, "maggot," encapsulates all the harsh truths of death. Similarly, Mitchell uses two simple images -- matted hair and a lion's skin -- to craft a shattering picture of grief: "After the funeral, Gilgamesh went out/from Uruk, into the wilderness/with matted hair, in a lion's skin."

As befits such an earthy tale, sexuality is vivid and unashamed: Shamhat, the priestess/prostitute, plays a more substantial role, and the possibility of a homoerotic connection between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is brought out more clearly than in some other versions of the story.

Sexual politics aside, it's impossible not to think of the story in terms of traditional politics: What was the land of Gilgamesh is now Iraq. In his introduction, Mitchell refers to the superwarrior Gilgamesh's "pre-emptive" attack on Humbaba. "We must kill him and drive evil from the world," Gilgamesh says in words that might sound familiar. Mitchell's version of the epic is beautifully written and dramatic. And it is earthbound, tethered by bright wool sashes. This seems right, given that Gilgamesh searches for but does not find a way to overcome death. He is human, and Mitchell has swathed the story with things that humans can touch.

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