

Beyond Parallels: Shared Ritual in *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*

INTRODUCTION

*Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another;
none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogenous,
extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.¹*

This paper examines the striking similarities between the prayer scenes of Ninsun from Tablet III of the *Poem of Gilgamesh* and Penelope from Books IV and XVII of the *Odyssey*, a parallel which Walter Burkert briefly discussed in 1992² but which has since received no further examination. Burkert included only the prayer scene in Book IV in his discussion, but I expand on this to include Penelope's prayer scene from Book XVII as an inextricable continuation of the parallel. In discussing this parallel, I make no claims as to the date, place, or agents of transmission; rather, I discuss the evidence of Near Eastern continuity of linguistic elements, themes, and narrative structure in the Greek epic. As a starting point for my analysis, I divide each of the prayer scenes into six basic components: lamentation, ritual bathing and dressing, in the company of women, ascent, scattering of offering, and prayer. To aid in the discussion, I juxtapose key parallel lines from the Standard Babylonian Version of *Gilgamesh* with the *Odyssey*; they appear at the beginning of each section with an English translation and synoptic transliteration of *Gilgamesh*³ above excerpts from the *Odyssey* in Greek.

Before examining the parallel in detail, it is first necessary to address the issue of literary genre. Following A. R. George and others, Johannes Haubold has argued for classifying the Mesopotamian narrative poem *Gilgamesh* as "epic," a classical Greek term, particularly in light

¹ Said 1993: xxv.

² Burkert 1992: 99-100.

³ English translation from George 2003; synoptic transliteration from SOAS, which is based on George's own transliterations.

of how both the Greek and Mesopotamian epics functioned for ancient audiences.⁴ If the genre is essentially the same, we are comparing similar things. Moreover, Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Levantine scribal communities considered *Gilgamesh* to be a “classical” work and worthy of preservation, as evidenced by their efforts to preserve and translate the Mesopotamian epic in subsequent recensions.⁵ The widespread geographical and temporal diffusion of *Gilgamesh* raises the possibility that Greeks had direct or indirect knowledge of it.

The impetus for Ninsun and Penelope’s prayer scenes is atavistic anxiety around their sons’ perilous situations—the monster Huwawa in the case of the former and the blood-thirsty suitors in the case of the latter, predators lurking in the bush. They undertake ritual actions to manage this anxiety⁶, beseeching the gods to protect their sons. They are successful in forming a symbiosis between god and human, “an alliance for mutual benefit,”⁷ offerings in exchange for protection of their sons. This symbiosis extends to the broader level of narrative and ritual within the epics: the rituals lend gravity to the narrative, while the narrative supplies meaningful context for the rituals.⁸

LAMENTATION

Gilgamesh

[Wild-Cow] Ninsun listened long and with sadness
to the words of Gilgamesh, her son, and Enkidu (III.35-36).

⁴ Haubold 2013: 18-19; 2002: 4-5.

⁵ West 1997: 590-591

⁶ Burkert (1979: 50) writes, “Religious ritual, by producing anxiety, manages to control it.”

⁷ Burkert 1979: 57.

⁸ Burkert (1979: 57) writes, “The defect of ritual, in a human society, is the apparent nonsense inherent in its redirection of activity, as “as-if” element; here a tale may supply a plausible context and fill the vacant spaces. The defect of the traditional tale is its lack of seriousness and stability; here ritual may supply a basis; for the serious character of ritual is guaranteed by the role of anxiety controlled by it, and its stability is secured even by its explicit sanctions.”

35 M₂ i 35 [š]á dGIŠ-gím-maš DUMU-ša
 c i 35a [f^ri-mat-dⁿ]in-sún a-ma-tum šá dGIŠ-gím-maš DUMU-šú

36 M₂ i 36 [-š]i-iš iš-te-nem-me
 c i 35b u dⁿen-ki-dù mar-ši-i[š]

Odyssey

ὥς ἂν μὴ κλαίουσα κατὰ χροᾶ καλὸν ἰάπτῃς (4.749)

ὥς φάτο, τῆς δ' εὔνησε γόον, σχέθε δ' ὅσσε γόοιο. (4.758)

ὥς εἰποῦσ' ὀλόλυξε...(4.767)

μή μοι γόον ὄρνυθι μηδέ μοι ἦτορ | ἐν στήθεσσι ὄρινε (17.46-47)

...τῇ δ' ἄπτερος ἔπλετο μῦθος (17.57)

Telemachus has departed Ithaca for the Peloponnese in search of news of his father Odysseus; his mother's suitors are plotting to ambush and kill him upon his return. Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu are devising death for the monster Huwawa who guards the far-flung Cedar Forest at the behest of Enlil. Telemachus' mother Penelope and Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun learn of the perils which their sons face, and both are overcome with sadness. Ninsun "listened long and with sadness | to the words of Gilgamesh, her son, and Enkidu."⁹ The poet of *Gilgamesh* tells us that Ninsun listened *mar-ši-iš* or "with crying, moaning."¹⁰ Compare this with Penelope's lamenting: Eurycleia says to her, "ὥς ἂν μὴ κλαίουσα κατὰ χροᾶ καλὸν ἰάπτῃς"¹¹; Eurycleia eventually calms her, "τῆς δ' εὔνησε γόον, σχέθε δ' ὅσσε γόοιο."¹² Mirroring Eurycleia's consoling of Penelope in 4.749, Telemachus says to his mother, "μή μοι γόον ὄρνυθι μηδέ μοι ἦτορ | ἐν στήθεσσι ὄρινε" (17.46-47).

⁹ III.35-36; all translations of *Gilgamesh* are by Andrew George.

¹⁰ (s.v. *maršiš* in *CAD*).

¹¹ *Od.* 4.749.

¹² *Od.* 4.758.

Just as Ninsun hears the words (*iš-te-nem-me*)¹³ of her son Gilgamesh, for Penelope, her son's speech was wingless (τῇ δ' ἄπτερος ἔπλετο μῦθος), which *LHD* interprets as "she heard in silence."¹⁴ The phrase "ἄπτερος μῦθος" occurs only four times in Homer, and only in the *Odyssey*. It is used exclusively within the context of the unfolding plot against the suitors and to refer to a female who, having heard the commands of a male figure, complies. Penelope follows Telemachus' wishes that she honor the purification ritual and pray to Zeus to bring vengeance upon the suitors, setting in motion the climax of the epic:

ὥς ἄρ' ἐφώνησεν, τῇ δ' ἄπτερος ἔπλετο μῦθος.
 ἡ δ' ὑδρηναμένη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἶμαθ' ἐλοῦσα,
 εὐχέτο πᾶσι θεοῖσι τελεέσσας ἐκατόμβας
 ῥέξειν, αἳ κέ ποθι Ζεὺς ἄντιτα ἔργα τελέσσει.¹⁵

Eurycleia follows Telemachus' command that she close and lock the doors to the hall to while he gathers the weapons with which to slaughter the suitors: ὥς ἄρ' ἐφώνησεν, τῇ δ' ἄπτερος ἔπλετο μῦθος. | κλήϊσεν δὲ θύρας μεγάρων εὖ ναιεταόντων¹⁶; the swineherd Eumaeus tells Eurycleia that Telemachus has commanded her to bar the doors of the hall in order that no woman may enter during the slaughter—she complies: ὥς ἄρ' ἐφώνησεν, τῇ δ' ἄπτερος ἔπλετο μῦθος, | κλήϊσεν δὲ θύρας μεγάρων εὖ ναιεταόντων¹⁷; after the suitors are completely slaughtered, Odysseus tells Telemachus to summon Eurycleia; she complies and enters the hall by opening its doors, the doors she had earlier closed:

ὥς ἄρ' ἐφώνησεν, τῇ δ' ἄπτερος ἔπλετο μῦθος,
 ὥϊξεν δὲ θύρας μεγάρων εὖ ναιεταόντων,
 βῆ δ' ἵμεν: αὐτὰρ Τηλέμαχος πρόσθ' ἡγεμόνευεν.¹⁸

¹³ "words, speech, utterances" (s.v. *šemû* in *CAD*).

¹⁴ *Od.* 17.57

¹⁵ *Od.* 17.57-61.

¹⁶ *Od.* 19.29-30.

¹⁷ *Od.* 21.386-387.

¹⁸ *Od.* 22.398-400.

The formulaic nature of the lines and their context reveal the methodical engineering of the poem's unfolding plot of vengeance against the suitors, which Penelope has a hand in with her prayer to Athena to protect Telemachus on his return to Ithaca and her later prayer for vengeance against the suitors.

In Tablets IV-V of *Gilgamesh*, a similar combination of a formulaic line, the unfolding plot against a nefarious force, the imagery of doorways, and a mother's appeal to the divine which drives the fate of her son occurs. As *Gilgamesh* and *Enkidu* move closer to *Humbaba's* lair in a forest of cedar, *Gilgamesh* beseeches the mountain to bring him a dream with good fortune:

‘[O mountain, bring me a dream, so I may see [a message of good fortune!]] (IV.9).’

Y₁ i 18' [K]UR-ú bi-i-la šu-ut-t[a a-mat damiqti? lu-mur]

Enkidu builds him a house as a conduit of dreams to aid *Gilgamesh* with his request:

Enkidu [made] for [him a ‘house of *Zaqīqu*’,]
he fixed [a storm-door in its doorway].¹⁹

w₂ iv 17' [i-pu-ša-áš-šum-m]a den-ki-dù a-na [ša-a-šú? É? za-qí-qí]
w₂ iv 18' [g^šIG šar-bi-il]-la ir-te-ti [ina KÁ-šú]

These lines occur without modification an additional four times (IV.43-44, 88-89, 130-131, and 171-172). After they have successfully slayed *Huwawa*, *Enkidu* says to *Gilgamesh*,

I made a door—six rods is its height, two rods its breadth, one cubit its thickness, | its pole, its top pivot and its bottom are all of a piece.²⁰

295 dd vi 7' e-pu-uš-ma g^šIG šá 6 NINDAN me-lu-šá 2 NINDAN ru-pu-us-su
296 dd vi 8' 1 KÙŠ ú-pu-šú šu-l-ku-šá sa-ḫir-šá u šá-gam-ma-šá šá iš-te-en-ṛma¹

In both *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*, the prayer rituals successfully induce cosmic forces which

¹⁹ *Gilgamesh* IV.10-11.

²⁰ *Gilgamesh* V.295-296.

are further propelled by the unwavering assistance of Enkidu and Eurycleia: Shamash summons the winds to destroy Huwawa and Athena joins Odysseus, Telemachus, and their allies in slaughtering the suitors in the hall. The repeated construction of doors in the case of the former and the opening and closing of doors in the case of the latter lend a numinous sheen to the scenes and become rituals in their own right, capturing and concentrating the power of the gods to bring the heroes to successful completion of their tasks.

RITUAL BATHING AND DRESSING

Gilgamesh

Into the bath-house she went seven times,
[she bathed] herself in water of tamarisk and soapwort.
[She donned] a fine dress to adorn her body,
[she chose a jewel] to adorn her breast.
Having put on [her cap,] she donned her tiara (III.37-41),

- 37 M₁ ii 1 [] 'i¹-ru-ub
c i 36 [a-na] 'É¹ nar-ma-ku 7-šú 'i-te¹-ru-u[b]
- 38 M₁ ii 2 [] 'ú¹tu-lal
c i 37 [ú-tal-li] ra-man-šú ina A.MEŠ giš¹ŠINIG¹ u ú¹t[u-lal]
- 39 M₁ ii 3 [] 'si¹-m[at pa]g-ri-šá
c i 38 [x x x]x raq-qa-ta si-mat pag-r[i-šú]
- 40 M₁ ii 4 []-m]e si-mat ir-te-šá
c i 39 [x x x-l]i-mu si-mat ir-[]
- 41 M₁ ii 5 []-ki]n-ma a-ga-šá ap-rat
c i 40 [x x x x] iš-šak-nam-ma a-g[a-]

Odyssey

ἀλλ' ὕδρηνάμενη καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα (4.750, 17.48)

ἢ δ' ὕδρηνάμενη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα (4.759, 17.58)

These ritual bathing and dressing scenes are virtually unique in both the Homeric epics and in *Gilgamesh*. The only other female bathing and dressing scene in Homer is in the case of Hera, a goddess, in *Il.* 14.170-172 when she is preparing to seduce her husband Zeus:

ἀμβροσίη μὲν πρῶτον ἀπὸ χροὸς ἱμερόεντος
 λύματα πάντα κάθηρεν, ἀλείψατο δὲ λίπ' ἐλαίῳ
 ἀμβροσίῳ ἐδανῶ, τό ρά οἱ τεθυμένον ἦεν.

It is tempting to find parallels with Hera's seduction of Zeus or with Penelope's seduction of the suitors (with Athena's help) in *Od.* 18.192:

κάλλει μὲν οἱ πρῶτα προσώπατα καλὰ κάθηρεν
 ἀμβροσίῳ, οἷῳ περ ἐϋστέφανος Κυθήρεια
 χρίεται, εὖτ' ἂν ἦ Χαρίτων χορὸν ἱμερόεντα;

however, nothing in Ninsun's prayer to Shamash suggests that she is attempting to seduce him in order that she may bend him to her will. Furthermore, according to Jean Bottéro²¹,

... 'to seek out a god' ... was out of a need for his protection, his assistance. It was not inspired by a desire to be close to him... The divine did not attract in the manner of a desirable thing, of a presence apt to enchant the heart—as in a true form of love.

The elevation of the scene is evident with Ninsun's visit to the bath-house seven times, a ritual generally reserved for kings. Ninsun's ritual bathing is firmly rooted in cultic practice and would typically occur "at the very moment the sun rose."²² Moreover, in manuscript c, *ú-tal-lil* ("she cleansed herself") is used, which is from the verb *utallulu*, which also bears the meaning "to be purified;" the parent root verb is *elēlu*, "to become pure;" *ullulu* "to purify, make clean, keep pure, to consecrate to a deity, to make free" is another derivation of *elēlu*.²³ Rather than employ the standard verb for washing, *mesû*, the poet has instead chosen a verb more closely

²¹ Bottéro 2001: 37.

²² George 2003: 459.

²³ s.v. *elēlu* in *CAD*.

associated with purification ritual, combining the verb with a reflexive pronoun *ramanšu* (herself). The poet of the *Odyssey* likewise employs a distinctive verb for washing in the middle voice (ὕδρηνάμενη) within a repeated hexameter formula to capture the ritualistic nature of the scene. The verb *elēlu* and its derivation *ullulu* are attested in Akkadian literature not only to describe purification with water but also purification with incense. *YOS* 6 225:14 states “With regard to the sesame which PN gave [to me] I have become polluted as to the ‘path’...Send me a censer so that the ‘path’ may become clean (again), and (then) I shall deliver (the sesame) to Eanna.” *li-li-il* from *elēlu* is used for “may become clean.” In this excerpt, purification is closely tied with fumigation with a censer as opposed to washing with water. An example from Standard Babylonian occurs in *CT* 13 38 r.6: “may she (Ningirim) purify you [*ul-lil-ka*] with the pure censer.” The importance of ritual purification with incense will be discussed further in the “Scattering of Offering” section.

ὕδρηνάμενη (“having washed herself”) from ὕδραίνω is only ever used as a feminine nominative aorist middle participle in the *Odyssey*, and it only appears in the two prayer scenes from Books IV and XVII; elsewhere the poet uses other verbs for washing such as λούω. To my knowledge, there is no universal verb for ritual washing in Homeric Greek, except for χερπνίομαι, “to wash one’s hands (as a matter of ritual)” in *Il.* 1.449.²⁴ Euripides in the 5th century BCE employed the Homeric usage of ὕδραίνω within a lamentation and ritual context, as in the case in the *Odyssey*. In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Iphigenia speaks of sprinkling holy water (ὕδραίνειν) upon her father’s crumbling house, in observance of sacrifice, while she wept:

κάγὼ τέχνην τήνδ’ ἦν ἔχω ξενοκτόνον
τιμῶς ὕδραίνειν αὐτὸν ὡς θανούμενον,
κλαίουσα (53-55);

²⁴ *LHD*; I consulted the following entries: νίζω, ἀπονίζω, χερνίπτομαι, and λούω; see Hoessly 2002.

and of pouring (ὕδραίνειν) libations for her deceased brother, bewailing the miserable fortune that has befallen her family:

...ὦι τάσδε χοὰς
 μέλλω κρατῆρά τε τὸν φθιμένων
 ὕδραίνειν γαίας ἐν νώτοις
 παγὰς [<πηγὰς] τ' οὐρειᾶν ἐκ μόσχων [is this a variant or a typo?]
 Βάκχου τ' οἴνηράς λοιβὰς
 ξουθᾶν τε πόνημα μελίσσᾶν,
 ἃ νεκροῖς θελκτήρια χεῖται (159-167).

In *Elektra*, the titular character refers to the ritual bathing of her father Agamemnon's body; she says, lamenting,

...ὥς σὲ τὸν ἄθλιον,
 πάτερ, ἐγὼ κατακλαίομαι,
 λουτρὰ πανύσταθ' ὕδρανάμενον χροῖ
 κοίται ἐν οἰκτροτάται θανάτου.²⁵

Penelope is described as putting on clean (καθαρά) garments. The earliest verbal attestation of the root καθαρ- is the adjective καθάρως, which appears in this scene and elsewhere in the Homeric epics: to clear out, free from obstructions (ἐξεκάθαιρον)²⁶; a space clear or vacant of the dead (ἐν καθαρῷ)²⁷; washing away of impurities (λύματα πάντα κάθηρεν; κάθηράν ῥύπα πάντα)²⁸; cleaning an offering cup with sulfur (ἐκάθηρε θεείῳ)²⁹; cleaning blood from battle wounds at Zeus' bidding (αἶμα κάθηρον)³⁰; putting on clean garments before prayer (καθαρά...εἵμαθ')³¹; clean clothes for courtship (καθαρά...εἵματ')³²; to clean clothes for

²⁵ 155-158.

²⁶ *Il.* 2.153.

²⁷ *Il.* 8.491, 10.199, 23.61.

²⁸ *Il.* 14.171; *Od.* 6.93.

²⁹ *Il.* 16.228.

³⁰ *Il.* 16.667.

³¹ *Od.* 4.750, 4.759, 17.48, 17.58.

³² *Od.* 6.61.

courtship in a river (καθῆραι)³³; application of a divine cosmetic (κάλλει ἄμβροσίῳ κάθηρεν)³⁴; cleaning bowls and cups for a feast (καθήρατε)³⁵; cleaning tables and chairs after the slaughter of the suitors (καθαίρειν)³⁶; describing a clean death (καθαρῶ θανάτῳ)³⁷; ritual washing of a corpse (καθήραντες).³⁸ The context of these early attestations vary in the epics, but its core meaning of ritually “pure” or “clean” is sustained in later attestations. The fifth-century noun κάθαρσις is first attested in Herodotus; the adjective καθάρσιος appears in Aeschylus’ tragedy *Eumenides*³⁹ describing ritual purification by means of the blood of an infant. Later, in the fourth-century, the noun κάθαρσις is attested in Plato’s *Cratylus*⁴⁰ as “purification” through the medicines and fumigations of doctors and diviners. From all of these appearances of catharsis in the Greek sources it is clear that catharsis is closely linked with ritual purification.

Ritual purification was performed for a variety of purposes, and they have been studied by Robert Parker.⁴¹ An early example, ritual purification after a plague, occurs in the *Iliad*.⁴² Other purposes included the purgation of blood guilt, as in the above example from Aeschylus, civil unrest, and madness.⁴³ Methods of ritual purification included the use of water, fumigation (e.g., the burning of incense), and sacrifice.⁴⁴ In many cases these rituals were performed as a practical matter of cleanliness or otherwise to define the boundary between the sacred and the secular.⁴⁵ Parker notes that, through the physical descriptions of cleanliness, “we are

³³ *Od.* 6.87.

³⁴ *Od.* 18.192.

³⁵ *Od.* 20.152.

³⁶ *Od.* 22.439, 22.453; presumably to remove blood pollution.

³⁷ *Od.* 22.462.

³⁸ *Od.* 24.44.

³⁹ 449.

⁴⁰ 405a.

⁴¹ Parker 1983.

⁴² 1.313.

⁴³ Burkert 1985: 77.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 76.

⁴⁵ Parker 1983: 19-20.

dealing...with a great poet's power to express the abstract through the concrete"; that is, abstract notions of physical cleanliness as "wholeness and propriety."⁴⁶

Like the poet of *Gilgamesh*, the poet of the *Odyssey* has elevated Penelope's bathing to the plane of ritual purification with the formulaic construction of ὕδριναμένη + καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα. For reasons which I will discuss in the section on "Scattering of Offering," I argue that the root καθαρ- is closely linked both with ritual and with the Akkadian root *qtr*. As Parker notes, for Greeks, formal lustrations and ablutions "not only...prepare the individual for a special event, but they also serve to lift the event itself out of the familiar plane and to imbue it with sanctity".⁴⁷ The poet of the *Odyssey* emphasizes this point with the perfect narrative symmetry in Books IV and XVII. Penelope's being told to wash herself and put on clean clothes and the action of her washing herself and putting on clean clothes follow an ABAB structure: Eurycleia tells her to wash herself and put on clean clothes (ἀλλ' ὕδριναμένη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα); Penelope washes herself and puts on clean clothes (ἡ δ' ὕδριναμένη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα); Telemachus tells her to wash herself and put on clean clothes (ἀλλ' ὕδριναμένη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα); Penelope washes herself and puts on clean clothes (ἡ δ' ὕδριναμένη, καθαρὰ χροῖ εἴμαθ' ἐλοῦσα). Thus, the poet has constructed a formula with ὕδριναμένη + καθαρὰ to better capture the sense of the conducting of a purification ritual as with Ninsun's preparations for prayer.

These scenes in the *Odyssey* are also connected through an intricate Archaic ring composition. In Book IV, when Penelope discovers that Telemachus has left for the Peloponnese in search of news of Odysseus and that the suitors are plotting to kill him, she is overcome with

⁴⁶ *Ibid*: 67-68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*: 20-21.

grief. Eurycleia bids her to cease lamenting, bathe herself, put on clean clothes, ascend to her upper chamber with her maidservants, and pray to Athena to save her son; Penelope then does exactly those things and in the same order. In Book XVII, when Telemachus has returned, the scene from Book IV is repeated: Telemachus bids Penelope cease lamenting, bathe herself, put on clean clothes, ascend to her upper chamber with her maidservants, and vow to the gods that she will make an exquisite sacrifice in the hope that Zeus will bring vengeance upon the suitors. The symmetry of these scenes connected by the rare ὕδρηναμένη and that ὕδρηναμένη occurs repeatedly with καθαρὰ strengthens their association with religious ritual.

IN THE COMPANY OF WOMEN

Gilgamesh

..... the harlots ... the ground (III.42).

42	M ₁	ii 6	[	KAR.KI]D.MEŠ	qaq-qa-ra i-pi-ra-ni
	M ₃	ii 6	x[]
	c	i 41	[x x x x]-rak-ki	šam-ḥa-a-t[um]

Odyssey

σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι γυναῖξιν (4.751, 760, 17.49)

Although the text here is fragmentary, we can infer from the line in *Gilgamesh* that Ninsun is in the presence of harlots (*šam-ḥa-a-t[um]*, which means “luxurious” or “lush” individuals⁴⁸) before she ascends to pray; thus, I have connected this line with σὺν ἀμφιπόλοισι γυναῖξιν (“with her attendant women”) in the *Odyssey*.

ASCENT

Gilgamesh

She leapt [up] the staircase, she climbed on to the roof (III.43),

⁴⁸ s.v. *šamu* in *CAD*.

43 M₁ ii 7 [] i-te-li a-na ú-ri
M₃ ii 7 iš-[]
c i 42 [gi]š²KUN₄ i-t[e-]
aa ii 1 [] 'ú-ri'

Odyssey

εἰς ὑπερῶν ἀναβᾶσα (4.751, 760, 17.49)

The obvious difference between these scenes is that Ninsun ascends to the roof while Penelope ascends to her upper chamber “where the women resided,”⁴⁹ although the action of ascent to pray is clear in both. Ninsun, in accordance with ritual practice in Mesopotamia, must step outside onto her roof and face the rising sun (Shamash)⁵⁰; it is also a practical matter for ensuring that the god will be able to delight in the fragrant incense. Penelope, besieged by suitors, beseeches Athena to thwart their ambush of her son Telemachus in Book IV and Zeus to render vengeance in Book XVII; practically-speaking, she would need to pray in secret, and her offering of barley for strewing remains a tantalizing promise of animal sacrifice to the gods. Burning incense on the roof is well-attested in Semitic ritual, and even in the Adonic rites in Greece, which were performed on the roofs of houses with burning incense; however, Penelope’s ritual and prayer in her private upper-chamber is apparently unique in surviving Greek literature.⁵¹

SCATTERING OF OFFERING

Gilgamesh

...she set up a censer before Shamash.
she scattered incense...(III.44-45)

⁴⁹ LHD.

⁵⁰ George 2003: 459.

⁵¹ Burkert 1979: 106; Burkert 1992: 100.

44	M ₁	ii 8	[	ma-ḫ]ar	^d UTU qut-rin-na iš-kun
	M ₃	ii 8	i-li	^r a ¹ -n[a]
	c	i 43	[	^r a ¹ -na ú-ri a-na	[
	aa	ii 2	[		-k]un
45	M ₁	ii 9	[	m]a-ḫar	^d UTU i-di-šú iš-ši
	M ₃	ii 9	iš-kun	^r sur ¹ -q[en-na]
	BB ₁	ii 1	[		^r d ¹ U[TU i-d]i-šú iš-[
	aa	ii 3	[		i]š-ši

Odyssey

ἐν δ' ἔθεται οὐλοχύτας κανέω...(4.761)

qut-rin-na from the verb *qutrinnu* (“to make an incense offering”) is derived from the parent verb *qutturu* (“to rise, billow, roll in [smoke]”), which is itself derived from the substantive *qatāru* (“incense”).⁵² The trilateral Semitic root *qtr*, which these verbs share, appears to be etymologically connected to the Greek καθαρ-. Chantraine, Frisk, and Beekes all agree that there is no convincing Indo-European etymology⁵³ contra Furnee⁵⁴ and Peters⁵⁵ who argue for an Indo-European root. Burkert⁵⁶ first proposed the possibility that καθαρός is derived from the Semitic verb “qtr” providing 2 Kings 23:5 as his first link: “And he put down the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense⁵⁷ in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven.”

Building on Burkert’s argument, West⁵⁸ proposes that the Greek θ (as opposed to the τ) in καθαρ- “corresponds more exactly with the Akkadian *qtr* than with the *qtr* of other Semitic

⁵² s.v. *qatāru* in *CAD*.

⁵³ s.v. καθαρός for all; see also Hoessly 2002: 18.

⁵⁴ Furnee 1971: 391.

⁵⁵ Peters 1993: 95.

⁵⁶ Burkert 1975: 77.

⁵⁷ *y’qatteru* from *qatar*.

⁵⁸ West 1997: 39.

languages,” such as Hebrew, Arabic, Ugaritic and Phoenician. The *t* in *qtr* is an emphatic consonant as in the Arabic ط. He goes on to claim that a more plausible origin of καθαρ- is the Akkadian *qutrinnu* (“to make an incense offering”) and *qatāru* (“to make smoke”)⁵⁹. He briefly mentions the Greek θυμιατήριον as having developed from Mesopotamian models which the Phoenicians manufactured. Burkert⁶⁰ notes that specialized wares and incense, such as frankincense, would have been imported to the Greek world through Cyprus beginning no later than 700 BCE. Frankincense, an incense which was burned in censers with charcoal, is first attested in Sappho as [λι]βανώτω[ι] within a ritual context.⁶¹ Sappho⁶² writes,

ὄππ[αι δὴ] χάριεν μὲν ἄλσος
μαλί[αν], βῶμοι δ’ ἐνι θυμιάμε-
νοι [λι]βανώτω[ι].

Fragrant altars were well attested in Homer⁶³: ἐνθά τέ οἱ τέμενος βωμός τε θυήεις⁶⁴; ὅθι τοι τέμενος βωμός τε θυήεις⁶⁵; and ἐνθα δέ οἱ τέμενος βωμός τε θυήεις⁶⁶. Burkert⁶⁷ notes that, “the cult practice must have expanded along with the trade.” Chantraine and Beekes agree that λίβανος is etymologically Semitic⁶⁸. Herodotus⁶⁹ writing about Babylon from the 5th century BCE records the following custom among Babylonians and Arabs:

ὁσάκις δ’ ἂν μιχθῇ γυναικὶ τῇ ἐωυτοῦ ἀνὴρ Βαβυλώνιος, περὶ
θυμίσμα καταγιζόμενον ἵζει, ἐτέρωθι δὲ ἡ γυνὴ τώυτὸ τοῦτο
ποιεῖ, ὁρθροῦ δὲ γενομένου λοῦνται καὶ ἀμφοτέρω: ἄγγεος γὰρ
οὐδενὸς ἄψονται πρὶν ἂν λούσωνται. ταῦτ’ αὖτε καὶ Ἀράβιοι
ποιεῦσι.

⁵⁹ s.v. *qatāru* in *CAD*.

⁶⁰ Burkert 1985: 62.

⁶¹ West 1997: 40; Burkert 1985: 62.

⁶² Fr. 2.

⁶³ Burkert 1985: 62.

⁶⁴ *Il.* 8.48.

⁶⁵ *Il.* 23.148.

⁶⁶ *Od.* 8.363.

⁶⁷ Burkert 1985: 62.

⁶⁸ s.v. λίβανος for both.

⁶⁹ *Hd.* 1.198.

Frankincense and other such aromatics made of resin were not native to Greece; they were imported from places as far away as Arabia and according to “ritually established procedures.”⁷⁰ Pliny the Elder⁷¹ remarks on the ritual harvesting of frankincense in *Naturalis Historia*: harvesters “were called ‘sacred’ and were forbidden any contact with the dead or with women while they engaged in gathering the crop.”⁷² In Greek myths about the Semitic practice of burning incense, such as those from Theophrastus, “the Sun priest...offered [aromatics] as tribute to the fire of the sun by which they are immediately consumed.”⁷³ Plato⁷⁴ also comments on the ritual usage of frankincense and other foreign spices which were imported to Greece:

λιβανωτὸν δὲ καὶ ὅσα πρὸς θεοὺς τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐστὶν ξενικὰ
 θυμιάματα, καὶ πορφύραν καὶ ὄσα βαπτὰ χρώματα, μὴ φερούσης
 τῆς χώρας, ἢ περὶ τινα ἄλλην τέχνην δεομένην ξενικῶν τινῶν
 εἰσαγωγίμων μηδενὸς ἀναγκαίου χάριν μήτε τις ἀγέτω...

The adoption of ritual burning of incense from Mesopotamia is not an outlier. Other ritual practices from Mesopotamia were imported into Bronze Age Cyprus, such as extispicy, which the Greeks incorporated into their sacrifices in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, and which Homer alludes to⁷⁵: ἢ οἱ μάντιές εἰσι θυοσκόοι ἢ ἱερῆες⁷⁶. More recent research has uncovered the exchange of ideological and material culture between Greece and the Near East, such as the importing of perfumed oil and its ritual usage to Mycenaean Greece in the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries BCE⁷⁷.

⁷⁰ Detienne 1977: 6.

⁷¹ 12.31.

⁷² Detienne 1977: 6.

⁷³ *Ibid*: 8.

⁷⁴ Plat. *Laws* 8.847b-847c.

⁷⁵ Burkert 1985: 112-113.

⁷⁶ *Il.* 24.221.

⁷⁷ Fappas 2011: 495-510.

In response to Burkert's thesis, Hoessly⁷⁸ poses two questions: "Von wem konnten die Griechen dieses Wort überhaupt kennenlernen?" and "Was kamen die Griechen dazu, ein Wort, das bei den Semiten 'räuchern' bedeutet, allgemein für 'reinigen' zu verwenden?" He agrees with Burkert's hypothesis that wandering Babylonian expiatory priests (*Sühnepriestern*) may have introduced cathartic practices, for whom the Semitic word for "smoking" was intimately linked with purification ritual, to Greeks who extended the use of καθαίρω/καθαρός to describe their own purification rituals, particularly those involving rituals with incense; καθαίρω/καθαρός thus came to mean "clean" or "pure" as a result of their association with purification rituals. However, he notes that Burkert's hypothesis may contain an anachronism:

Das Wort müsste doch ziemlich *vor* Homer importiert worden sein, während doch da kathartische System erst *nach* Homer von solchen Sühne Priestern eingeführt worden zu sein scheint.

Were cathartic practices first introduced *after* Homer? He does not give evidence for this point, although he does concede that there are cathartic "approaches" (*Ansätze*) in Homer, the purification of evil pollution (κακῶν ἄκος) with incense being one such example⁷⁹:

οἷσε θέειον, γρηῤ, κακῶν ἄκος, οἷσε δέ μοι πῦρ,
ὄφρα θεειώσω μέγαρον...

An inscription from the reign of Assurbanipal (7th century BCE) describes the practice of the *Sühnepriester*: "through the craft of purification priests I cleansed their daises, purified their defiled streets"⁸⁰. In extending Burkert's hypothesis to *Il.* 16.228, Hoessly⁸¹ writes,

Wenn also Burkerts These zutrifft, so würde in *Il.* 16.228 in den Worten ἐκάθηρε θεείω mit denen Homer die Reinigung des Bechers durch Achill vor Spende und Gebet beschreibt, noch die ursprüngliche Bedeutung des Wortes durchschimmern.

⁷⁸ Hoessly 2002: 19-20.

⁷⁹ *Od.* 22.481-82.

⁸⁰ Streck 1916: 40 iv. 87.

⁸¹ Hoessly 2002: 19-20.

sur-qen-na (“she scattered [incense]”) appears to be derived from the verb *sarāqu* (“to scatter an offering material in rituals”), which is itself derived from the verb *surruqu* (“to scatter”). The noun *sirqu* is an “offering of aromatics,” which, according to *CAD*, can include barley if burned as incense. Ninsun’s scattering of “incense” here could be any such aromatic, such as frankincense or burned barley. Barley was a “principal regular offering” to the gods in Mesopotamia.⁸² Whereas Ninsun has clearly burned the incense as an offering (she “smothered the censer” when she ended the ritual), Penelope processes upwards towards her upper chamber, bearing a basket of barley for strewing (οὐλοχύτας) as a promise of animal sacrifice to come—the sacrifices she vows to all the gods in 17.59-60:

εὕχετο πᾶσι θεοῖσι τεληέσσας ἐκατόμβας
 ῥέξειν, αἳ κέ ποθι Ζεὺς ἄντιτα ἔργα τελέσσει.

There is also the possibility that Ninsun’s offering of incense, like Penelope’s offering of barley, is a promise of a divine feast for Shamash. Bottéro⁸³ notes that the incense burned in “liturgical ceremonies for the gods... enhance the magnificence of the feast with their odor.” Regular feeding of the statues of gods in Mesopotamia corresponds to Greek gods’ reliance on mortals for sacrifices, a fact which is well illustrated in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*,⁸⁴ when Hermes beseeches Hades to release Persephone to assuage her mother Demeter’s wrath and therefore avoid the cessation of sacrifices to the gods:

...ἐπεὶ μέγα μήδεται ἔργον,
 φθῖσαι φύλ’ ἀμενηνὰ χαιμεγενέων ἀνθρώπων,
 σπέρμ’ ὑπὸ γῆς κρύπτουσα, καταφθινύθουσα δὲ τιμὰς
 ἀθανάτων...

⁸² Bottéro 2001: 129.

⁸³ *Ibid*: 131.

⁸⁴ 351-354.

Penelope's carrying of barley for strewing in a basket symbolically recalls the *κανηφόροι* ("basket-bearers") who carry barley in a processional sacrifice to Athena; such basket-bearers were traditionally uncorrupted virgins.⁸⁵ The detail suggests that the poet is capturing Penelope's chastity and purity in the face of the suitors who aggressively court her, a married woman, in Odysseus' absence. Burkert⁸⁶ gives a vivid account of the role of the basket-carrier and barley in Greek sacrifice:

The sacrifice is a festive occasion for the community. The contrast with everyday life is marked with washing, dressing in clean garments, and adornment...A blameless maiden at the front of the procession carries on her head the sacrificial basket in which the knife for sacrifice lies concealed beneath grains of barley...A vessel carrying containing water is also borne along, and often an incense burner....The participants each take a handful of barley groats (*oulai, oulochytoi*) from the sacrificial basket. Silence descends. Ceremonially and resoundingly, and with arms raised to the sky, the sacrificer recites a prayer, invocation, and vow.

Penelope's prayer ritual is thus in accord with standard Greek ritual practices with the only exception being the ascent to her private chamber.

PRAYER

Gilgamesh

...before Shamash, she lifted her arms. (III.45)

'Why did you afflict my son Gilgamesh with so restless a spirit? (III.46)

...[until he] annihilates from the land the Evil Thing you abhor...(III.54)

'...may Aya the Bride unfearing remind you:'

'Entrust him to the care of the watches of the night!' (III.56-57)

'Let rise thirteen winds and Humbaba's face darken,
let the weapons of Gilgamesh then reach Humbaba!' (III.92-93)

⁸⁵ Parker 1983: 78-79.

⁸⁶ Burkert 1985: 56.

The gods, your brothers, shall bring food [to delight] you...(III.98)

'Will he not grow wise with Ea of the Ocean Below?

Will he not rule with Irnina the black-headed people?

Will he not dwell with Ningishzida in the Land-of-No-Return? (III.104-106)

After Wild-Cow Ninsun had charged Shamash thus...(III.116)

- 45 M₁ ii 9 [m]a-l̥ar dUTU i-di-šú iš-ši
M₃ ii 9 iš-kun ʿsur¹-q[en-na]
BB₁ ii 1 [] ʿd¹U[TU i-d]i-šú iš-[]
aa ii 3 [i]š-ši
46 M₁ ii 10 [dGI]š-gím-maš lib-bi la ša-li-la te-mid-su
M₃ ii 10 am-me-ni taš-kun ʿana ma¹-[ri-ia]
BB₁ ii 2 [] ʿd¹GIš-gím-maš lib-bi la ša-l[il]
aa ii 4 [-l]i-lu
54 M₁ ii 18 [in]a KUR
M₃ ii 18 u mim-ma lem-nu šá ta-ze-ru []
BB₁ ii 10 [ù mi]m-ma lem-nu šá ta-zer-ru ú-l̥al-laq ina K[UR]
56 M₃ ii 20 [š]i-i a-a i-dur-ka d^a-a k[al-]
BB₁ ii 11 [ši]-ʿi¹ a-a {šI} i-dur-ka d^a-a kal-lat li-l̥a-ʿsis¹-k[a]
aa ii 13 [-k]a
57 M₃ ii 21 [š]á-a-šú a-na EN.NUN.M[EŠ]
BB₁ ii 12 [a]na EN.NUN.MEŠ šá GI₆ ʿpi-qid¹-[su]
aa ii 14 [-s]u
92 BB₁ iii 6 []x
y 9' [] šá d̥lum-ba-ba liʿ(TU)-tu-ú pa-ni-šú
aa iii 12 13 IM.MEŠ lit-bu-nim-ma šá ʿd̥lum-ba-ba liʿ-tu-u pa-nu-šú
93 BB₁ iii 7 []x
y 10' [-g]m-m[aš li]k-ʿš¹-d[u] ʿd̥lum-ba¹-ba
aa iii 13 ù g¹šTUKUL šá dGIš-gím-maš ʿlik-š¹-du d̥lum¹-ba-ba
98 i iii 4' DINGIR.MEŠ ŠEŠ.MEŠ-ka ninda-b[é-e?]]
aa iii 18 DINGIR.MEŠ ŠEŠ.MEŠ-ka nin-da-bé-e šá ta-x x lid-di-nu-ka
104 i iii 10' ul KI dIDIM ABZU ʿi¹-[]
aa iii 24 ul i[t-] ʿABZU i¹-me-eq
105 i iii 11' ul KI d̥ir-ni-ni ÛG.MEŠ šal-ma[t]
aa iii 25 ul it-t[i -n]i-ni ʿÛG.MEŠ šal-mat SAG.DU i¹-b[e-e]
106 i iii 12' ul KI d̥nin-giš-zi-da ina kur.nu.[gi₄.a]
aa iii 26 ul it-ti ʿd̥nin-giš-zi-da ina kur.nu.gi.a¹ [uš-š]ab
116 aa iii 36 ul-tu ʿri-mat¹-d̥nin-sún ana dUTU id-di-nu ur-ti

Odyssey

...εὖχε' Ἀθηναίῃ κούρῃ Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο (4.752)

...ήρᾶτο δ' Ἀθήνη (4.761)

... εὖχεο πᾶσι θεοῖσι (17.50, 59)

εἴ ποτέ τοι πολύμητις ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν Ὀδυσσεὺς
ἦ βοὸς ἦ ὄϊος κατὰ πίονα μηρί' ἔκηε... (4.763-764)

μνηστῆρας δ' ἀπάλαλκε κακῶς ὑπερηνορέοντας (4.766)

τῶν νῦν μοι μνηῆσαι καί μοι φίλον υἷα σάωσον (4.765)

αἶ κέ ποθι Ζεὺς ἄντιτα ἔργα τελέσσει (17.51, 60)

...τεληέσσας ἐκατόμβας
ῥέξειν... (17.50-51, 59-60)

...οὐ γὰρ οἶω
πάγχυ θεοῖς μακάρεσσι γονὴν Ἀρκεισιάδαο
ἔχθεσθ', ἀλλ' ἔτι πού τις ἐπέσσειται ὅς κεν ἔχησι
δῶματά θ' ὑπερεφέα καὶ ἀπόπροθι πίονας ἀγρούς. (4.754-757)

...θεὰ δέ οἱ ἔκλυεν ἀρῆς. (4.767)

In the previous sections I have demonstrated how Ninsun's and Penelope's ritual actions are intimately connected to each other, which continues with their remarkably similar prayers to the gods. *ma-har* in Akkadian means "to pray to a deity"⁸⁷, which George has abbreviated to "before Shamash" in the English translation. I have connected it with the Greek ἀράομαι. What Penelope tells Athena in the opening of her prayer echoes the content of Ninsun's rhetorical question which she poses to Shamash. Both Telemachus (as the son of Odysseus who has offered many sacrifices) and Gilgamesh are undeserving of facing a terrible fate. Ninsun and Penelope are expressing their acute anxiety of a potential theodic crisis, although the crisis is more apparent in Ninsun's question: "Why did you afflict my son Gilgamesh with so restless a

⁸⁷ s.v. *mahāru* in *CAD*.

spirit?”⁸⁸ The sentiment of the opening of their prayers is echoed in the Akkadian *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*⁸⁹ which describes a devout, dutiful man who is thrown into a theodic crisis:

Like one who has not made libations to his god...
And abandoned his goddess by not bringing flour offering...
For myself, I gave attention to supplication and prayer:
To me prayer was discretion, sacrifice my rule.

“Give, as I gave,” Ninsun and Penelope seem to say, in expectation of “reciprocal altruism.”⁹⁰

Both mothers pointedly request the gods’ assistance with destroying the enemy. Ninsun says, praying to Shamash who is associated with justice,⁹¹ “...[until he] annihilates from the land the Evil Thing you abhor...Let rise thirteen winds and Humbaba's face darken, let the weapons of Gilgamesh then reach Humbaba!”⁹² The thirteen winds refer to the winds which Shamash has the power to summon. Penelope calls for the warding off the suitors: *μνηστῆρας δ’ ἀπάλαλκε κακῶς ὑπερηνορέοντας*⁹³, and later in Book XVII for Zeus and all the other gods to bring vengeance upon them: *αἳ κέ ποθι Ζεὺς ἄντιτα ἔργα τελέσσει*.⁹⁴

Furthermore, Ninsun and Penelope request that the gods remember to save their sons: ‘...may Aya the Bride unfearing remind you: | Entrust him to the care of the watches of the night!’ Ninsun cries out;⁹⁵ Penelope begs, “*τῶν νῦν μοι μνησαι καὶ μοι φίλον υἷα σάωσον*.”⁹⁶ *li-ha-sis-ka* (“may she remind you”) is derived from the verb *hussusu* (“to remind”)⁹⁷. In the

⁸⁸ *Gilgamesh* III.46.

⁸⁹ 12-25 from Lambert (1960)’s translation in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*; see also Bottéro 2001: 166.

⁹⁰ Burkert 1979: 54.

⁹¹ *Ibid*: 33.

⁹² *Gilgamesh* III.54, 92-93.

⁹³ *Od.* 4.766.

⁹⁴ *Od.* 17.51, 60.

⁹⁵ *Gilgamesh* III.56-57.

⁹⁶ *Od.* 4.765.

⁹⁷ s.v. *hussusu* in *CAD*; The construction of this phrase appears very similar to Arabic; in Arabic, the prefix *li* (لِ) is used for the subjunctive and the *ka* (كَ) is the masculine object pronoun “you,” which is attached to the end of a verb.

middle voice, *μυμνήσκω* means to “remind oneself” of a genitive.⁹⁸ Ninsun promises that, if Shamash answers her prayer, “the gods, your brothers, shall bring food [to delight] you...”.⁹⁹ Penelope likewise promises “...τελήεσσας ἐκατόμβας | ῥέξειν...”.¹⁰⁰ Before ending her prayer, Ninsun asks, “‘Will he not grow wise with Ea of the Ocean Below? | Will he not rule with Irnina the black-headed people? | Will he not dwell with Ningishzida in the Land-of-No-Return?’”¹⁰¹ Her questions are echoed in Eurycleia’s suggesting to Penelope that she pray to Athena:

...οὐ γὰρ οἶω
πάγχυ θεοῖς μακάρεσσι γονὴν Ἀρκεισιάδαο
ἔχθεσθ’, ἀλλ’ ἔτι πού τις ἐπέσσεται ὅς κεν ἔχησι
δῶματά θ’ ὑπερεφέα καὶ ἀπόπροθι πίονας ἀγρούς.¹⁰²

They finally end their prayers, which the gods answer. Although we are not told explicitly as this piece is missing from the extant tablets, Shamash does hear Ninsun’s prayer, as Athena does with Penelope’s (...θεὰ δέ οἱ ἔκλυεν ἀρῆς)¹⁰³; later in Tablet III, he sends the thirteen winds to help Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay Humbaba.

CONCLUSION

My hope is that the findings in this paper will address the parallel’s significance beyond Martin West’s assertion that parallels between Greek and Near Eastern literature merely “speak for themselves.”¹⁰⁴ I argue that the parallel strongly suggests a shared culture, of Near Eastern cultural continuity and integration of which Greece was a part, and neither deliberate alterity or Orientalism on the part of the Greeks given the Homeric scholia’s silence on Near Eastern influence, the universal nature of the Homeric epics (e.g., Greeks and Trojans share the same

⁹⁸ *LHD*.

⁹⁹ *Gilgamesh* III.98.

¹⁰⁰ *Od.* 17.50-51, 59-60.

¹⁰¹ *Gilgamesh* III.104-106.

¹⁰² *Od.* 4.754-757.

¹⁰³ *Od.* 4.767.

¹⁰⁴ West 1997: viii.

gods),¹⁰⁵ and Greek-speaking people's inhabiting of areas within Mesopotamian empires' spheres of influence. What I hope will emerge from this paper is a challenge to how we classify "the classical" with Homer venerated as the "Big Bang" of European literature.¹⁰⁶

Abbreviations

CAD *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*

CT *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets*

LHD *Lexicon of Homeric Dialect*

YOS *Yale Oriental Series, Babylonian Texts*

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¹⁰⁵ Johannes Haubold (2005) writes on "reading Homer which emphasises continuity between East and West."

¹⁰⁶ Griffin 1987: vi.

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