

TABLET SIX

[Morning of New Year's Eve. A space outside the temple, with tower stairs as before. Stage left, the great double doors to the council hall of the gods are now dominant. A pair of three-legged royal seats stands upstage, the one to the left occupied by Enlil's Council Mask. The Traders and their interlocutors take foreground (downstage) positions such that the ceremonies behind them are continuously seen but only sometimes heard.]

Eber and the Traders

enter, carrying their shepherd crooks and the Troopers' bows.

Eber:

Their gods have been carried into the Chamber of Destinies already, so now it's all right to watch; but give those doors a wide berth. —Keep those bows out of sight! But I don't think our friends will call for them at such close quarters. —After the coronation you can go celebrate New Year's. When fixed and movable day are the same, it's a feast of reconciliation. Let Gilgamesh call it the sun-god's. At least the foolishness is shortened to twenty-four hours.

[The Traders lay down the bows.]

[The doors open slowly from within.]

Trader 1:
Widows, Lil-Amin, Optimates, and Rector enter, in procession.
[Lil-Amin is dressed as a masked bride.]

Father, my heart's as anxious as any native's to hear the messenger hail this new moon, for I fear the vengeance of the God of the World. By speaking slyly, according to your light, you have accepted the shah's unholy calendar.

Eber:
The Widows, as bridesmaids, beat a rhythm with pestle-cymbals. The Rector carries a heavy crosier, with which he controls the ceremonies by thumping upon the floor. The Optimates close and seal the double doors, while Lil-Amin is led to take her seat on the right. They all touch their foreheads to the ground in front of Enlil's empty mask before moving to their places in the ensuing ritual.

Even from angels the will of Shaddai is often hidden. . . . I am not faultless maybe. It's a narrow line I tread. By opposing superstition I strengthen blasphemy. But the king has yielded to my policies, as these heathens have yielded to his demand for hell-oil. I can only hope to keep the peace while we wait for God's word to reveal itself day by day.

Rector: The gods asked one another, and chose Enlil to lead their decisions; for when chaos was full he had saved them from the dragon. With four currents of wind he hewed from earth and water a land of plenty between the two great rivers on their course to the sea; and set the black-haired people to attend with sacrifices bountiful and savory the seven lovely houses of the gods; and first among them was the city of his daughter Inanna. But we have allowed ourselves to be led into grievous strife with her law. We have menaced her altar with evil. Once again our manifold wickedness has disordered the spirit of Uruk. In our weakness we have failed to hold fast the love of our sacred mother. The serene and gracious moon has been taken from our sky, and the pitiless sun means to drink the river from our fields. Our bread is turned to stone. May Enlil look with mercy upon the the servants of Inanna, the despair of her heart! —Bring the old king before the seat of god to confess his transgressions. —May the gods renew this kingship by fatal decree, and grant their people another year of life. . . .

Gilgamesh enters from the right, escorted by Troopers. [He wears a horned crown on his mask, and carries the Rod and Ring. The Troopers bear the Triskelion banner as a gonfalon. Leaving Gilgamesh near the Rector at center, they take up positions opposite the Traders downstage, who speak to each other in the foreground. Eber moves as close as possible to Gilgamesh without interfering in the ritual.]

Trader 2: They bring in their year by offering their choicest harlot on the highest place they've got. If she doesn't pacify the overlord idol, comes fire and brimstone!

Trader 1: Law to them is nothing. Each year beforehand, divine consent to chance is chiseled as their destiny! All their piety goes toward learning how to guess the future. Righteousness does not avail.

Trader 2: The Name of the One God, world without end.

Optimates: *His word looms a stormcloud on the horizon.*

Widows: *Amen.*

Trader 2: Gilgamesh insisted on going through this. I hope our father can keep him from doing something rash. It would wrong our unborn seed to die for a Gentile. But the Troopers don't expect a crisis yet. Tonight they'll be carousing. Having been born in snow, they exalt the sun.

Trader 1: Thank God this is the year of zero epact. With calendars in conjunction, we can agree for the moment with both kinds of heathen! For us the pleasure of acquiescence is all too rare.

[Upstage ritual action continues separately, its music and chanted words merely suggested, except where emerging into the text.]

Trader 2: I don't see how the holidays are going to be so pleasant if the people don't get any friendlier.

Trader 1: These are the days they serve their servants and have their scapegoat lead the revels! They'll welcome circumcised foreigners.

[The Widows and Optimates perform elements of restrained dance.]

Trader 2: I'd like to be happy in Erech. Why should we abhor the stationary arts and comforts? I didn't ask for levitical responsibility. It's not my idea to be against these women. In the middle of a dance who can ponder law?

Trader 1: The famous guest-cup is not for us, and orgy is forbidden.

Trader 2: No other nation is tested by self-abnegation!

Rector: . . . Confess the insubordination of your rule.

Gilgamesh: I confess that none of my designs has been handed down from heaven. No god has envisioned my plans or approved them. I have taken it upon myself to make new form and tone ironically, affecting to pretend that his semantic substitutions are as traditional as the coronation itself.]
 [He satisfies ceremonial things and devise more efficacious ways. By me the polity has been reformed, and idle artisans put to new inventions. In drastic supervision, never have I closed my ear or turned a blind eye. Worst of all, I have altered fate by refusing Ishtar's brand, and eschewing her adulterations. If these be offences to Enlil, then do I admit them.]

Optimates: *Amen.*
 [The Widows titter at their slow wits.]

Trader 2: Gilgamesh is right to hold with a man's fatherhood.

Rector: . . . As Lugal of Uruk, say what you have done to serve her.

Gilgamesh: I have given Enlil a ladder down to earth, and the whole Sea-Land a beacon for caravans and boats. It flashes blue sunbeams into the deep of the sky, and its shadow walks across the city to cool the heads of children.

Trader 2: They lure their god with a doctrine of incest.

Rector: For trafficking in vile mire, may you be spared the wrath of Enlil; for polluting our city with the smoke of slime.

Gilgamesh: Incense and orisons vanish like a mist; even hecatombs are not prolonged: but my freewill offering of fired earth winds an upward path that will endure for all our gods. Neither can it be pulled down by armies nor scattered by thunder.
 [The Rector removes Gilgamesh's mask rather abruptly and lays it on Enlil's seat.]

Trader 2: Only battered to an ant hill by the four winds of El-Shaddai!

Rector: Yield up the Rod and Ring, and await the proof by custom, that you may contend to rule. Bow to the throne of Enlil. Until the king returns, let a stranger bear the retribution!
 [Gilgamesh solemnly hands the Rod and Ring to Lil-Amin, but mockingly bows his face to the ground before her seat instead of Enlil's.] *[Thumps once with his crosier.]*
 Hark: I hear a knocking!

[Silence. . . . Thumps twice.]

Who knocks for kingship?

Engidu enters, escorted by Norkid.

[Optimates conduct Engidu to the Rector. Norkid goes to stand with his men. Engidu looks at Gilgamesh.]

[Silence. . . . Thumps three times.]

Enter, Lord of the Epact. . . . Do you swear to serve Uruk, and for love of Inanna carry from her streets the sins of long dark night?

Engidu:

Do I.
[Sneezes.]
 Smell feathers make me cough.

Rector:

Relinquish the purple!

[He rips off Gilgamesh's cloak (leaving him as bare as a slave), who starts to react but checks himself. The Rector then slaps Gilgamesh's face, somewhat harder than protocol requires.

[Aside to Gilgamesh:] Sir, we beg your public indulgence of our tradition immemorial.

—Lead the dying king to solitude. Let him eat dust and quench his thirst with penance. —We must break his pride!

[Thumps repeatedly in a drumming beat.]

This time the latter responds with an open offer of violence—at which the Rector does not flinch. The Troopers lay hand to swords, but Norkid stops them with a gesture. Eber restrains Gilgamesh with a touch. The Rector smiles at him,

Trader 2:

No salt tears from that prince of men! Contrition, never!

bowing ironically, and resumes with ritual intonation.

Rector:

Banish this uncircumcised barbarian from the eyes of gods!

The Optimates awkwardly fling a net over Gilgamesh. He remains calm but uneasy, staring back at Engidu, who has been fascinated by him.]

**Optimates:
& Widows:** —You have all day to put a stop to time, your Royal Lugalissimus!—Halt the sun with arrows! —Piss up Euphrates; make him flow to the mountains! —Forbid the moon to grow! —Draft the masons to wall out Engidu! —Save your neck by axioms! Prove the theorem that Giszax’s more than half immortal! —Cauterize your wounds with salt. Glaze out the dew on your eyeballs! —We’ll smoke your carcass with stink-fire, and embalm it with bitumen!

[Ad lib in various voices, jeering. They taunt him in sing-song and with bits of mocking dance.]

Trader 2: Tiny minds uncork their genius.

**Optimates:
& Widows:** —Cogitate your freedom, Oh Philosopher-King! Reckon away those knots. —Find that battle-axe of yours! Hack your way out of the butterfly net! —Giszax, Giszax, time to go berserk! Show us the rage that your hillbillies thought was so awesome! Let’s hear the battle-cry that weakened the knees of mountain ewes! —Bring down the temple with your Lifo-righto-textile-peed-on! —Oh savior of the city, invent yourself salvation! —After your parts are strewn around the brickyard, you’ll be glad enough to share the favors of a female grave with local dogs!

Trader 2: Son of the Nephilim, is there an angel to save you from this humiliation? Instead of mocking the savage, they turn their scorn on you!

Rector: Enough. [*Thumps patiently.*] Enough.
[Smiling.]

Widows: —Before you go, sir alchemist, answer us our riddle: what’s two-thirds hydrogen plus one-third oxygen but can’t get through a fish net?

Trader 1: Gilgamesh is a son of man. If he falls, he falls.

Trader 2: And down we go with him!

Optimates: —Yes, go hide in your kiln, where Enkidu can’t find you! —Soak yourself in creosote and fire up your guts!

Gilgamesh saunters off, draped in the net. [They make a show of kicking him out. Animated by their own bravery, they snatch the Triskelion gonfalon from the Troopers, who thereupon draw their swords. The Traders move to the rescue with suddenly revealed short-swords in one hand and their formidable crooks in the other. Norkid wades in with bare hands to make peace among them, while one of the Optimates tries to trample the Triskelion. Another Optimate gives a little scream.]

Gilgamesh re-enters, at another point, to watch unseen.

Rector: Order! Order! [*Thumping in earnest.*] Let it stay!

- Widows:** —Yes, harden your codpiece with glaze! —Go play with your Erecto-testro-gilga-heathen! —Don't look here for any straightlaced nanny-goat that doesn't know the world is made for horny billies!
[Calling after Gilgamesh, as they think.]
- Lil-Amin:** Silence! Silence for the coronation! For shame, on Enlil's wedding feast! Nor will the new king be any better pleased. —Rector, give me peace, or clear the court!
[With dignity. Commotion ceases. The Triskelion is restored.]
- Norkid:** I will, if he does not. While I'm alive, he won't turn temple mummery into a coup d'etat!
[Adjusting his spectacles. Troopers and Traders deploy to positions of control.]
[*A moment of silence.*]
- Rector:** Temporarily we submit to force. There'll be no holy war if the principal trial takes place according to the law.
- Eber:** The law is Gilgamesh. We can extirpate your priestcraft.
- Rector:** I deign to answer houseless nomads and rabid fascists only with my opinion that the bull which goeth before the herd is but a cattle like those that follow.
- Norkid:** Sufficient unto the day is the anxiety thereof. That's this fascist's motto. But if Gilgamesh won't deign to scotch the snakes that hatch before our eyes, I have no such compunction. Thinking of the future I've been known to forget my orders.
[Troopers and Traders slowly return to their former places.]
- Rector:** Captain, you are an honorable soldier!
- Norkid:** My tongue has no bones, and wags as it will. An occupational compensation for our mindless rote. —Men, *as you* WERE!
- Lil-Amin:** Let the rite proceed.
[Ceremony resumes.]
- Trooper 1:** My sword-palm itches to churn some flesh. Gilgamesh is not here now to protect the owners of our rightful spoils.
Troopers and Traders converse with each other
- Trooper 2:** There's no use in plunder if you can't take it with you. And it's better to hack your way home after a feast than slay your host before he serves the eats! No one's going to be poisoned if we make the ayatollah taste it first.
in the foreground. Behind them the Rector invests Engidu with Gilgamesh's mantle. In dumbshow: Engidu, while still bewildered by
- Trader 2:** What about us? We're dead already! This swarm of drones covets our imported goods. They also want the daughters back that were given us for wives by the erstwhile liberator who confiscated their temple treasury to pay for a pile of bricks! It doesn't make them hate us the less that he, our only defender, has surrendered to their folklore. The chief idolater is no priest of reconciliation!
civilization, prompted by the Rector, accepts the Rod and Ring from Lil-Amin; he is then led

Trooper 2: Be of good cheer. Gilgamesh hasn't lost his nerve. He studies dreams too much, and to the empty throne beside her and crowned with Gilgamesh's mask.] for the moment some kingdom in his head seems more important; but our troubles fade as Mithra's fire climbs the zodiac.

Engidu: Oh Lady-Amin, highmost priest, and Op-timates of Ur-ek. Oh great womens and man, [Speaks shyly and haltingly what he's tried to memorize.] on eart' of In-an-anna.

Widows: *As earlier with human hands*
[Chanting in dance.] *You unset human snares for beasts,*
And then for humans laid the lion low,
Deliver us from evil now.

Rector: I anoint Enkidu, Imperator of the Epact, to try his strength against Gilgamesh; and if [Touches Engidu's head with blood from Lil-Amin's sacrificial dish.] he fails the verdict to perish in his stead. —Take up kingship of the feast, to command us as you will, until you lose or win the place you sit in!

Engidu: Do I what speak you. I ready be for old bull of able-value blood! One life from two will [Speaks haltingly but with gradually gained confidence.] blow away on wind. I kill him to lady-god and cover-god. Me city-king all years will be.

Widows: *Women and men, raise your joyful cry: Eu-oi, Eu-oi!*

Rector: Sleep not, until the New Year cracks its shell.
& Widows: —Lest Enlil frown upon the black-haired folk in everlasting night. Sleep not, until the [Intoned as antiphonal litany.] night's dark lid begins to open, until you see the slitted eye of light.
—Lest his bridal bed be made a nesting place for vultures. Sleep not, until you hark a voice from the east with tidings of the silver crescent.
—Lest the house of our gods be filled with dust and leveled like a desert tomb.
—Lest the merciless sun cake dry all mud with cracks, and choke with sand the living waters.
—Lest time go on without return.

Widows: *Give ear for word of Inanna her sky-boat!*
Watch for the horns of her bullock!

Trooper 2: It's not the moon that sprouts beer-barley; so how can she inaugurate a year? They don't understand the constant mill of time. Mithra lingers and retreats, but he never wanes!

Rector: When on high the gods chose Enlil to weave all destinies. . .

Trader 2: The harlot they call a queen, she wasn't good enough for a blasphemous king, but for them she's pure messiah!

Trooper 1: You patriarchals should have more respect for ladies of the cloth. She's the finest kind. Have you ever seen her dance? Or have you lost the yen, what with all your wives?

Trooper 2: Nobody but Gilgamesh would refuse to touch the one woman anywhere that's his own true match.

Trooper 1: But the perfect bride from folk to god, for god to folk!

Widows: — . . . a pious bride.

[They lead Lil-Amin down from her throne, removing her mask and robes, leaving her dressed only in the blue bridal veil.] —May our full, perfect, and living sacrifice be gladly received by her mystic bridegroom; and her beatitude bring upon us gifts of God. Let us make communion by the light of stars, in the shadow of Our Lord on her skin.

*By the first sweet gleam of moon
Enlil greets his lovely bride!*

Rector: [Kneeling before her, he loops a white cord three times about her waist and ties it lightly. His ritual prayer gradually grows more personal in address. Everyone falls silent as his voice lowers. Breaking off, he kisses her feet passionately.] Weep not for garments, milady, when the lord of gods has gently plucked this knotted cord. Your gleaming skin will adorn the incensed linen like a cloven pearl. In the fearless manner of desire, like the petals of a lily, you must receive the savior of us all. Then shall you be reclothed in tender caresses, and dressed in Enlil's misty salt-sweet breath. His sea-soft hand will gently warm your bud-tipped breast. You shall feel his kiss on your lips. He will come unto you with lifted glory; your knees shall be parted by his golden ivory thigh. . . .

[The Urukians stir uneasily.]

[The Widows lead her to the tower stairs. The Rector remains on his knees.]

—Oh my sister Lil-Amin! Lil-Amin! The rapture of your god is forbidden to your priest! In every other sacrifice I have proved that I grudge great Enlil nothing I can have or know, nor life itself. But I give him you in anguish! I forebode the levin by which a god may infuse the beatitude that women dare not dream of. I dread that he will utterly consume you! Why should earth's jealous father release from divine atonement the most precious daughter of mankind, and restore to me the life that illuminates my humble altar? For me of all men it is most unlawful to serve as his attorney at love. He does not favor the testimony of my unhallowed desire. —I cannot follow you to heaven; yet I am the solicitor of Uruk, and thus, as lawyer to you, the city's proxy, though before a bar too high for human counsel, I arraign our accursed warlord's tower for raising your bridal bed too high!

Slowly **Lil-Amin** disappears up the stairs.

[The Widows return, dancing accompaniment to the Rector's private prayer, and come to a stand between Troopers and Traders.]

Trooper 2: Thus spake the all-too-human pope! This Messpot duty still unfolds a few surprises.

Engidu: She love me! Peoples love me! I love all-body!

[He shouts and smiles spontaneously, growing more and more excited, to the amusement of everyone except the Rector, who arises and turns away to recover himself.]

Trader 2: Thus spake orangutan!

Optimate 1: Our ox is jealous of the Lord!
[Amazed.]

Widows: —Listen for the sighs of fathers!
[They dance. Little by little everybody's solemnity yields to merriment and the rite dissolves into general festivity.] —Hearken to the songs of young husbands!
—Guess the yearnings of blood-stirred boys!
Open the hearts of women!
—The bull will lift his head in the pasture,
—and the cow will lift her tail:
when Lil-Amin makes Enlil love!
—Journeyman will be set loose like cowboys
—to lift the skirts of wedded girls
when Lil-Amin makes love in the sky!
—Seven thousand times seven are the bids that await
seven thousand wives baking folds of soft white bread.
Pray not to waste a single drop of pearly yeast!
Swim swiftly, sweet Euphrates,
Until we end this dance!
—Merrily, merrily, merrily,
—Do not lose the chance!

Rector: [*Thumps heartily.*]

[Smiling and genial, signaling the end of formality.] Yes, dear guests of Uruk, it's not for you to watch this wedding in solemn silence. Strangers, welcome! Citizens, rejoice! Your choice of meat: wild boar killed by Engidu without a wound; or succulent lamb well drained of blood, to suit those that bring us salt. Custom is suspended! Let innocence drown all wisdom. Eat, drink, and dance: for the world may end tomorrow! —Your Highness, lead us to the end of time!

[Engidu lays the Gilgamesh mask on the seat and puts the Ring of office on his head like a rakish garland, handling the Rod like a swagger stick.]

Optimate 1: Ask your whim, Engidu the First! Rule thou our disorder!

Engidu: Is all woman the same?

Optimate 1: Does not each stick make its own smoke?

Optimates go off with Engidu, capering.

- Rector:** May it please Your Honor and his distinguished sons! Our banquet is afforded by the economy you teach us. General welfare offends no god.
[To Eber, gesturing cordial invitation.]
- Eber:** I have made no pact, Your Grace.
- Rector:** Our humble gratitude entails no obligation to the guest. On holiday we shed all cares of office.
- Norkid:** Come along, Eb! There's nothing wrong with a truce. It can't hurt to help warm up the fun-king. As long as we're cold sober before it's over.
- Eber:** Then my thanks already for your hospitality pro tem.
[Bowling to the Rector.]
- Norkid:** As long as our Gilgamesh remains the autocrat ontologically.
[Taking them both by the arm.]
- Rector:** I've always admired your vocabulary.
- Norkid:** It comes from cosmopolitan occupations. Take us to the belly-dancers.
Norkid, Rector, and Eber go off smiling at each other.
- Widow 2:** You could do worse than take your father's hint.
[To Traders.]
- Trooper 1:** You called us some goddam awful names.
- Widow 1:** I did think the best part of you ran down your mother's leg.
- Trooper 1:** Maybe we could be rehabilitated.
- Widow 1:** With some beer we could discuss your therapy.
- Trooper 1:** Yes, Ma'am!
Troopers dash off.
- Widow 1:** This is the dance of rising sap.
[Widows mimic a belly-dance.]
- Widow 2:** For the palm to bear dates, seed must find its way to her flower.
- Widow 1:** I'm more for sap than seed. But these tame Traders are famous for their fructifications.

- Trader 1:** I'm so well married, I thought it would take a devil to make me wicked. But I must admit your torso is savory to my eye already.
- Widow 2:** Your eyes are nice. But we're not pictures. Our temple is not that kind of museum.
- Trader 2:** Would you like to hear some tent music?
- Troopers return,** each with a jug and long straw.
- Trooper 1:** First we wet our whistles. Let's all suck the fennel stalk.
- Widow 2:** A toast to the fifth and final sense!
[A Widow, a Trader, and a Trooper take turns at each straw.]
- Trooper 2:** Drink to the supreme sacrifice!
- Trooper 1:** If it's sacrifice, who wants to live forever?
- Trader 2:** Of course it's a small thing to want a woman.
- Trooper 1:** For me it's a small thing after I get what I want.
- Widow 2:** But not for long, I hope. You should consult a specialist.
[Traders dance.]
- Widow 1:** According to the whispers of our exogamous sisters, we may have more to learn than teach from these educated sheiks.
- Widow 2:** They're charming when they make us sheep's eyes, but I lean toward military men.
[Pointing to Trooper 2.] —That northman now, that wrinkles up his nose every time he lets an arrow fly: I always like to watch him shoot.
[Troopers get up to do a sword dance.]
- Widow 1:** On their feet, both these types have pros and cons. Judging just by song and dance, Widows keep sipping as they produce dainty food, until they meet the test, let's award a bouquet of fig blossoms to all these handsome guests.
- Trooper 2:** Praise be to Ishtar that it's not a prize of cherries!
Traders and Troopers eat morsels.]
- Widow 2:** I'll separate rams from billygoats by the way they bite and chew my seedcakes.

Widow 1: For my part, gentlemen, draw straws. . . .

[A Trooper and a Trader draw from different jugs.]

[She claps with glee.]
[Throwing aside the straws, they take turns drinking from the jugs, on the fly, roopers, Widows, and Traders dancing in a ring.]

There's nothing to choose between them! They deserve equal entertainment. Praise be to Mithra and Shaddai both, we're neither maids nor wives! Let no one rise from this feast unsatisfied! The night's as long as the day!

Widow 2: But not long enough. Somebody ask Giszax to hold back the sun!

Trooper 2: Not today he wouldn't! Don't forget his sexy-jismal system and zero impact!

Widow 1: A stitch in the bush saves nine in time. I didn't take the veil for contemplation and celestial studies!

Traders: —Brethren and sisteren, it's useless to be shrewd!
—Mingle rhymes that blow like the wind!

Widows: *No wight who dares complain or frown
Will be allowed to lift my gown!*

Traders: *There's almost nothing half so sweet
As your exotic heaps of wheat!*

Troopers: *When we finish all these beers
We'll quit the corps of engineers!*

Widow 2: Behold, I shall climb into the highest palm tree and take hold of all its branches.
Widows, Troopers, and Traders snake-dance off to the banquet.

Gilgamesh crosses to the opposite side, walking backward to look after them with amusement, and **disappears**.