H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rivkah Brickman Harris. *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000. xvi + 288 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8061-3539-7.

Reviewed by Sharif S. Elmusa (Department of Political Science, The American University in Cairo)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (November, 2004)

Odyssey of Realization and Self-Knowledge

The book explores two intertwined features of Mesopotamian society, gender and sexuality, and the stages of life. It casts a wide net and is carefully argued, well-written, and a pleasure to read. It is a step toward a more elaborate study of sexuality in Mesopotamia, as well as the writing of a continuous historical narrative of gender and aging in the Middle East that reaches back to antiquity. In brief, the picture drawn by the author shows that status and roles in Mesopotamian society were highly gendered. Women, broadly speaking, possessed a lower position than men throughout their life course. Both men and women "lost" in social standing as they advanced in age beyond mature adulthood. The status of both sexes was also a function of their position on the social ladder. Thus old women from the lower strata had the lowest status, whereas men from the upper strata enjoyed the highest status. The rest were in between.

Mesopotamian society includes both the Sumerian and Akkadian periods. The author lumps the two long eras together and does not consider historical questions of change and continuity, which may not be unreasonable for a pioneer volume on these topics and the paucity of information. She uses an eclectic methodology from the social sciences, including classicism, psychology, and, naturally, philological work and translations of cuneiform texts, the main form of writing of those times. This may sound promiscuous for the methodologically austere, but then multidisciplinarity is indispensable for understanding a multilayered social and existential problem such as the one we have at hand, if not for getting a comfortable job in the modern world. As with other historical studies of the "subalterns," Harris nets her arguments from the gaps and silences of the male-produced historical record. She singles out for close examination a literary source, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and two myths, Enuma Elish (creation myth) and Nergal and Ereshkegal (male and female deities of the netherworld).

The book is organized in ten chapters and three implicit parts. Roughly, the first part focuses on the phases of life, coming of age, aging and generational conflict; the second focuses on the overlap between gender and age; and the third on women, including a final chapter titled "Innana-Ishtar (the Sumerian-Akkadian names of the goddess) as a paradox and coincidence of opposites." Because the gods of Mesopotamia include both sexes and could age and disappear from the scene, the attitudes toward aging and gender could also be discovered in the way the deities were represented. The author is careful to point out that the attitudes and values manifested in literature and myth do not exactly mirror reality, but perhaps like all literature, they reflect and refract it. She contends that if myth is not descriptive, it is normative. Perhaps.

A preliminary point of the book about age is that Mesopotamians did not care very much for chronological age for either males or females. For someone like the present reviewer–who grew up in the neighborhood of Mesopotamia, in Palestine–without birthday celebrations or rituals marking the passage from one stage of life to the other, Harris's thesis seems *prima facie* valid. In Mesopotamia, the lack of interest in chronological age is attested to by the absence in the archaeological record of rites of passage and ceremonies marking transitions from one phase of life to another.

Mesopotamians frequently divided the life of humans into three stages: children, adult men and women, and old men and women. They wished for many children, believing that this was a decision of the gods because of high infant mortality rate (25-35 percent in the first year of life). Children were expressively loved, kissed, "lullabied," and held in the arms. These gestures were expressed in literature. Mesopotamian art seldom depicted children, in contrast to its Egyptian counterpart. Male children were not privileged over female children, and each sex assisted the corresponding parent in accordance with the division of labor. The vocabulary of the period contained numerous words designating child: fe-

tus, infant, baby, little one, suckling, weaned, deformed, stillborn. Age was occasionally noted not just by years, but by height too. Schooling was reserved largely for the children of the elite, and corporal punishment was sanctioned. The treatment of children had its dark side as well: deformed and handicapped children were abandoned, and others rejected by parents because of poverty or other causes. In general, though, it appears that children of both sexes were well-attended to within the material constraints of the day.

The author chooses the epic of Gilgamesh to understand Mesopotamian views of adolescence, especially that of the male sex. Reading the poem as a coming-of-age allegory, she sees Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu as typical teenagers. Enkidu, it must be recalled, was the man who was seduced to the city and made to adopt its culture by a harlot, Shamat [Shamhat], in order to cease foiling the traps of the hunters, to help tame the tempestuous king of Uruk who lorded it over his subjects and deflowered their brides on the eve of their weddings, and to accompany him to the cedar forest to obtain timber. She sees the antisocial conduct of Gilgamesh as typical of a youthful man. While the interpretation may apply to Gilgamesh, it is hard to see how it applies to Enkidu. The latter had been a dedicated shepherd, and he "paled with anger" when he was told that Gilgamesh was abusing the young virgins of the city. This strikes us as a highly responsible behavior. Without going further into details, the framework of the author is insufficient to understand Enkidu, who is a more complex figure than this interpretation leads us to believe, exploited by the city to confirm the culture-nature dichotomy and the superiority of culture, and sentenced to death by a "kangaroo court" of the main deities. A better framework would be from post-colonial studies and eco-criticism.

Gilgamesh himself, after the death of Enkidu, wanders in the wild, visits the underworld, governed by Ereshkegal and Nergal, in search of consolation for the death of his companion and of immortality. He emerges from the journey a mature person, resigned to human finitude. Thus he passes through three phases, preliminal (separation from Uruk), a long liminal (wanderings) and integration (return). This is an archetype of the journey. It is an odyssey of self-knowledge and realization before there was Odysseus.

Old age is the final phase of human life. In general the old, though they may have been accorded respect, were less valued than the young. A mark of old age was gray hair, perceived unfavorably and dyed. Because Mesopotamians were generally dark-haired, they had a poetic expression describing humankind as "the dark-haired." Another sign was a stooped posture; years did not count as much. The ratio of the old among the population is not known, although many may have lived past sixty. Old age was a difficult phase, with noticeable physical decline and loss of status. Older men were equated with women and children thanks to the decline of their contribution to work. The marginalization was manifested in the rations they were allotted for their labor or the price paid in compensation for their murder, which–although they were greater than for women–was much less than for younger males.

Old age, according to one folktale, was characterized by loss of sexual prowess, teeth, hair, and appetite. It "was not a golden age in Mesopotamia"–the understatement of the book (p. 72). Yet Mesopotamians did not seem to dread old age as the Greeks did. Old age was seen as a reward for virtuous living, and brought devotion and piety. But the Mesopotamians were counseled, too, as the Greek were by Plato, that they could drink more alcohol than when they did when young. As the author puts it, "'a life of many days, the satisfaction of growing very old (littutu), good health, and happiness' was the fervent wish of kings, and surely of ordinary people too" (p. 31).

As in all human societies, tensions arose among generations, as has already been indicated by the marginalization of the elderly. "Complex relationships including affection and exploitation must have been at the center of family life" (p. 69). One of the sources of tension was primogeniture, which coexisted with another form of inheritance based on equal division. The father usually was in control of family resources, and his sons could only establish independent households after his death. The extended family may have been the norm during certain periods, but the boundaries of the household have been hard to establish by scholars. Although the old were marginalized, still there was a hierarchy of super-and sub-ordination. For example, the title of *abu* or father (same as in Arabic) connoted the former, and *maru* (son) the latter. Rebellious offspring always existed. Women could discipline their daughters, but not sons. Unlike in Rome, the male head of the household did not have the power to determine the life and death of members of the household. In fact, the code of Hammurabi may have afforded children some legal protection against parental physical assault. The author suggests that Mesopotamian myths may have mitigated intergenerational discord in society "by relegating youthful antagonism and revolt to the realm of the gods" (p. 79).

For women, menopause was even more of a boundary between adulthood and old age. The word for menopause literally meant her blood stopped or ceased flowing. It was not, however, the "final stage of death" as in Victorian England. Women reached menopause by the age of fifty, although some did so only at the age of sixty. It may be that on the whole, women, although healthier than men when they survived, died younger because of childbirth. The status of older women was perhaps the lowest, especially if they were from the lower strata. Their compensation for labor and for murder was like that of children. Old age, however, may have brought advantages, such as freedom from "impurity," associated with menstruation that brought with it certain restrictions on activities and still unknown taboos. These taboos did not include sexual engagement. Men also were considered impure if they ejaculated constantly. Although there was an unhealthy dose of male misogyny regarding older women, they were represented positively in Mesopotamian art, which, unlike its Egyptian counterpart, was not preoccupied with depiction of youthful figures. Little is known about the attitude toward old male sexuality, but in general older-male-younger-female unions were acceptable, though not vice versa. In a tablet of the Summa Alu omen series we read, "If a man has sexual relations with an older woman (*sibtum*) he will quarrel daily" (p. 94). The male was supposed to be the dominant, active sexual partner, which may have become less pronounced if the female was somewhat older.

Harris uses the myth of Nergal and Ereshkegal, the male and female gods of the netherworld, to examine in some depth the issue of gender and sexuality. The myth is about how they came to be husband and wife ruling that realm; for originally Ereshkegal was the chthonic goddess and Nergal was an astral deity. The myth has been interpreted variously. Harris proposes that the myth expresses at least a normative position on how relations between men and women ought to be. She sums up the elements of this relationship as follows:

–The male is active and the female passive. –The man may subdue the woman by force if need be, but once she submits, force is no longer employed. –Women possess a rapacious sexual desire. –Men exhibit tenderness toward the woman and regard for her prudence.

There is much in the text of the myth that supports the author's extrapolation of such an androcentric view of sexuality.

Socially, women performed a wide range functions–witchcraft, mourning and keening, counseling, dream interpretation, herbal healing, and midwifery (the midwife was described as one "who knows the inside"). Not all of these were age-specific, although the last four functions were more likely to be the domain of older women. The type of work was often based on certain beliefs regarding the nature of men and women. For example, although tears were not gendered as they were in Greece, mourning and keening were based on the notion that women's maternal role endowed them with greater compassion than men. And women's intercession was thought to be more effective because they were thought to be more pious.

Still, women's place was mainly in the house, where they cooked, cleaned, reared children, made cloth and brewed beer. We are perhaps at a disadvantage, notes the author, in our knowledge of women's tasks and occupations, because these are scarcely referenced in the male-authored historical documents. Women from the upper classes were perhaps involved in economic and political affairs; those from the middle strata were defined by the roles of their male kin, their names often not mentioned; and those from the lower strata remained nameless.

The author ends her essays, which could be read independently from each other, with a chapter on "Innana-Ishtar as paradox and coincidence of opposites." By this she means that the goddess incorporated within herself polarities and dualities, and by this incorporation transcended them. Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, was the most important female Mesopotamian deity in all eras. She was a liminal, androgynous, marginal, war-like, and ambiguous figure who "danced the whirl like a man" (p. 164). Here are some lines, not necessarily in order, that define her features (pp. 160-165):

Though I am a woman, I am a young noble man. To run, to escape, to quiet and to pacify are yours, Innana. To initiate a quarrel, to joke, to cause smiling, to be base and to be important are yours, Innana. Star of the battle-cry, who can make brothers who have lived in harmony fight each other. You, Ishtar, thus always finish men off. When I sit by the door of the tavern, verily I am a prostitute who knows the penis [emphasis in the original]. The friend of a man, the girlfriend of a woman.

Ishtar had a special festival, which was, as might be expected, carnivalesque, disorderly, replete with performances of which bawdy theater and obscene language. Perhaps the disorder was meant to affirm the order, the author hypothesizes. To fathom Ishtar's popularity, she quotes Clifford Geertz as saying that man's life in the world perhaps has no genuine order, no empirical regularity, and no moral coherence. The religious response, through symbols and images, is to paint an image of such

an order and even to celebrate its ambiguities and paradoxes.

I have two final observations to make about the book. One is that I found the sprinkle of comparisons with Greek and Roman practices concerning gender and aging highly valuable. They remind us that Mesopotamian practices were not universal, for as one reads along, one is tempted to think that many of them were historically so. The second is that I wish the author had included an overall conclusion. If and how does all this hang together at the end? What are we to make of it historically, how does it relate to the Middle Eastern region, not just Rome and Greece? What needs to be done? But on the whole this is a wonderful book for the lay academic even for the lay reader.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Sharif S. Elmusa. Review of Harris, Rivkah Brickman, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. November, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9936

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.