UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

A Tale of Love and Revenge
An Interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts
in
Visual Arts
by
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2014
The MFA thesis of Elmira Mohebali is approved and it is acceptable in quantity and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014
Dedicated to

My Mother, Jamileh Piran.
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A Tale of Love and Revenge

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2014

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When my empathy with goddess, Ishtar turned into a schizophrenic obsession, a video performance was created. *A Tale of Love and Revenge* is a performance for camera in which I continued my existence within the powerful immortal, Goddess Ishtar. Ishtar in my story gives up her identity as a goddess for her love of Gilgamesh.
Introduction

A Tale of Love and Revenge is a new interpretation of the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh*. As an Iranian woman, born and raised in capital city of Tehran, I never heard the name Gilgamesh. The origin of this epic goes back to Mesopotamia in current Iraq. Yet, the Epic seems to have too many common points with my native Iranian culture to be dismissed. In excitement of discovering what seemed to hold the roots of many Iranian issues and problems within, I was drawn into the Epic deeper and deeper. Before I knew it, I fell in love with the hero, king Gilgamesh, “who had seen everything.” (Kovacs, Tablet I pg3),

As time passed, and as I read different translations of the Epic in English and Persian, I realized that *the Epic of Gilgamesh* could be interpreted in a variety of settings, especially with the Mesopotamian kings being directly associated with divinity. One of the many interpretations of the Epic could consider Sitchin’s proposal of earth being an experimental project of intelligent aliens. (Sitchin)

A different and more interesting interpretation could take a feminist reading of the *Epic*. In *A Tale of Love and Revenge*, I deliberately chose to see the Epic in the shadow of goddess point of view. Throughout this work, questions are asked and paths are revealed. Questions of women, including myself, are asked of the audience on both personal and global scales.

In a more personal, amorous interpretation, I address Gilgamesh in my love letters. Through speaking directly to the king, I discovered that the relationship between the king and the goddess is shifting constantly and fits into multiple, different settings in
history. Studying and observing these shifts that are also mentioned many times in the love letters contributed to a deep self-realization and therapeutically charged art practice.
Love Letter #1

Dear Colonizer,

Beloved Master,

I know that our relationships, the symbolic interaction between the two entities that we call our worlds, are more complicated than the possibilities offered within this passage. I cannot even imagine how to holistically discuss my points in this letter. There are invisible hands interfering in every aspect of our lives to an uncontrollable instinct, from our public affairs to the most personal aspects of our beings, from the oil cartels over the gulf to our exaggerated sex lives. Please let me make it clear from the very beginning something that you might already know.

The Easterners write in spiral forms. We write in metaphors and indirect analogies. Persian literature is full of authors and poets who appear as gods who create misleading universes. Despite your youthful appearance, you are now old enough to know that gods are known for putting mankind to intense labor. Let’s forget all about the original sin and the biblical genesis that makes humans responsible for all that we’re going through on earth. Here, I’m asking you to glance upon Babylonian
Genesis with me.

I am talking about when the Mesopotamian God, Marduk, defeated the goddess, Tiamat. Then the new reign began as a male god defeated the female goddess of chaos and sweet waters. Tiamat was the mother of second-generation gods, who then were kept captive to serve another group of gods. The privileged gods were the supporters of Marduk in his victory. We read about Tiamat's supporters in a book by Alexander Heidel published in 1951 AD:

"Their menial task proved so burdensome that they asked Marduk for relief. As Marduk listened to the words of the captive gods, he resolved to create man[kind] and to impose on him the service which the defeated deities had to render." (Heidel, Pg. 9)

All that I'm trying to say is that both the gender conflict within the region and the related power struggles are ancient issues. They have altered appearance through history, yet the core issues have stayed the same.
The Epic of Gilgamesh
Through the Ages

_The Epic of Gilgamesh_, the oldest epic from Mesopotamia, has only been known to the modern world for fewer than two centuries. The three different Babylonian versions of the epic vary in origins from the Northern Mesopotamian sites of Assur, Nimrud, and Sultantepe, and the Southern Mesopotamian sites of Uruk and Babylon. The best-preserved tablets that this research is based on are mostly found in the palace library of King Ashurbanupal in Assyria dating to the seventh century BCE. The original eleven clay tablets are written in Standard Akkadian\(^1\) script in cuneiform\(^2\). Cuneiform as a form of Near Eastern writing is used throughout the region as late as the middle of the Persian Empire in 300 BCE. The English and Persian translations of Gilgamesh Epic that are presented here are mostly based on the Standard Version.

The existence of a Sumerian version of the Epic is evident, while the poorly preserved fragments of the Sumerian texts date as late as the Old Babylonian Era. The fragmented tablets in Sumerian show that each tablet in the Standard Babylonian

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\(^1\) The Babylonian and Assyrian fragments of the Epic bear witness to a standardized edition of the poem, which is called the Standard Babylonian epic.

\(^2\) The cuneiform system of writing is used widely in ancient Middle East. The term has Latin and middle French roots meaning "wedged form".
version has its roots in an individual corresponding epic story sometimes as short as 144+ lines. In comparing the older tablets and fragments of the Epic like Old

3 “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven” in a single tablet is considered the basis for tablet VI of the Standard Version. (Kovacs, pg. XXV)
Babylonian, Middle Babylonian and Assyrian versions to the better preserved tablets of Standard Babylonian version, dramatic social changes become apparent. Whether these texts contain some historical information embedded within or merely are of a literary narrative, they show significant alteration from one era to another. For example, the Standard Babylonian Epic seems to have few episodes reappearing from the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh and Agga*. In the Sumerian accounts of the war, Agga is captured and yet the conclusion seems a curious forgiveness and mercy from Gilgamesh that ends up in the release of Agga. The approach of Gilgamesh toward Agga can be seen in tablet V during the battle with Humwawa, the guardian of Cedar Forest. In the description of the fight with Humwawa in Standard Babylonian version, Gilgamesh appears just as merciful as he is been with Agga, while *Enkidu*, his primitive counterpart convinces him to kill the guardian of the forest.

In the Kovaks’ translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tablet V, after capturing Humbaba, it reads:

“...Humbaba begged for his life, saying to Gilgamesh:  
‘you are young yet, Gilgamesh, your mother gave birth to you,  
and you are the offspring of Rimat-Ninsun...  

...  
Gilgamesh, let me go(?)  
I will dwell with you as your servant(?)  
As many trees as you command me I will cut for you,  
I will guard for you myrtle wood ...,  
Wood fine enough for your palace!”  

*Enkidu addressed Gilgamesh saying:*

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4 Description of confrontation between Agga of Kish and Gilgamesh of Uruk. (Cooper, pg 224-40)
“my friend, do not listen to Humbaba,
...
my friend, Humbaba, Guardian of the cedar forest,
grind up, kill, pulverize(?), and ...him!
...”

Tracing the overlapping and expansion of the standard Babylonian version of the Epic and the Sumerian tablets and fragments indicate that the role of the goddess Innana, named Ishtar during Akkadian Era, are misinterpreted recklessly.

According to A Quest for Identity, Iranian Women through History and Pre-History by Shahla lahiji and Mehrangiz Kar, in a comparison of the two versions of the Epic, prove that the role of Ishtar is deliberately misrepresented as a whimsical and deceptive persona.

These dramatic changes in Mesopotamian literature manifest the shift from matriarchal practices to patriarchy. According to Mathilde and Mathias Vaerting’s book, The Dominant Sex, the sex of the deity in ancient mythology is determined by the sex of those in power in the particular society. (Stone, pg 31)

As seen and translated from fragmented tablets of Sumerian era and Old Babylonian times, Inanna’s well-respected role has been defined by reasoning while as for Standard Babylonian texts present Ishtar as unreliable. The goddess Ishtar is punishing her lovers brutally in the Standard Babylonian text. The extreme example

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5 Ishtar, (Akkadian), Sumerian Inanna, in Mesopotamian religion, goddess of war and sexual love. Ishtar is the Akkadian counterpart of the West Semitic goddess Astarte. Inanna, an important goddess in the Sumerian pantheon, came to be identified with Ishtar, but it is uncertain whether Inanna is also of Semitic origin or whether, as is more likely, her similarity to Ishtar caused the two to be identified.
is from the Gilgamesh Epic, when Gilgamesh objects the goddess’ proposal. (Kar & Lahiji)

“...What do I have to give you if I married you?
...may the streets be your home,
...may you be clothed in a garment,
and may any lusting man marry you!
You are an oven who ...ice,
a half door that keeps neither breeze nor blast,
a palace that crushed down valiant warriors,
an elephant who devours its own covering,
...
Where are your bridegrooms that keep forever?
...
you loved Ishullanu, your father’s date gardener
who continually brought you baskets of dates,
and brightened your table daily,
...
you struck him, turning him into a dwarf...”

(Kovacs, pp53)

While according to Kar and Lahiji the fates of Innana’s lovers are very different from the samples presented in Gilgamesh’s response.

The boasts of Gilgamesh toward the goddess and his wrongful accusations bring me to a new stage, which is needed in order to explain how my obsession with Gilgamesh shifted to identification with Ishtar.
Love Letter #2

Dear Lord of Lords,

My Beloved Master,

There are parts of the history where you can claim to be Marduk himself, if we accept that history on earth functions as a subjective delusion. Remember for instance Peter Weyland's TED talk of 2023 A.D. Back then we were impressed to be reminded of the thin line of human advancements in technology: "Fire, Stone tools, Wheel, Gunpowder, Light bulb, Automobiles, Television, Nuclear weapons, Spacecrafts, Internet, Biotech, Nanotech, Fusion, fission, and so on." That was the beginning of robotic era and no one was suspicious of Weyland's corporations' activities in search of Planet X. (Sitchin) Weyland then concluded in saying that "We", (referring to himself as part of the great empire at the time,) are the Gods now (then) and proposed to change the world. (Prometheus) I don't really care enough to call him shameless for assuming the divine quality of eternal life. Regardless though, you know that he was a naive human being looking for eternity. All he should have done was to find Ut-na-pištim, the same way you did, and learn his lesson as a mortal, just like you. (Epic of Gilgamesh)
Gilgamesh Epic as it’s Presented
The Original Plot

In the Epic of Gilgamesh as it appears in the translations of Akkadian and Sumerian tablets, the plot seems to be more or less the same. Although we must take into consideration how much of the Sumerian version has been destroyed or damaged. Gilgamesh was two-thirds divine, for his mother was Ninsun, the patron goddess of multiple cities in Mesopotamia. The misunderstandings around the three-part division of Gilgamesh’s bloodline do not concern this paper. I’ll only name the two explanations advanced by experts in the Gilgamesh Legend. Bahram Beyzai, an Iranian scholar and expert in mythology, believes that this division is merely physical, meaning that two-thirds of Gilgamesh’s body is divine and immortal. Beyzai’s explanation derives from a westernized worldview that limits the ancient world to half-human creatures like centaurs. Other scholars such as Edward Greenstein, a scholar at Bar Ilan university, believe that Gilgamesh’s divine superiority applies to his wisdom and physical strength; his mortality is the only element defining him as human.

Gilgamesh’s name appears in the Sumerian book of Kings, and he’s known as the mighty ruler of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia. The opening of the Epic indicates brutality and oppression of people of Uruk by their king, Gilgamesh. People of Uruk complained and the gods of heaven heard their complaints. Then they implored the lord of Uruk, Anu. Anu was asked to resolve the anxious and disarray that was caused by Gilgamesh’s brutality in Uruk. Anu, father to the goddess Ishtar, orders Aruru to create a
counterpart for *Gilgamesh*. *Aruru*, creates *Gilgamesh’s* perfect counterpart, *Enkidu*. As strong and beautiful, *Enkidu* is to match *Gilgamesh*; he is one-thirds animal and two-thirds human (Mitchel). He was created and lived in nature amongst animals. Until he was “seduced” to civilization of Uruk by a *ḥarimtu* named *Shamhat*.

*Shamhat*, is the only *ḥarimtu* known by name in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. I use the Akkadian term *ḥarimtu*, instead of the words priestess or harlot used in the English translations of the Epic. *Ḥarimtu* is an occupation which we do not have any definition for in our contemporary worldview. These are women in the temple of *Ishtar* or *Eanna* whose bodies are dedicated to the Goddess of Love and War. Their habitat is the *Ishtar* temple within the walls of the city where men attend to fulfill their sexual desires.

After *Shamhat* and *Enkidu* wind up their weeklong lovemaking in the wilderness, they come to the walled city of *Uruk* where *Enkidu* challenges *Gilgamesh*. From the first encounter, two heroes become best friends. They defeat *Humwawa*, the guardian of cedar forest as mentioned earlier. Arrogant and imperious, *Gilgamesh* seems desirable to *Ishtar*. The goddess proposes to him by saying,

```quote
“come along *Gilgamesh*, be you my husband,
to me grant your lusciousness. (fruit)
be you my husband, and I will be your wife.
I will have harnessed for you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold,
With wheels of gold and ‘horns’ of electrum (?)...”
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Reacting to *Gilgamesh’s* offensive attitude, *Ishtar* borrows the Bull of Heaven from her father, *Anu*, to kill *Gilgamesh*. Through out the encounter between the *Bull of

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6 Eanna or Ishtar temples are the same location. This temple is mentioned as *Eanna* in some texts meaning the temple of *Anu*.
Heavens and the two heroes, Enkidu kills the Bull that results in the vengeance of all the gods for the two heroes.
Empathizing with a Goddess  
Finding the Inanna/Ishtar Within

Reading the *Epic of Gilgamesh* initially I have sympathized with Gilgamesh throughout his life journey. The loss of his beloved friend and his fear of death made me think that the Epic was a general reflection of life and Gilgamesh was a mirror for every human being. Through reading analytical texts about the Epic, I realized alternative readings of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu are possible. One alternative reading of the relationship between the two heroes is first addressed in the late 1920s by Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen; he argues that Gilgamesh’s oppressive behavior before the arrival of Enkidu and the phallic representation of Enkidu in Gilgamesh’s dreams (as an axe) make the sexual nature of their relationship obvious. (Ackerman, pg 47)

Considering the sexual element of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, I started to question Gilgamesh’s disrespectful behavior towards the goddess once again. Rereading the passage on a more personal level, I realized the insult is not merely a sign of power struggle between genders manifesting a shift between matriarchy and patriarchy. The more personal reading of the epic triggered an empathizing approach with the goddess in me. In her book, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, Tikva Frymer-Kensky mentions that divinely oriented epics are not composed in order to set role models for the ordinary women. However, they are not pure representations of female self-perception, either. (Freymer, pg14)

In a more historical approach to the text, Frymer-Kensky’s reading could be perfectly accurate. However, I approached the Epic and its characters in an obsessive...
personal level. I felt for Ishtar’s suffering and rage when she took her complaint to her parents Anu and Antum.

“…in a fury she went up to the heavens, going to Anu, her father, and crying, going to Antum, her mother, and weeping: “Father, Gilgamesh has insulted me over and over, Gilgamesh has recounted despicable deed about me, Despicable deeds and curses!”

... father, give me the Bull of Heaven so he can kill Gilgamesh in his dwelling.”

As the story progresses from this passage, it seems that it is not Gilgamesh who is the target of the goddess’ rage. Whether Enkidu’s influence on Gilgamesh is causing his dishonorable behavior, or the nature of the relationship between the two men is causing Ishtar her vengeful behavior, this section of the Epic has to do with Enkidu as much as it deals with Gilgamesh. While asking a lot of questions regarding the intentions behind either action, I repeatedly came back to one main question: how would heterosexual women respond to betrayal? The question of betrayal, which undertone in the Epic of Gilgamesh, is a very specific one by nature. The issue of betrayal in a condition where the sexual orientations are in question is a particularly tough one. In a hetero-normative approach to the situation, this is a matter different from two women competing over one man, which is not an unfamiliar issue particularly to Iranian women. For centuries having multiple wives has been practiced all over Middle East. In the situation where competition between two women is neither a possibility nor a choice, one has to empathize with both parties. However, Ishtar is obviously brutalized and dishonored by Gilgamesh. At this point, my obsession to empathize with Ishtar escalated to a schizophrenic stage.
In a love letter to Gilgamesh, I as Ishtar once wrote “both Ishtar and I come from schizophrenic backgrounds”. By which, I meant to refer to the history of Greater Iran. Throughout centuries, Iranians have developed skills to cope with hard social circumstances: most recent isolating sanctions imposed on Iranian society by western governments is only an example of what caused this schizophrenia. The condition referred has a very long-term history in Iran. By constantly being occupied, overthrown as a sovereign state or simply ruled by foreign powers, a social skill is developed among Iranians that still exists today. Sometimes considered a sign of respect, it is referred to as Ta’rof. This cultural characteristic developed to guarantee citizens safety against strangers, was highlighted in multiple forms in the past few decades, which makes Iranian interactions particularly difficult. For centuries, Iranians were living in direct or indirect dominance of foreign powers. This had included spy and intelligence activities. As a result ordinary people learned to live under the shadows of distrust and insecurity. In the next section, I would sufficiently summarize the consistent duality in Ishtar’s character by claiming its schizophrenic background.

7 By using the term schizophrenia, I am trying to emphasize on dual condition of these two characters. Fictional (as Ishtar) or non-fictional (as myself) these two claim the duality as a broader condition not only in personal level but in a communal stage. They might not be personally diagnosed with the mental disorder, however their societies are both unhealthy and disordered.
Dear Master,

Beloved Colonizer,

I’d hate for you to think that I’m living my life in peace, while you are muted. On the contrary, believing that I caused this silence, thick, heavy and as unbearable as it is between us, is killing me day after day. So believe me when I say that immortality is a curse. To me, the eager behavior toward rejuvenating within your western nations is the most ridiculous. This is another reason for me to believe that Ut-na-pištim took you for a fool. Seeing the suffering of humankind, I can’t help but consider eternal life on earth as a curse. You should be happy that the poor serpent ate the rejuvenating plant that Ut-na-pištim gave you. (Epic of Gilgamesh)

It might not be true that we live in parallel universes, but we are not experiencing the same things either. Anyway, as I go through this burden that I unconsciously took part of, I yearn for your presence. Living life as a goddess, taught me to be just. I was bound to be just for there are pre-established rules to follow.
My earthly life experience was different though. I was not part of your empire, and I looked for signs to find my way into it from the beginning.

On earth, I was not a goddess anymore. I was fresh out of my cocoon with extremely sensitive skin and unprotected, fragile eyelids. There were discovery rituals (rite of passage) for everything here provided by the same invisible hands that are controlling our relationships and interactions now.

Through one of these rituals I still remember:

I was feeling the heat and sweat within the space as well as in my trembling virgin body. Even sometimes I gave up to the unbearable vibration and started crying quietly. I used to mistake the feeling of trembling and vibration for you. Not to forget that I mistaken you as friendly and on my side back then. In the heydays of these friendly sensations I used to ask you for favors, such as crying inside to "free me and let me go" or "hold me and calm me down." I was that naive, you see. I was talking to you as if the suffering Christ was talking to his father through Holy Spirit.

They used to whisper the verses (hex). The tents were dark and stuffy made out of black goat wool. I didn't need to enter one to sense the strong scent of animals mixed with the smell of the male sweat.

I was now one of the women, those with chaos in between their legs who were convinced to be insane. We were all one massive body,
and we made shaping a grid impossible. We danced and moved in an unpredictable manner.

You were amongst the actual performers of the ceremony. Those simple ordinaries had wild snake between their legs. They were holding the snakes in a protective manner and pretending that they are cocoons, while spreading around a false hope for colorful flying entities called butterflies.
My Version of the Epic
A Tale of Love and Revenge

[Within the following text, first person singular pronouns shift and shared between the author and the Goddess]

When my empathy with Ishtar turned into a schizophrenic obsession, a video performance was created. *A Tale of Love and Revenge* is a performance for camera in which I continued my existence within the powerful immortal, Goddess Ishtar. Ishtar in my story gives up her identity as a goddess for her love of Gilgamesh.

The focus of this work is on the missing fragments lost in history. Through highlighting the mistranslation of the original tablets, I am back to reclaim my power. Considering the description of Professor Greenstein that Gilgamesh’s human one-third makes him mortal, I gave up all aspect of divinity but my immortality. I remained immortal, because the superior gods didn’t want to let go of me, for without Innana/Ishtar there will be no love in the world. Keeping in mind that gods decided to let me maintain my immortality, I am pretending to be one of the mortal women on earth. It breaks my heart to remember that my immortality annoyed Gilgamesh. I did not mean to hurt him. In the contrary, I meant to save and help *Gilgamesh*. And I used all my power to do so. As goddess *Ishtar*, I gave up my eternal life in the heavens to be with him. Yet this was only the beginning of my fable-like life on earth. Living as a mortal on this dusty planet forced me to change.

Before I came here though I have to admit that in a brief phase of decision-making I was blinded with love. Then I was a goddess and Gilgamesh was partially one of us.
Decision-making was an emotionally charged moment. More like when a mortal mother is sending a seven-year-old to school or realizes for the first time that she cannot protect her baby forever. At some point I realized that if I wanted the world to see the goddess’ potential, I had to release and lighten. I was getting too attached, too emotional and too controlling to let her go. Perhaps, I was suffering from a complex form of narcissism that causes one to worship a self-image. The part-divine ruler of Uruk, Gilgamesh, was exactly diagnosed exactly with this.

Through my love letters to Gilgamesh while manifesting my love for him I have tried to remind myself of our real history, a divine and forgotten history of the underdogs. Marginalized, beaten and misunderstood as we are, I would like to reclaim the power and potential that we\textsuperscript{8} preserve within.

\textsuperscript{8} all Plural first person references in this section could refer to a number of signifiers including women, colonized nations or captive gods of Mesopotamia.
The Last Love Letter

Dear Gilgamesh,

There are all these different ways that I picture you for voyeuristic purposes. These images are not coming to my mind for any purpose of worship or not even with any feelings of admiration anymore. Looking at the representations, I often wonder for which part of you I fell in love? Was it your masculinity? But I don’t even know what that means. Is masculinity defined by your size, being ten feet taller than me? Does the phallic wild snake between your legs define it? Is there a link between mask and masculinity? If not, why are you emphasizing on the curtains so much? Just look at the city that you are dictating over. It is filled with walls, barriers and veils. You make me wonder if you are one of the deceiving incapable ordinaries. Are you?

I still can hear your voice, when you describe the silkworm hanging between your legs. You said that it would start glowing if you keep playing with it and that’s why you call it glowworm. It didn’t take me that long to find out that the whole thing was a scheme. Yes, it was a lie after all and you were a liar.

You know, I’m a goddess anyway, accountable to follow the law. Ambiguity leads to suspicion. I can’t help it. Relationship between ambiguity and suspicion is a law, so despite our powerful entity of seduction we can’t overcome this reality. My seduction took a curious
form called Art when I tried to reduce or rather alter its catastrophic nature.

You have betrayed me as if my sexual appeal and seductive beauty didn’t mean anything anymore. I was aging and there were younger and prettier alternatives for you. I was outraged to hear everyone talking about the curse. I started walking around to find your home, the home they were talking about where you have welcomed your new bride, Enkidu. I was looking for a way and I found a window. I found a window to it, to your miserable “love” life. That was a moment of clarity. Epiphany, brought the gift of silence. I didn’t want you anymore. It was the last image of you in my head. I made my decision as a goddess smiling.
Works Cited


Prometheus. Dir. Ridley Scott. Film. 2012


**Bibliography**


