

# Discrimination and condensation of sacred categories : the fable in Early Mesopotamian literature

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# I

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## DISCRIMINATION AND CONDENSATION OF SACRED CATEGORIES: THE FABLE IN EARLY MESOPOTAMIAN LITERATURE \*

### *Introduction*

Situated between two regions with well attested fable traditions and credited with high literate cultures long predating either one, the ancient Near East is often sought or decried as one possible source for Mediterranean and Indian fables. As a link in the transmission of Greco-Latin fables, Babrius, resident in Syria, provides a ready medium for such influences on the classical tradition. The Near East is a geographical center and crossroad from an Indo-European point of view. But the motif and tale-type indices indicate that we may profitably cast our net far more widely. How do we avoid the ensuing entanglement of diffusionistic aetiologies? The place of fables within their presumably native symbolic systems is an important backdrop for evaluating such questions.

\* Technical abbreviations in this work may be found in standard Assyriological reference works such as *The Assyrian Dictionary*, University of Chicago (Chicago 1956-). RC = *Rhetoric Collection*—see n. 4, p. 3.

One of the best attested and oldest fable traditions is found among the school texts of Old Babylonian (i.e., sometime during the first half of the second millennium B.C.E.) Mesopotamia. These fables and related forms of discourse were part of the Old Babylonian school curricula for teaching the learned Sumerian language to students coming from a Semitic vernacular context. To these same schools we owe the majority of the extant Sumerian literature. While important questions remain—as to 1) what oral and written traditions fed the schools; 2) how and to what degree the schools modified the texts from these traditions; 3) what new texts were composed in the schools; and 4) what was the sociological profile of the Old Babylonian learned and literate elite—we assume that the unities of time, place and language allow us to speak of the symbolic systems in the written remains of Old Babylonian Sumerian speech communities. Major aspects of these systems were probably applicable to broader realms of ancient Mesopotamian society.

This tentative endeavor is hobbled by the obvious lack of native informants, the poorly attested and even more poorly understood native conceptions of genre, the lack of performance contexts, and abiding ambiguities of the Sumerian language and writing system. We must nonetheless do our best to account for the evidence, such as it is, recognizing that the examples are not as numerous or as convincing as we might desire. However, once having defined the corpus from which our evidence is drawn we may discuss the structures and processes which relate at least some of the fable material to other Sumerian texts.

### *Fables and Fragments*

Knowledge of the Sumerian fable materials is due primarily to the pioneering work of E. I. Gordon. These

fables are found within collections of what he called "Sumerian proverbs". He published text editions of Collections One and Two, Four and Five.<sup>1</sup> In addition, he published two synthetic studies of these collections—the first a general work, the second devoted to animals as described in these collections.<sup>2</sup> More recently, B. Alster has published treatments of Collections Seven and Twenty-four.<sup>3</sup> All six of these collections, as well as the nineteen remaining collections are now being edited by myself under the title of *Sumerian Rhetoric Collections*.<sup>4</sup>

No known Sumerian term corresponds to 'fable'. Using the working definition "short narrative concerning personified plants, animals or inanimate objects", those Sumerian tales fitting this category are not made distinct in terms of contexts or narrative devices from short narratives concerning human beings exclusively. For example, the Sumerian term a-da-man-du<sub>II</sub>-ga "disputation" applies equally well to verbal duels between school students or graduates, as to disputations between pairs of animals, plants or inanimates set in mythic narrative frames.<sup>5</sup> The lack of a specific term does not necessarily imply the lack of a native genre. But

<sup>1</sup> *Sumerian Proverbs* (University Museum: Philadelphia 1959); "Sumerian Proverbs: Collection Four", in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 77 (1957), 67-79; "Sumerian Proverbs: Collection Five", in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12 (1958), 1-21; 43-75.

<sup>2</sup> "A New Look at the Wisdom of Sumer and Akkad", in *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 17 (1960), 47-123; "Animals as Represented in the Sumerian Proverbs: A Preliminary Study", in *Drevnij Mir*, Festschrift V. V. Struve (Moscow 1962), 226-249.

<sup>3</sup> "Sumerian Proverb Collection Seven", in *Revue d'assyriologie* 72 (1978), 97-112; "Sumerian Proverb Collection XXIV", in *Assyriological Miscellanies* I (1980), 33-50.

<sup>4</sup> *The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1984-). Part I contains a monographic reinterpretation of the collections as educational texts of far broader contents than proverbs. Part II contains text editions of the collections, and will be issued in fascicles.

<sup>5</sup> See E. I. GORDON, in *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 17 (1960), 144-147.



further analysis requires an outline of the structures of the compositions in which the fables and related forms are found.

The *Sumerian Rhetoric Collections* contain about 300 different entries mentioning one or more animals. Lacking clearly personified plants or inanimates in these collections, the discussion will be limited to animals. Many of these entries are found in more than one collection, as well as in school tablets from Ur and elsewhere which cannot be assigned to specific collections.

About one-half of all the entries originally in the twenty-three extant collections from the ancient city Nippur (Collections Twenty-three and Twenty-four are of unknown provenience) are preserved and at least partially intelligible. However, the entries mentioning animals are not randomly distributed through the collections, so we are not entitled to extrapolate directly from these statistics. About one-half of the animal entries are found in rather well preserved collections devoted exclusively to animals—Collections Five and Eight. Collection Twenty is largely devoted to animals and adds twenty-eight more animal entries. The remaining animal entries tend to be clustered within larger collections, especially Collections One, Two, Three and Six. Approximately 150 school tablets from ancient Ur with exercises of a nature apparently similar to the predominantly Nippur Rhetoric Collections have also been published.<sup>6</sup> The Ur tablets are mostly with single entries. Many of these entries duplicate entries known from Nippur.<sup>7</sup> About 61 of these entries refer to animals.

<sup>6</sup> C. J. GADD and S. N. KRAMER, *Ur Excavations. Texts VI: Literary and Religious Texts* (Trustees of the British Museum and the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania: London 1966). More are to be published in A. SHAFFER, *Ur Excavations. Texts, Part VI 3*.

<sup>7</sup> See the list in *The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections, Part I, Table 3*.

Nippur tablets of the same type as those making up the collections, but not assignable to any collections are 1) in Istanbul, Museum of the Ancient Orient: Ni 4166 (*IS ET* 2, 113) rev. I' 4'-10'; rev. II' 7'-8'; 2) in Philadelphia, University Museum (both unpublished): CBS 6565 obv. 5'-7'; CBS 3922 obv. II 1-6; 3) in Chicago, Oriental Institute (all unpublished): A30155=3N-T130; A33490=3N-T920c obv. 1-2 (perhaps *RC* 6); A33588=3N-T924e rev. 1; 4) in Baghdad, Iraq Museum (both unpublished): IM 58695=3N-T772 1-2; IM?=3N-T429 obv.? 1-2. Additionally, there are two unpublished tablets in the Yale Babylonian Collection and one unpublished tablet in the Oriental Institute, Chicago, all of unknown provenience.

Many of these entries, especially those from Ur, but also from Nippur and unknown proveniences, are on one-entry tablets. Such entries, of course, have no explicit contexts. The entries known from multiple entry tablets are contextualized in accordance with the didactic demands of the Mesopotamian educational procedures. The primary organizing factor is the key word, usually the initial word.<sup>8</sup> They are not organized according to genre, origin, meaning or function of entry. Nor are there any explicit indications through rubrics, labels, etc., which assist in interpreting the entries. A very few entries are found in contexts other than the *Rhetoric Collections*.<sup>9</sup> However, these contexts only occasionally help to clarify how the entries may have been used in the *Rhetoric Collection* contexts. Thus, we must rely on internal criteria, models of the educational context and comparative material from other cultures in order to interpret the entries.

<sup>8</sup> For a general discussion see part I of *The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

A given text may be considered a fable on the basis of subject matter and narratological devices.<sup>10</sup> It must concern personified animals (or, where they exist in other contexts, plants, and possibly objects that are normally inanimate). It must tell a story. We lack native criteria for what constitutes a story, or even specific recognition of any texts as stories. Therefore, I rely on my native competence for recognizing stories, with all the dangers attendant to such an approach. A characteristic example is one variant of *RC* 5.55:

When the lion caught the weak goat (the goat said,) "Free me and I will give you my companion, the ewe, on returning (to the fold)." "If I release you, tell me your name," (said the lion). The goat answered the lion, "You do not know my name? My name is 'I will make you wise.'" When the lion came to the fold he said, "I have released you!" She answered from the far side of the fence, "You became wise in exchange for the various sheep which do not live here!"

An unknown narrator establishes the setting in conformity with expected events. Lions prey on goats. The goat (probably a she-goat) delays the inevitable by promising a fatter, juicier ewe. A clever lion would have been reluctant to accept the offer, because a goat that would betray her companion is also likely to renege on a promise. Nonetheless, the lion accepts the offer, but demands a pledge in return for the delay and the goat's freedom—the name of the goat. The goat is a better semiotician than the lion and answers with a name that both fulfills the lion's desired category of information (personal name) and the narrator's foreshadowing of the plot's conclusion. She gives the name "I will make you wise."

<sup>10</sup> Examples are *RC* 2.76(69), 81(76), 87(82), 107(101), 113(107); 5.36, 51, 55, 57?, 58?, 69, 71, 72, 83, 90, 102, 103, 104, 116; 12.E.3; 20.A.10, 13, 22, 24, 25, B.2; *UET* 6/2, 226; 238; 308=UM 29-13-512 rev.; 315 obv. 1-4; perhaps 336:5-9; and YBC 7301. Numbers in parentheses indicate numeration according to editions published before *The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections*.

At this point, either the lion and goat agree to meet at the fold at a later time, or the lion expects the goat to go to the fold and bring back the ewe. In either case, the goat is released and it runs to the safety of the fold. The lion arrives there, either as agreed or out of impatience. He reminds the goat that he fulfilled his part of the bargain and expects the goat to reciprocate or pay the debt herself. The goat informs the lion that there are no sheep in the fold and that the lion will have to be satisfied with being made wise, both of this fact and of his foolishness, rather than with "I will make you wise" herself.

Three conversions occur in this story. The state of "lion as unmediated danger to goat" becomes "goat protected from lion by fold." The lion's conceptual category of "I will make you wise" as personal name becomes the goat's category of promise. It is also possible that the name was to be pronounced (in Sumerian) in an ambiguous manner, such that it could also mean "You will make me wise." In such a case, the lion may have been aware of the ambiguity between personal name and promise, but chose to understand the promise in a self-flattering way—that the lion would make the goat wise. Only when the lion finds he must dine on wisdom, not "you", does he realize the intended rendering "I will make you wise." Note that this ambiguity is only in the oral text. The written text grammar allows only a second person patient. Theoretically, both first and second person agents are possible according to the written text, yielding also "You will make yourself wise."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the story indicates differing initial and final statuses for the main *personae*, as well as the processes and relationships which bring about the conversions. The

<sup>11</sup> Ambiguous statements are also key narrative devices in the Sumerian heroic tale "Lugalbanda and Enmerkar". See my "Notes on 'Lugalbanda and Enmerkar'", in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983), 103-109.



remaining approximately 270 among the 300 animal entries lack at least one of these key elements. Forty-one entries indicate situations for animals and contain animal speeches, but there is no change in status resulting from the speeches.<sup>12</sup>

*UET* 6/2, 216 Fox, having urinated into the Tigris River, (said,) "I am raising up a carp-flood."

It would be easy enough to weave a story around this boast.<sup>13</sup> Yet *this* entry does not indicate the result of the fox's boast and is not a story.

Forty-three entries are descriptions of animals in specific situations further developed by indication of an action or speech.<sup>14</sup> Five more such entries are in the first or second person.<sup>15</sup>

*RC* 3.154 The she-goat spoke in the manner of an old woman but acted in the manner of a (sexually) unclean woman.

There is no indication of how or if the contrast led to a change in status. A further seventeen entries do not even go so far as to qualify the initial (or final) status specified for the animal.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *RC* 2.65(61a), 68(64), 69(65), 71(66), 72(67), 100(95); 3.70; 5.38, 39, 42, 50, 61, 66, 73, 77, 78, 79, 85, 106, 119, 123; 8.2; 14.45; 20.A.3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21; *UET* 6/2, 210, 216, 242, 285; YBC 7301.

<sup>13</sup> Haim SCHWARZBAUM, in *The Mishlê Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah-Nakdan*, Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research (Kiron 1979), 371 and 452 n. 9, has pointed out numerous possible parallels to this entry.

<sup>14</sup> *RC* 2.64(61), 73(68), 75(70), 78(73), 79(74), 118(112); 3.80, 112=8.16; 3.117, 145, 154; 4.49; 5.31, 35, 43, 46, 49, 56, 60, 62, 63; 5."c"; 84, 88, 107, 108, 114, 117, 118, 124; three entries in *RC* 6, one duplicating 7.30; 7.34(33); 8.11, 17; 20.A.15; Ni 4166 (*ISSET* 2, 13) rev. II' 7'-8'; 3N-T429 obv.? 1-2; *UET* 6/2, 227, 228, 235, 246, 247.

<sup>15</sup> *RC* 5.44; two entries in *RC* 6, including one duplicating 11.18'; 10.12=19.A.1'; 14.17.

<sup>16</sup> *RC* 2.7(?), 63(60); 5.5, 29, 65, 80, 109, 110, 112, 115, 122; one entry in *RC* 6 duplicating 7.33(32); 20.A.6; A 33490=3N-T920c obv. 1-2; IM 58695=3N-T772 1-2; A w/n (Oriental Institute, Chicago) rev. III' 25'-29'(?); YBC 7348.

RC 5.5 The wild ox, he/you circle(s) among the rushes.

On the other hand, there are no entries which can be clearly identified as quotations from animal speeches without any identifying context.

Before discussing the significance of these entries, as well as most of the others among the animal entries, several other categories of entries should be mentioned. Those entries mentioning animals as food or commodities, having no personified qualities, are not on this list.<sup>17</sup> Forty-five entries mention animals within explicit metaphors and are unlikely to be fragments of fables. However, they may be allusions to fables.<sup>18</sup>

A large number of entries (about seventy) may be understood as references to specific situations and animals, such as allusions to specific fables, or as generalizations about types of animals and situations in which they find themselves. These ambiguities are apparent in one of the simpler examples:

RC 1.67(65)=2.124(118) City without dog—fox is overseer.

The relationship between cities (and temples, which are symbolic of urban centers) and dogs is established among the Mesopotamian hymns and laments. The departure from cities of the ubiquitous dogs indicates a total abandonment.<sup>19</sup> There is also a fable concerning foxes, dogs and a city, RC 2.74(69):

<sup>17</sup> Such as RC 3.1, 23, 113; 7.32(31).

<sup>18</sup> RC 1.18, 79(77); 2.86(81), 94(89), 114(108); 3.33=7.100, 3.45=7.46; 3.54, 82=7.13; 3.96=5.93; 3.115, 116, 135, 161, 183=7.92; 4.14, 56; 5.2, 4, 13, 34, 37, 74, 92, 98, 99, 100, 101, 111, 120; two entries in RC 6; 8.3, 4, 12, 18; 9.8=10.9; 13.5; 14.21; 15.C.9, E.15; 20.A.2, 5, 7, B.3. For a general survey of animal imagery see W. HEIMPEL, *Tierbilder in der sumerischen Literatur*, Pontifical Biblical Institute (Rome 1968).

<sup>19</sup> References are in J. KRECHER, *Sumerische Kultlyrik* (Wiesbaden 1966), 141-144.



Fox said to his wife, "Come", let us crush the city Uruk like a leek with our teeth and wear the city Kulaba on our feet like a sandal." When they were not even 360 meters from the city, dogs began howling within the city. "Geme-Tummal, Geme-Tummal, you ought to go home! Evils howl within the city!"<sup>20</sup>

Here the fox wishes to perform a dominant role, such as overseer. However, the city is not without dogs. The change in status is a persuasion to a new attitude.

There is no extant Mesopotamian fable in which the fox does become overseer. The relationship predicated in *RC* 1.67, whether actualized or not, is thus found elsewhere in the literature. But neither linguistic nor contextual clues indicate whether, in *this* entry, reference is made to a city/dog/fox/overseer, a certain city etc., cities etc. in general or *par excellence*, or some combination of these qualities of specificity. Indeed, perhaps the answer is "all of the above."

There is a small group of longer entries in the *Rhetoric Collections* which contain independent sections, usually of a one sentence length. For example:

*RC* 3.10 The shepherd—his penis; the gardener—the crown of his (tree); the irresponsible heir who has not supported a wife and has not supported a child, his nose has not borne a leash.

*RC* 1.153 He who has not supported a wife and has not supported a child, his nose has not borne a leash.

<sup>20</sup> Uruk and Kulaba are twin cities. Geme-Tummal is the name of the vixen, meaning "slave girl of the Tummal," a cult building of the goddess Ninlil in the city Nippur. The speaker of the final lines is ambiguous. I assume the cowardly fox wishes to send home his wife so she does not witness his failure to confront the dogs. Without any witness, he will be able to further boast about his feats. It is more likely that fox, rather than the dogs, would address his wife by name.

The first millennium omen text *Shumma Izbu* XXIII 29'-30': "If dogs howl in the street—destruction; an enemy will attack the city. If dogs howl at the sky—destruction; an enemy will attack the city" should be interpreted within the symbolic system of this fable.

Another example is *RC* 3.15, composed of four sentences which develop the theme of care and moderation. The entire text is found in manuscripts C and G:<sup>21</sup>

- 1) Eating a little is not the end of a man.
- 2) Begging kills.
- 3) Eating a little is living well.
- 4) Keep moving along, but keep a firm footing.

However, manuscript A has only sentences 2, 3 and 4; D, M and Q have 1, 3 and 4; P has 1 and 3; and A w/n has only 3. Further internal evidence for the existence of independently standing fragments of entries are the dividing lines which mark off portions of an entry. In manuscript G of *RC* 3.15 the line on the tablet containing sentence 3, the same sentence that appears alone in A w/n, is marked off from the rest of the text by such lines.

The same phenomenon is found for at least one fable. Thus, one manuscript of *RC* 2.74(69), "The Fox and His Wife," contains only the second, concluding speech by the fox to his wife: "Geme-Tummal, Geme-Tummal, you ought to go home! Evils howl within the city!" Other possible examples of this phenomenon are in *RC* 2.87(82), 2.113(107) and 5.51. However, the manuscripts are all too poorly preserved to determine exactly what the shortened text was. It is never clear why one manuscript contains an excerpt and another manuscript has the longer text. The excerpts do not seem to be morals although, in the cases of *RC* 1.153 and 3.15, the sententious excerpts may have been popular maxims.

The major value of these examples is to establish precedents for considering some of the shorter entries as fragments of fables. Others may be direct allusions to

<sup>21</sup> The manuscript sigla refer to the edition in *The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections* II/3. The sentences are not numbered in the original text.

various narratives. Thus, the consideration of fables within broader symbolic systems should take into account those shorter, non-narrative entries which may have been parts of fables.<sup>22</sup>

*Myths, Fables and Related Discourse*

In a given society relationships among symbols are periodically recrystallized. Those symbolic narratives describing the origins of current social and natural relations which also perform this function are myths. These social processes in conjunction with natural events will lead to eventual recrystallizations of symbols and their relationships. Analysis of the texts generated under mythic paradigms requires assumptions about the scope of the social contexts in which they occur and about the distance between a given text with context and the previous and subsequent recrystallizations. None of this information is self-evident from ancient Mesopotamian texts. Initial attempts at placing different texts within the same symbolic systems should be subsequently revised based on these considerations.

Most mythic symbolic systems probably contain a very large number of types of symbolic relationships in common. Therefore, it would be very difficult to attribute the symbols of a given text to a given myth. When trying to relate early Mesopotamian fables to their contemporary myths, most of the fables contain little that is obviously generated by a mythic pattern beyond that which is very general and obvious even to the modern Occidental reader.

<sup>22</sup> Entries too fragmentary to schematize include *RC* 1.127'(128'), 166; 2.59(58), 70(65a); 4.41; 5.8-11, 16-20, 25, 33, 47, 48, 52, 53, 86, 89, 105, 113; seven entries in *RC* 6; 8.6; 15.E.12, G.6-7; 19.D.1'-5'; 22.1, 3, 4?; 24.2'; CBS 3922 obv. II' 1-6; CBS 6565 obv. 5'-7'; Ni 4166 (*ISCT* 2, 113) rev. I' 4'-10'.

Rather than discussing whether or not the social contexts which produced or transmitted the fables, that is, the Old Babylonian schools, also produced or transmitted myths, I will assume that those Old Babylonian Sumerian texts commonly called myths are indeed the texts of myths. At the very least they are symbolic narratives describing the origins of *some* state of affairs.

Five Sumerian texts—three mythic and two fabulaic—show close relations in terms of characterizations and narrative. The two fabulaic texts are so-called because they concern a personified fox and may be fragments of fables not now extant. They may be provisionally translated as:

*RC* 2.72(67) Fox urinated into the sea. "The whole of the sea is my urine", (he said).

*UET* 6/2, 216 Fox, having urinated into the Tigris (said,) "I am raising up a carp-flood!"

The three mythic texts are "Enki and the World Order";<sup>23</sup> "Enki and Ninhursag";<sup>24</sup> and "Enlil and Ninlil".<sup>25</sup>

Four of these texts concern a character which has attributes of a trickster—the fox in the fox entries and perhaps

<sup>23</sup> Translation in S. N. KRAMER and I. BERNHARDT, "Enki und die Weltordnung," in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena*, Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe IX 1/2 (1959/60), 231-256; and S. N. KRAMER, *The Sumerians* (Chicago and London 1963), 171-183.

<sup>24</sup> S. N. KRAMER, *Enki and Ninhursag. A Sumerian "Paradise" Myth*, Bulletin of the American Oriental Society, Supplementary Studies 1 (New Haven 1945); or same translation in J. B. PRITCHARD (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* 3 (Princeton 1969), 37-41. Two more recent studies emphasizing somewhat different aspects of the text and often differing from the interpretation offered here are Y. ROSENGARTEN, *Trois aspects de la pensée religieuse sumérienne* (Paris 1971), 7-38; and B. ALSTER, "Enki and Ninhursag", in *Ugarit-Forschungen* 10 (1978), 15-27. The former is inspired by M. ELIADE, the latter by E. LEACH.

<sup>25</sup> H. BEHRENS, *Enlil und Ninlil: Ein sumerischer Mythos aus Nippur* (Rome 1978); J. COOPER, rev. of H. BEHRENS, in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 32 (1980), 175-188.



“Enki and Ninhursag”; and Enlil in “Enlil and Ninlil”. All of the texts are systematically woven into a net of related categories—divinity, humanity and animality; water, semen and urine; cosmic creativity, sexuality and pollution.

“Enki and the World Order” opens with a poorly preserved section, followed by praise of Enki’s powers. He is given the power to create an orderly cosmos and assign functions to other deities within that cosmos. Enki’s creative power is usually described as a verbal power—he “names” or “decrees”. Sometimes he seems to exercise his power manually—he “puts” or “builds”. But his creation of the Tigris River is a primarily sexual act (lines 250-252):

He stood up proudly like a rampant bull,  
He lifts the penis, ejaculates,  
Filled the Tigris with sparkling water.

The river bed itself is subsequently described as a “wild cow”. This passage is followed by mention of the agricultural bounty made possible by irrigation waters from the river. The remainder of the texts concerns other creative acts, assignments to deities and a dispute over the assignments.

Enki’s divinity is manifested through his super-human feat of creating the known world, an aspect of the quintessential divine power of destroying, creating and preserving the natural and cultural order. But, as is typical of Mesopotamian texts from the late third millennium on, the deity is described in primarily anthropomorphic terms. His creation of the Tigris in the form of an animal is that much the more striking in the context of this myth. Unlike the description of his creation of the domestic bovine, ovine and caprid herds (lines 53-55)—by “coming out to” the ewe, mother cow and she-goat—there is no self-evident or appropriate rationale for the animalistic creation of the

Tigris. This process will become clearer in the context of the other four texts.

The metaphorical description of Enki creating the Tigris at one and the same time delineates and blurs the categories of water and semen; animal, human and deity. The writing system is similarly ambiguous. The cuneiform script uses the same sign to write both water and semen—A. This sign may be read as “a” or “e” for both terms. In this passage the water of the Tigris is equated with Enki’s semen, in his capacity as bull.

There is no reference to urine in this passage. Nor are there any implications of pollution at the time of this creative, cosmogenetic act. This relatively simple myth also lacks characterization of Enki as a trickster. However, he does play the typical trickster’s role of mediator at the end of the text. One deity, Inanna, complains of not having been allotted her fair share of powers by Enki. Enki calms her by pointing out that she, in fact, has all aspects of divine power.

“Enki and Ninhursag” describes a series of transitions in the natural and cultural order of the land Dilmun.<sup>26</sup> The opening lines of the text distance the story from central Mesopotamia by calling Dilmun a sacred place, a place, as we know from other texts, toward the edge of the known world. In the initial state much of the subsequent natural and cultural order does not obtain. Neither the lion nor the wolf is a beast of prey (lines 15-16); old age is not indica-

<sup>26</sup> From at least the end of the third millennium onward the geographical Dilmun is equivalent to modern Bahrein in the Persian Gulf, together with some of the mainland, perhaps. It was toward the southeastern edge of the world within the southern Mesopotamians’ ken. However, in myths one must also consider the separation between the sacred and profane planes as a measurement of distance. This myth gives no clues as to the location of Dilmun within the symbolic geography of southern Mesopotamian society, other than indicating that Dilmun is a sacred or holy place. The *Gilgamesh* Epic is of primary importance in clarifying this symbolic relationship.



tive of social status (lines 24-25); purification rites are lacking (line 26); etc. Enki gives order to Dilmun in an abbreviated version of his actions in "Enki and the World Order." He creates a microcosm of the world he created in the first myth. As part of the process (lines 67-70):

His penis digs an irrigation ditch.

His penis sloshes water among the reeds.<sup>27</sup>

His penis even lifts from the knee the hem of the great cloak.<sup>28</sup>

He said, "No one may walk in the marsh."

Immediately after establishing the marsh as a discreet geographical unit and his own territory, he copulates with Ninhursag (lines 74-76).<sup>29</sup> Time is now greatly compressed and her pregnancy lasts only nine days (lines 77-78). Their daughter thus born, Ninmu, wanders into the marsh and Enki copulates with her, as with the ensuing granddaughter, Ninkurra. Both cases take place amidst a raincloud, after moving up or down stream, and with Enki wearing a large garment, perhaps a cloak (lines 79-127). Finally, Ninhursag establishes rules allowing for copulation and teaches them to Enki's and her great granddaughter, Uttu (lines 128-152?).

With lines 153-156 the story becomes a modified version of Enki's initial encounter with Ninhursag:

For a second time, while he (a gardener) was filling with water,

The ditch is filled with water,

The dike is filled with water,

The dry, uncultivated place is filled with water.

<sup>27</sup> The verb translated "to slosh" (*gir<sub>5</sub>-gir<sub>5</sub>* or *gigri*) refers to both submersion (in water) and to slipping in and out of narrow spaces. Aquatic animals are said to slip (same verb) among reeds in a marsh ("Bird and Fish" 68; "Home of the Fish" 147). Thus, this line may possibly be understood as describing Enki's penis as slipping in and out among the reeds.

<sup>28</sup> Very uncertain translation. S. N. KRAMER has: "Indeed, he lifts his penis to. . ."; Y. ROSENGARTEN, *op. cit.*, 20 n. 6: "son beau vêtement de ses genoux il enlève."

<sup>29</sup> The verb is a *ša-ga-ri*, the same verb used for copulation with Ninmu, Ninkurra and Uttu.

The “first time” is Enki’s initial creative action in lines 67-69. However, in this repetition a gardener, not Enki, utilizes Enki’s creation. The gardener unambiguously irrigates with water<sup>30</sup> and his penis is not mentioned. Enki disguises himself as the gardener and, otherwise following the new rules, copulates with Uttu (lines 157-186). Ninhursag takes the semen and grows plants from it. Enki eats the plants and through his resulting knowledge of them is able to determine their fates (lines 187-217). This drives Ninhursag away (lines 218-220). The fox volunteers his services to another resident of Dilmun, Enlil, to bring Ninhursag back. He is apparently successful, but the passage describing her return is largely broken (lines 221-ca. 240). The remaining traces may indicate that the fox used a disguise. When Ninhursag returns she heals Enki, who has grown ill from the plants, by causing them to be born as beings like Enki and Ninhursag, rather than as plants (lines ca. 241-269). Each is assigned a spouse or a position in the cosmos (lines 270-276).

The same super-human creative power described in anthropomorphic terms is found in “Enki and Ninhursag” and in “Enki and the World Order.” But the former lacks any metaphorical descriptions of Enki as an animal. It uses techniques of plot function and characterization to discriminate these categories. The cosmogenetic act—making the marsh into a useful agricultural region—becomes the setting for the sexual act—copulation with Ninhursag. Copulation is unambiguously associated with semen. However, the activities in the marsh retain the mixtures of categories. The water of the dikes and ditches is conceived of as a fluid from Enki’s penis. But what is the fluid? I would very tentatively suggest that the passage alludes to urination, as by a dog, to establish territoriality. While this, in fact, is

<sup>30</sup> The verb is a—si “to fill with water.”

exactly what Enki has done, I cannot otherwise demonstrate that the ancient Mesopotamians associated animal urination with territoriality. In any case, an explicit comparison of Enki to a urinating dog would be unexpected. If this assumption is true, Enki has used a polluting substance, urine, to establish the boundaries of the regions he is creating. The crossing of these boundaries by his offspring violates a taboo which results in incest. But it is important to note that these copulatory adventures are not evaluated until after Ninhursag has established a further set of rules governing copulation.

These new rules introduce the second half of the story. In this half the categories become further intensified. The human gardener, who uses only water, parallels Enki. Enki takes on the guise of the gardener, establishing his role as trickster. This action may parallel his wearing of a large garment in the first half, which may have been used as a disguise when he copulated with Ninmu and Ninkurra. However, in this more strongly human role Enki becomes susceptible to human illness. His deceit and continued appropriation of his offspring drives Ninhursag away. It is possible that an inverted deception is required to bring Ninhursag back. Thus, the fox is the agent of her return. The Enki of the first half has, in effect, been split into a strongly humanized Enki and a fox with some human qualities (speech) in the second half. With the establishment of rules for copulation *and* territoriality, as well as the clearer discrimination of categories, Ninhursag ordains a non-incestuous system of sexual relations, as well as specific realms of competence for her descendents.

"Enlil and Ninlil" takes place in the area of the central Babylonian city of Nippur. The opening strongly contrasts with the opening to "Enki and Ninhursag" by calling Nippur "the very place in which we live." A creation and a cosmos is assumed and in place at the beginning of the

story. Ninlil is warned by her mother of the dangers of walking by and bathing in a certain canal—she will attract the attention of the lusty Enlil. When Ninlil nonetheless arrives there Enlil approaches her and is rebuffed. Enlil brings her downstream and copulates with her. When the community finds out Enlil is expelled. However, Ninlil follows him. At the city gate, at a river of the Netherworld and at a ferry, Enlil disguises himself and copulates with Ninlil again. The places in the cosmos assigned to their children are indicated by epithets following the children's names. The first, Suen, is the light of the moon. Nergal is "(the deity) coming out of the Meslam (temple)." Ninazu is the owner of the Egida (temple) or, in one version, perhaps the Surveyor. Enbilulu is the Canal Inspector. The myth ends with praise of Enlil.

There are no indications in the narrative that Enlil and Ninlil are anything other than human. Semantic classifiers in the writing system and stock epithets categorize them as divine. The concluding hymn to Enlil shows the development from human to divine, inverting Enki's change from divine creator to frail human (complemented by the role of the fox). But both texts conclude with offspring assigned places in the cosmos. They also share the engendering of these offspring through the breaking of taboos. Enlil's copulation with Ninlil is judged a rape by the assembly and his punishment is expulsion.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Further evidence on the nature of Enlil's crime may be found in *RC* 3.171: "A man on a boat going downstream. . . ; touching upon a garment and (?) the vulva are aberrations against Suen." While unsure interpretation of the first predicate (perhaps "meting out food") precludes certainty of meaning, the elements of 1) going downstream (also in "Enki and Ninhursag" and "Enlil and Ninlil"), 2) the garment (also in "Enki and Ninhursag"), 3) the sexual activity (both "Enki and Ninhursag" and "Enlil and Ninlil") and 4) the mention of Suen (also in "Enlil and Ninlil"), make it highly probable certain activities such as seen in these myths were considered aberrations or taboo.



The epithets of Enlil and Ninlil's offspring are also significant in establishing the inverse structure relative to "Enki and Ninhursag." Nergal is associated with the netherworld. Together with Suen, the moonlight, they form a cosmic axis. Ninazu and Enbilulu, the surveyor and canal inspector, parallel Enki's acts of creating the canal system and establishing a discreet geographical unit. The alternate epithet for Ninazu calls him the owner of a temple, a primary Mesopotamian symbol of the *axis mundi*.

There are no animals, animal metaphors or allusions to animalistic behavior in "Enlil and Ninlil." His deeds are strictly sexual. He copulates (ġiš—du<sub>11</sub>), kisses (ne—su-ub) and inseminates (a šà—ri). As in "Enki and Ninhursag" the waterway is the setting for the copulation.

Just as the fox complemented Enki, so do the fox entries complement "Enlil and Ninlil." The elements lacking in "Enlil and Ninlil"—cosmogenetic power, animality and urination—are all found in the fox entries. The fox claims for itself two cosmogenetic deeds—the creation of the sea and the creation of the carp-flood. Neither action is explicitly sexual, but the latter is closely related to the bounty that may arise from sexuality and fertility. Bringing on the carp-flood, a Spring flood bearing a wealth of fish,<sup>32</sup> is also attributed to Enki in "Enki and the World Order" 90: "When I (Enki) draw near to the earth, the carp-flood at its height comes into being." Tigris water is also essential for irrigation and the fertility of the land.

The fox entry *RC* 2.72(67) is more dramatic than an English translation can, at first, indicate. In the first sen-

<sup>32</sup> For this meaning see T. JACOBSEN, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven and London 1976), 246 n. 31.

tence the nature of the fluid from his penis is ambiguous.<sup>33</sup> Mention of the sea would indicate that water is the fluid. Either fresh or salt water is a possibility. The sea is fed both by the heavenly waters—rain—and by the underground waters—rivers, wells and fountains. The speech by the fox first makes the claim of creativity. This switches the fluid to the creative realm of semen. But the end of the speech ends the ambiguity by revealing that the fluid is urine. Being both a waste product and considered undrinkable, the urine corresponds to the salt water of the sea.<sup>34</sup>

The other fox entry is not suspenseful, but is paradoxical.<sup>35</sup> He pollutes the Tigris, but claims to bring the bounty of fish by this act. Yet this claim is not more paradoxical than Enlil's begetting of the god Suen by a criminal act that polluted the community. The fox's putatively creative act results from a reconfusion and mingling of two fluids, water and urine, that had been rendered into strongly distinct categories. The establishment of boundaries together with the breaking down of those boundaries was the origin of each of the other creative acts we have discussed. However, the sub-human realm of the talking fox is not appropriate for super-human cosmic creativity.

<sup>33</sup> A further ambiguity in this entry depends on the homonymns *kāš* "urine" and *kaš* "beer", as well as the first verb *sur* "to drip" etc., commonly used in reference to filtered beer.

<sup>34</sup> Evidence for urine as a polluting substance is primarily from first millennium texts. *Shurpu* III 63 refers to an oath, presumably that one would not urinate or vomit into a river, that was broken. Note that *UET* 6/2 406 is an Old Babylonian text partially duplicating this tablet, although not line 63. *Shumma Izbu* XXIII 23'-28' is a list of the evil results from a dog urinating on a man or his furniture, e.g. 23': "If a dog urinates on the table of a man—his god is angry with him." But note 25': "If a red dog urinates on a man that man will be happy." Note *Namburbi* 12 (*OrNS* 36 [1967] 1-8), a ritual for the evil of a dog which splatters its urine on a man. Urine is also used among the *materia medica*, such as in *BAM* 272 7'-9' (a *ša.zi.ga* therapeutic ritual for male potency).

<sup>35</sup> As recognized by B. ALSTER, "Paradoxical Proverbs", in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 27 (1975), 212.



In both fox examples we have outrageous boasts rather than aetiologies. The first entry is a creation gone wrong. Rather than using semen to create a fertilizing Tigris, the fox has used urine to create a sterile sea, from the points of view of agriculture and drinking water.<sup>36</sup>

Although the fox inverts the figure of Enlil or Enki, all are tricksters or mediators. In *RC* 2.74(69) (see above), the fox tried to trick his wife into going home so that she would not know the truth of how he fared at Uruk. Another attempted trick is in *RC* 5.71:

There were nine wolves, but ten sheep. There was one too many to share among them. When the fox came upon them (he said), "Let *me* apportion the shares. (For) the *nine*, being *you*, there is one. *I*, being *one*, will take nine. This is how I divide the shares."

The fox uses sly double-talk to redress the imbalance between the numbers of sheep and wolves.

Enki plays a similar role in the myth "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld."<sup>37</sup> Inanna, lady of heaven, descends to the realm of her older sister, Ereshkigal, lady of the Netherworld. Their rivalry causes a macrocosmic disruption as well as the illness of Ereshkigal and the death of Inanna. Following Inanna's instructions, her vizier waits three days and asks various heavenly gods for help. Enki devises a plan to restore order, cure Ereshkigal and bring Inanna back to life and up from the Netherworld. He creates two inchoate creatures, the *galatur* and the *kurgarra*, who bring the food and water of life to the Netherworld. Following Enki's instructions they heal Ereshkigal, trick her into letting them have Inanna's corpse, and revive Inanna. The cosmic imbalance is redressed when the

<sup>36</sup> Sumerian literature has a very strong sedentary, urban and agricultural bias. The opposite is not the sea-faring life, but the nomadic life.

<sup>37</sup> See translations by S. N. KRAMER in J. B. PRITCHARD, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* 3, 52-57; *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 124 (1980), 306-308.

Netherworld ghosts, who go up with Inanna, grab a scapegoat to take her place. As a god, Enki performs his mediating role at a distance from the location of the impasse. While this distinguishes him in text from the animal-human fox, Enki (or Ea, his Akkadian name) came to be the primary locus of the trickster, mediator and advisor among the gods in Mesopotamian literature.

Rather than being mere nonsense, or simply outrageous boasts, the fox entries are part of a continuum of symbols woven into similar structures. The surface texts discriminate these symbols into their constituent parts to varying degrees, from the sublime to the ridiculous. Thus, a strong component to the understanding of the fox and his actions depends on understanding the relationships of the fox entries to the myths.

The process of discrimination and condensation of symbols often hides the relationships with myths. Often, only structural similarities remain. Usually, we require unmistakable *realia* in order to demonstrate the symbolic relationships. Our key here has been the analogy of the fox urinating to create the Tigris flood to Enki's ejaculating to create the Tigris. Other classes of entries in the *Sumerian Rhetoric Collections* are amenable to a similar analysis, although many of these entries do not even mention animals. Most numerous are those entries related to the story of the scapegoat chosen to replace Inanna in the Netherworld.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Some of the symbolic elements which make this relationship clear are goats, gazelles, sheep, flocks, the steppe, the desert or wasteland. Dumuzi, the scapegoat, was closely associated with shepherding and, in texts concerning his death, he is described as having been changed into part animal—either part gazelle or part lizard. Relevant animal entries include *RC* 1.30; 3.80 (cf. "Inanna and Bilulu"); 3.112 (cf. perhaps a Dumuzi lament); and 5.36 (cf. "Dumuzi's Dream"). In the human mode, quotes from and allusions to Dumuzi texts may be *RC* 1.111; 1.148-149; 2.12; 3.7 (= *VAS* X 123 III 12). *RC* 3.16 belongs in the context of "Dumuzi's Dream" 153, but the use of pronouns prevents classification as human or animal.

The processes of discrimination of monster into animal and human, of changing symbolic distances and mediation between human and deity, and of scapegoat into sacrificer and sacrificial animal are well documented by the art of early Mesopotamia. The question of how this process occurs, especially in which direction(s) and according to what stimuli, can only be addressed in the context of many forms of literature in addition to myths, fables and fragments.

## DISCUSSION

*M. Adrados*: Les nouveaux matériaux, déjà publiés ou encore inédits, que vient de nous présenter M. Falkowitz, enrichissent sensiblement notre connaissance de la fable sumérienne. L'édition d'un corpus à jour et complet des fables mésopotamiennes rendrait de grands services à ceux qui étudient la fable gréco-latine. Celui que j'ai moi-même donné dans mon *Historia* est en effet dépassé.

Il y avait en Mésopotamie — comme en Grèce — des fables cosmologiques, liées aux mythes de la création. On en a de nouvelles confirmations. Cela est fort intéressant. De manière générale, il y a encore beaucoup à faire pour éclairer les rapports entre les fables de la Mésopotamie, de l'Inde et de la Grèce. Les idées que j'ai avancées dans mon *Historia*, sur la forme de ces fables, sur les proverbes, les comparaisons, les anecdotes, doivent être réexaminées à la lumière des matériaux nouveaux dont nous disposons désormais.

*M. West*: I should like to take up the question of the relationship between the fables (or proverbs) about the fox and the cosmological myths to which you related them. It seems to me that a saying such as 'The fox urinated into the sea. "The whole sea is my urine", he said' is self-contained and self-explanatory; it can be understood without reference to any cosmological myth. It could be taken out of a Mesopotamian context and applied, for instance, to certain scholars one can think of. Now, given that the cosmological myths existed, no doubt there were resonances which were felt by the people who wrote these sayings, but they do not affect the basic sense of the utterances. We do not need to derive them from the myths by transformation of positive terms into negative, substitution of urine for semen, etc.

*M. Falkowitz*: How do you understand this entry about the fox?

*M. West*: I understand the saying to be an example of an absurdly pretentious claim. The fox has made a petty contribution to the sea, and

then claims that he has created the whole of it, or made it his own in some way.

*M. Falkowitz*: You are surely right that the fox's claims seem absurdly pretentious to us. But we do not have the same cosmological myth as the Old Babylonians. In many cases, the fox entries are not transformations within a binary, structural system. Rather, I see them as possible forms of disambiguation, as I have tried to show.

*M. Vaio*: I would agree with Mr. Falkowitz and against Mr. West that the fox-entries (no. I on Mr. Falkowitz' handout) are not self-contained and pretentious, comic utterances but rather have the cosmological overtones which Mr. Falkowitz gave them. My argument is based on Mr. Falkowitz' entry II "Enki and the World-order" together with the speaker's comments on it. Here we see Enki operating on a cosmic and human level. This is followed by the intervention of a fox, whose presence occurs in a wide context of creation. In the light of this we can more clearly see the possible cosmic resonances in the Fox Entries (no. I on the handout).

*M. Nøjgaard*: La connaissance de ces matériaux est capitale pour comprendre l'histoire de la fable antique. Pour progresser, il faudrait commencer par étudier les différences entre les textes sumériens et les premières fables grecques:

- 1) dans quels genres de textes trouve-t-on des animaux?
- 2) quelle a pu être la fonction de ces textes?

Il semble, à première vue, que tous les textes où apparaissent des animaux appartiennent à des 'bibliothèques scolaires'. On en peut déduire que ces textes avaient une fonction éducative.

De manière générale, on ne saurait comprendre ces textes si on ignore leur contexte humain et social. Leur signification change du tout au tout selon qu'on les insère dans un contexte de fable ou de mythe. Leur sens est-il religieux ou moral?

*M. Falkowitz*: Virtually nothing is known of the social background of the students, or of specific contexts for the entries in the *Rhetoric*



*Collections*. M. Nøjgaard's questions are fundamental, but our research must start with relationships among texts. However, the distinction between the religious and the moral does not seem appropriate for these texts.

*M. Nøjgaard*: Connait-on le contexte narratif auquel fait allusion la réplique du renard? Faut-il regarder ces propos comme l'écho d'un mythe cosmologique étendu, ou bien la narration s'inscrit-elle déjà dans une tradition littéraire profane, auquel cas le dicton aurait une signification morale analogue à celle de la fable grecque?

*M. Falkowitz*: First of all, Sumerian fables, unlike many Greek and Indian fables, do not have explicit morals or *epimythia*. On the other hand, in the *continuum* of the sacred and profane, the *Rhetoric Collections* do not seem to be parts of a sacred literature. The entries concerning religious topics—deities, priests, taboos, temples, etc.—are certainly not *verba solemnia*, and sometimes even seem to show a disrespect for sacred institutions.

*M. Nøjgaard*: Pourquoi les pédagogues akkadiens ont-ils précisément choisi ces matériaux pour enseigner le sumérien aux jeunes gens? Ils ont dû avoir un but éducatif, et tout donne à penser qu'on les a choisis pour leur valeur culturelle.

*M. Falkowitz*: As I have stated, the primary goal was instruction in writing and Sumerian, resulting in a unique status for the students in the society. The selection process which yielded the *Rhetoric Collections* is hard to understand because

1) The schools are our source for Old Babylonian Sumerian literary texts. We can hardly say that texts known from other historical periods were rejected or ignored in forming the curricula. Those few texts known also from the preceding, Ur III period, were, in any case, rewritten in new recensions for the Old Babylonian period.

2) Much of the curricula was probably invented for immediate didactic purposes, just as lexicographers both invent and quote usages of words.



3) The sources of the entries in the collections remain uncertain, although some seem to be translated from Akkadian and a very few (but no fables) seem to be quotations also found in the myths, heroic tales or religious literature. Popular oral texts would have been in the Semitic vernacular and could not have been incorporated into the schools directly.

4) Narrative or performance contexts, or even morals for the entries would yield important evidence internal to the collections for answering this question, but these are lacking.

*M. Lasserre*: L'analogie de l'intervention du serpent dans l'*Ancien Testament*, *Gen.* 3, 1-7 montre bien comment un animal peut jouer un rôle dans un mythe 'religieux' de la création du monde, sans rapport apparent avec une tradition fabulistique. A la lumière de ce témoignage, les deux interventions du renard dans les mythes d'Enki mériteraient d'être interprétées dans un sens mythologique.

Mais dans le troisième épisode mythique considéré, le renard intervient une troisième fois comme intermédiaire rusé entre Enki et Nin-hursag. Et d'autre part, plusieurs autres ruses du renard, ressemblant en tout point à celles des fables occidentales, sont citées dans des contextes rhétoriques ou scolaires. N'y a-t-il pas lieu, alors, d'émettre l'hypothèse suivante:

- a) il aurait existé une littérature fabulistique autonome, comme plus tard en Grèce, et c'est à elle que l'auteur des épisodes mythiques aurait emprunté le renard. (De la même manière, les fables grecques apparaissent dans l'enseignement et la pratique de la rhétorique — *Arist. Rh.* II 20, 1393 a 23-1394 a 18 — et dans des documents scolaires — *Tabulae Assendelftinae*);
- b) l'auteur des textes mythologiques relatifs à Enki, composant son récit de la même manière qu'un Hésiode quand il incorpore une fable à un épisode du mythe cosmogonique (*Op.* 202-211), aurait de son propre chef recouru à un personnage de fable.

On voit bien que cette hypothèse implique l'existence, en Mésopotamie, de littératures analogues à ce qu'on trouvera en Grèce: des

textes d'auteur, conservés par écrit, et une 'littérature' orale. Ces circonstances sont-elles envisagées par les historiens?

*M. Falkowitz*: The direction of influences cannot be determined from within the evidence. Among other reasons, few literary tablets are datable other than within a general period. However, the more continuous and more easily datable evidence from Mesopotamian art, which must be developed at length elsewhere, indicates to me that mythic thought is more likely to influence the structure and content of a fable than vice-versa.

The episode of the fox in "Enki and Ninhursag" is essential to the structure of the text and cannot be a borrowed insertion. Nonetheless, were the details better known, the episode could conceivably resemble an independent fable. But no such fable is known. In any case, a direct insertion would be exceptional. Of the approximately thousand preserved entries in the *Rhetoric Collections*, only about two dozen—none of them fables—are known from other contexts.

For my comments on rhetoric, fables and Old Babylonian schools, see Part I of my *Sumerian Rhetoric Collections*. Unfortunately, we lack explicit discussions of the rhetorical uses of fables such as found in Aristotle and the *progymnasmata* of the Greeks.

*M. Lasserre*: L'absence de témoignages sur l'existence d'une fable autonome, sous forme écrite ou orale, ne me paraît pas déterminante. J'en veux, théoriquement, pour preuve le fait que certaines fables mésopotamiennes se retrouvent dans la tradition grecque à haute époque, et qu'on voit difficilement comment elles ont pu y entrer, sinon par une transmission de proche en proche, indépendante de mythes qui, eux, n'y ont pas laissé de traces.

*M. Nøjgaard*: S'il est vrai que les narrations sumériennes empruntent leur matière à des originaux akkadiens, cela jette une lumière intéressante sur la possibilité d'une transmission double. D'une part, il a pu y avoir une tradition orale, dont il ne reste aucune trace; d'autre part, une tradition 'savante', scolaire. Pourquoi les Grecs n'auraient-ils pas repris

directement cette tradition 'savante' lorsqu'ils ont éprouvé le besoin de créer leurs propres institutions 'scolaires', et cela dès l'époque d'Archiloque? Les premiers pédagogues grecs à la recherche de matériaux éducatifs ont pu s'inspirer de collections animales babyloniennes, ce qui expliquerait pourquoi les poètes ioniens utilisent comme exemples des fables: ils les ont apprises à l'école!

Dans l'état actuel de nos connaissances, on ne s'explique pas pourquoi la fable, utilisée dans les écoles chez les Akkadiens et, deux mille ans plus tard, dans les écoles de l'époque hellénistique, ne l'aurait pas été aussi dans l'enseignement grec primitif. La lacune est-elle due à notre ignorance de la nature de celui-ci ou à l'absence réelle de la fable dans l'enseignement grec classique?

*M. Adrados*: La fable du renard qui a créé la mer me semble être une parodie du mythe de la création par Enlil. La Grèce offre aussi des exemples de mythes parodiés. Ainsi la fable intitulée Αἴσωπος ἐν ναυπηγίῳ (H. 8). Or, dans les fables sumériennes dont a parlé M. Falkowitz, le renard se tourne lui-même en dérision de manière fort comique, tout comme le fait, dans une fable babylonienne bien connue, le moustique qui demande à l'éléphant sur lequel il s'est posé si son poids est supportable ou s'il faut qu'il s'envole.

Autre question. En Mésopotamie, dès les temps les plus reculés, il a existé des collections de fables, contenant aussi des textes divers. En Grèce, on n'en connaît aucune qui soit antérieure à Démétrius de Phalère.

Quant à la transmission de la fable orientale en Grèce, je serais tenté de lui faire suivre les mêmes voies qu'aux mythes qu'Hésiode et les lyriques ont recueillis. Il se peut qu'elle ait été orale: ne récitait-on pas, dans les fêtes, mythes, œuvres lyriques et fables? D'autre part, dans un article à paraître (dans *Classica et Mediaevalia*), je montre comment certaines fables ont été transmises à la Grèce et à l'Occident, au moyen âge, par le truchement de leurs versions syriaques ou arméniennes.

*M. Falkowitz*: There will probably never be direct testimony to the process of borrowing or transmission. An understanding of this process

largely depends on analyzing the place of the putatively borrowed text in the symbolic cultural systems from which it came and to which it was brought. I have tried to show an aspect of the place of a few texts among other Sumerian texts. Similar analyses need to be done for the Greek fables said to come from some source or tradition in the Near East, especially as they fit among Greek texts.

*M. West:* I think one should not exaggerate the necessity of sociological structures as a condition for the reception of particular fables. The wide diffusion of fables that has actually taken place proves that the fable, more than almost any other genre, is universally acceptable. It can pass very easily from one culture to another—perhaps sometimes with differences of interpretation reflecting the outlook of the particular culture—and be recognized as intelligible, entertaining, significant, as it stands.

*M. Adrados:* En Mésopotamie, puis à Rome et au moyen âge, l'école a joué un grand rôle dans la transmission de la fable. Pas en Grèce. Ni à l'époque archaïque, ni à l'époque classique. La fable était alors chez elle dans les banquets, dans les fêtes populaires. Les iambographes, les poètes comiques, les philosophes socratiques ont contribué à en transmettre les thèmes. Pas l'école.

Une curieuse anecdote évoque le destin scolaire de la fable orientale: des maîtres d'école auraient, selon l'*Abikar* (VIII 36), utilisé celle du loup qui apprend à lire pour se moquer d'eux-mêmes et de leurs disciples, en faisant lire au loup, en lieu et place des mots qui figurent dans le texte, 'chevreau, brebis'.

*M. Lasserre:* L'hypothèse de M. Nøjgaard est séduisante. Je me demande, cependant, si le modèle de l'école sumérienne, réservée aux scribes, a pu influencer l'école grecque, dont les caractéristiques, pour autant qu'on les connaisse, semblent très différentes. Je ne suis pas convaincu, d'ailleurs, qu'on puisse parler d'école en Grèce, au sens classique du terme, comme véhicule de culture, à l'époque archaïque. Mais je reconnais volontiers que par l'Anatolie hittite sous influence



mésopotamienne, et par la Phrygie, patrie de la fable, par exemple (il y aurait d'autres voies), l'itinéraire d'une transmission par imitation de systèmes scolaires serait possible sans solution de continuité spatiale ou chronologique. Les étapes chronologiques à prendre en considération, notamment, sont bel et bien celles de l'apogée des civilisations de l'Anatolie, puis de la Phrygie.

*M. Falkowitz*: The Old Babylonian schools were the source of scribes, but the curricula did not teach practical, scribal technique, such as writing Akkadian letters, business, administrative and legal documents.

While Sumerian religious texts (but not didactic school texts) do appear among the Hittites, it is not at all clear that the Old Babylonian school tradition at all influenced the Hittites. Indeed, only fragments of the Old Babylonian curricula survived into the first millennium in Mesopotamia. The school system itself was radically changed in Babylonia during the second half of the second millennium. Questions of mutual scholastic influences between Hittites and Mesopotamian societies need to be studied. But I would also look to Syria and Palestine as possible links in such borrowings as may have happened.

*M. Nøjgaard*: On constate qu'un des traits caractéristiques de la fable grecque, c'est que les dieux, les hommes et les animaux sont sur le même pied. Les animaux peuvent s'adresser directement aux dieux sans intermédiaire. Qu'en est-il dans la littérature sumérienne?

*M. Falkowitz*: There are a few stories concerning an animal and a deity; but it is more common that composite monsters such as the Anzu (lion-eagle) would play roles equal to deities. By the time of the Old Babylonian Sumerian literature, the gulf between the human and divine planes was wide enough that while humans could deal with deities, it was as subordinates. Animals played even lesser roles.