

## Humour in Sumerian Didactic Literature

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### Abstract

Sumerian disputations and diatribes have often been described as ‘humoristic’ compositions, but the exact nature of the underlying humour has not been investigated so far. Bearing in mind the difficulties of identifying and correctly interpreting humour in ancient works of literature, an attempt at a systematic study of humour in Sumerian didactic disputations and diatribes will be made. The study will focus on a selection of relevant texts, namely the disputation between schoolboys known as *Dialogue 1*, the disputation between women known as *Two Women B* or *Dialogue 5*, the *Diatribes B* and *C* (also known as *Engardu the Fool* and *He is a Good Seed of a Dog*, respectively), as well as two hitherto unpublished diatribes against women entitled *The Evil Mouth* and *Woman Perfecting Evil*. Since all these compositions are characterised by an abundance of insults, one aim of the investigation is to determine if and how these insults could have had a humoristic effect. In this context, the ancient ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the compositions will also be taken into consideration. While it is evident that these texts were studied at school, and probably had little relevance outside of it, at least the disputations potentially could have been performed on stage. Hence, the presence of an (imaginary or potential) audience will be included in the discussion of humour in Sumerian didactic literature.

### 1) Introduction

The Sumerian didactic disputations between schoolboys and women as well as the so-called diatribes have often been described as ‘humoristic’ compositions,<sup>1</sup> but the exact nature of the underlying humour – by which I here mean anything that has the potential to arouse amusement or laughter – has not been investigated comprehensively. This has two likely reasons: Firstly, many of the compositions have not yet been edited, and are among the most difficult Sumerian literary texts ever written. Secondly, it is of course a tricky, if not risky, endeavour to study humour in ancient literary texts that were composed about 4000 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate this point, let me begin with an example of moralistic didactic literature from the more recent past: *The Struwwelpeter*, “Shock-headed Peter” or, as Mark Twain translated the German original, *Slovenly Peter*. As this was (and still is) one of the most widely known children’s books, nearly everyone remembers the stories about the disastrous consequences of misbehaviour, not rarely resulting in the immediate death of the miscreant. Thus, in the “very sad story of the matches,” a girl plays with matches and burns to death, and Soup-Kaspar, once a strong and healthy boy, refuses to eat his soup and dies within five days. While the earliest critique of the repressive punitive pedagogy goes back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> the book has long ceased to set pedagogical standards, and many people nowadays would not risk traumatising their children with it.

However, Dr. Hoffmann composed the book for his three-year old son precisely because all the children’s books he could find were too moralistic for his taste,<sup>4</sup> and the first edition in 1845 appeared under the title “Lustige Geschichten und drollige Bilder für Kinder von 3-6

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<sup>1</sup> To name but a few: van Dijk (1953: 99), Gordon (1960: 140-142), Foster (1974: 80), Foster (1995: 2464), Johnson/Geller (2015: 21-24).

<sup>2</sup> Foster (1974), by contrast, emphasizes the universality of humour; he changed his view in Foster (1995: 2459).

<sup>3</sup> Stern (1914). See Maier (1987: 34-36).

<sup>4</sup> F. S. (1871: 768).

Jahren,” i.e. “Funny stories and droll pictures for children between 3 and 6,” indicating that the book was actually meant to be amusing, not shocking. Since the Sumerian compositions, which I will introduce presently, also abound in pretty shocking exaggerations (with a decidedly moralistic bend), it might be useful to bear in mind the discrepancy between Dr. Hoffmann’s original intention and a modern audience’s perception.

While Dr. Hoffmann left his memoirs,<sup>5</sup> no such testimonial of the unknown authors of the Sumerian texts survives, and it is unlikely it ever existed. Therefore, it is commonplace but necessary to emphasize that what may have been uproarious in nature might not seem funny to us at all, while the elements we find amusing might once have been pretty serious. With this in mind, I think it is nevertheless possible on the basis of the extant material to arrive at a more nuanced appreciation of the texts in question. In the following, I will focus on literary disputations between human protagonists, be they schoolboys or women, as well as the so-called diatribes against human targets.<sup>6</sup> By excluding the precedence debates between personified entities such as summer and winter from most of the discussion of humour in Sumerian didactic literature, I do not wish to deny their didactic and moralistic, let alone humoristic, potential, but it is more subtle and indirect. Also, different subscripts and separate grouping in the Nippur ‘catalogue’ N2 suggests the precedence debates were seen as distinct in antiquity.<sup>7</sup> A final disclaimer concerns the term ‘Sumerian.’ There are several indications in the texts that they are of relatively late, probably (early) Old Babylonian date. This makes ‘ethnically’ Sumerian authors unlikely. ‘Sumerian’ therefore simply refers to compositions written in the Sumerian language and does not include any assumptions about the linguistic or ethnic origin of the authors. Put somewhat differently, it is conceivable that the humour underlying the compositions is (Old) Babylonian rather than ‘Sumerian.’

Since we have neither documentation about the ancient authors’ intention(s) nor about the ancient audience’s understanding of these texts, a first step in trying to assess the nature of these compositions, which includes the question of whether they were intended to be ‘funny’ in any sense, is to look at the terminology employed, as well as any statements on the meta level that provide relevant information.

## 2) The art of insulting

It has often been pointed out that the Sumerian disputations and diatribes abound in insults, and indeed all compositions centre around the term *in* = *pištum* “insult,” as well as the corresponding verb *in* *tub*<sub>2</sub> = *wapāšum* “to insult.” Thus, one of the protagonists of *2WB* summarises the quarrel with her neighbour as follows:  $\hat{g}e_{26}$ -e e-ne-bi du<sub>14</sub> i<sub>3</sub>-AK-en-de<sub>3</sub>-en / in in-gen<sub>7</sub> in-tub<sub>2</sub>-tub<sub>2</sub>-bu-un-de<sub>3</sub>-en “Me and her, we quarrelled. We exchanged insult with insult.” (ll. 182–183). This is in line with an earlier statement by her rival (ll. 161//169), who had also testified to their mutual exchange of invectives: me e-ne-gen<sub>7</sub> in mu-un-tub<sub>2</sub> “I insulted her like she (did).” A verbal contest was hence defined as an exchange of insults, and the main objective was to create powerful slurs: The rhetorical question: in tub<sub>2</sub>-tub<sub>2</sub>-bu- $\hat{g}u_{10}$ -gen<sub>7</sub>-nam ba-de-e $\hat{g}_3$ -en “Will you invent something like

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<sup>5</sup> Herzog/Siefert (1985).

<sup>6</sup> Disputations between schoolboys: *Dialogue 1 (D1)*; Johnson/Geller 2015; see also Matuszak 2019a), *Dialogue 2 (D2)*; Ceccarelli forthcoming), and *Dialogue 3 (D3)*; partial edition: Römer 1988; full edition: Ceccarelli/Wagensonner forthcoming). Dialogues between women: “*Two Women A*” (“*2WA*”; Matuszak 2017) and *Two Women B (2WB)*; Matuszak 2017). ‘Diatribes’ against men: *Diatribes A* (unpublished), *Diatribes B* and *C* (Sjöberg 1972). ‘Diatribes’ against women: *The Evil Mouth* (Matuszak forthcoming a) and *Woman Perfecting Evil* (Matuszak forthcoming b). For constraints of space, references to manuscripts of unpublished texts cannot be given.

<sup>7</sup> In N2 (ETCSL c.0.2.01), literary disputations between human protagonists, Edubba’a compositions, and diatribes against men are listed in lines 50–62, whereas precedence debates are mostly listed in lines 25–30. While this is less clear in other ‘catalogues,’ it should be noted that *only* precedence debates are referred to as a-da-min<sub>3</sub> du<sub>11</sub>-ga; see Mittermayer (2019: 7–9).

my insults?!” (2WB 109) conveyed clearly that the speaker considered her rival’s capability to craft invectives inferior to her own. This suggests that a verbal contest was an exercise in rhetorical prowess and creativity.

in and in tub<sub>2</sub> also serve as technical terms in disputations between schoolboys. In *DI* 115 [110],<sup>8</sup> for example, the addressee of the invective declares that the insults did not ‘stick’: in mu-e-tub<sub>2</sub>-ba-ĝu<sub>10</sub> su-ĝa<sub>2</sub> nu-ĝa<sub>12</sub> “The insults which you hurled against me didn’t affect me (lit.: are not present in/on my body).” A similar image is also conveyed by an expression attested in 2WB, *D2* and *Bird and Fish*, which expresses that someone did or did not take their opponent’s insults to heart:

e-ne ma-an-du<sub>11</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-še<sub>3</sub> nu-gid<sub>2</sub>  
 ĝe<sub>26</sub>-e in-na-du<sub>11</sub> zu<sub>2</sub> ba-an-keše<sub>2</sub> ša<sub>3</sub>-še<sub>3</sub> ba-an-gid<sub>2</sub>  
 “She has spoken to me: I did not take it to heart.  
 I have spoken to her: she was *dumbstruck*, she took it to heart.”  
 (2WB 184–185)

enim-ĝu<sub>10</sub><sup>(NU)</sup> in-nu ša<sub>3</sub>-še<sub>3</sub> la-ba-gid<sub>2</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>  
 “These aren’t words that concern me (lit.: “not my words”). I won’t take them to heart.”  
 (*D2* 177)

in ku<sub>6</sub>-e a-na mu-ni-in-tub<sub>2</sub>-ba (ša<sub>3</sub>-še<sub>3</sub> nu-mu-un-gid<sub>2</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>)  
 “The insult, which Fish had uttered, ([Bird] did not take to heart).”  
*Bird and Fish* 51. Cf. also l. 81, where the same is said about Fish.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that insults could hit the target so violently that they stuck on, or even found their way inside, the victim’s body brings them in close proximity to curses, and indeed insults are repeatedly mentioned alongside curses in *D3* b 61–62 (similarly d 15–16): a-na-aš-am<sub>3</sub> ka-tar-re-a-bi in-na-e-du<sub>11</sub> / saĝ mu-e-ta-DU-a aš<sub>2</sub> in-ni-sar in in-ne-tub<sub>2</sub> “Why did you speak to him boastfully, (why) did you revile, curse, insult him?” The same connection between insults and curses is also found in *Tree and Reed* 243–244, where Reed complains to King Šulgi: lugal-ĝu<sub>10</sub> ĝeš lu<sub>2</sub> du<sub>24</sub>-a-ĝu<sub>10</sub> / in la-<sup>r</sup>ga mu-un<sup>r</sup>-tub<sub>2</sub> aš<sub>2</sub> la-ga mu-un-du<sub>11</sub> “My lord, Tree – my subordinate – uttered vicious insults and spoke vicious curses.”<sup>10</sup> Surely (didactically motivated) insults and curses (employing ‘black magic’) were not perceived of as synonyms, but they both share the aim of having an immediate, negative effect on their target, and were thus seen as powerful, or even fateful, utterances.<sup>11</sup> In this context it might also be worth noting that CAD M/II 212 has two different entries for *muppišu*: *muppišu* A (fem. *muppištu*) is derived from (w)*apāšu* “to insult” and hence translated as “slanderer,” while *muppišu* B (fem. *muppištu*) is derived from *epēšu* and hence translated as “sorcerer” or “sorceress” respectively. Both slanderers and sorcerers or witches occur as enemies in incantations.<sup>12</sup>

As regards the so-called diatribes, the target of the invective in *Woman Perfecting Evil* is declared as me-te <sup>r</sup>in-na<sup>?</sup> “worthy of insult”<sup>13</sup> and the speaker announces: in-na ĝeš ga-bi<sub>2</sub>-ib-tuku “I will make her listen to (my) insults!”<sup>14</sup> *The Evil Mouth* and *Diatribes B*, however, lay the focus on the insults *uttered* by the addressees of the invectives. While the

<sup>8</sup> When quoting from *DI*, the first number refers to the line count established in Matuszak (2019a), while the number in square brackets refers to the line count in Johnson/Geller (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted after Mittermayer (2019: 70).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted after Mittermayer (2019: 22).

<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, 2WB illustrates beautifully how an insult uttered during an initially playful verbal contest can have fateful consequences for the addressee if it reaches the ears of others and develops into a defamatory rumour; see Matuszak (2017, chapters 5 and 6).

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Schwemer (2007: 108-110 *et passim*).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted after MS 2865 obv. 3. Similarly perhaps *Diatribes C* Segm. A 23: [...] <sup>r</sup>x<sup>r</sup> in-na mu-na-kal.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted after MS 2865 obv. 4.

wrongdoings of the woman addressed in *The Evil Mouth* are described as a “gross insult” (in dugud) against the goddess Innana (l. 95), the speaker of *Diatribes B* complacently asserts that he has made Engardu’s insults and lies known to everyone: in-zu sila daġal ba-ni-in-[x] / lul-zu pa bi<sub>2</sub>-i-[e<sub>3</sub>] “Your insults [...] the broad street. Your lies I have made obvious!” (Segm. B 7’). As both *The Evil Mouth* and *Diatribes B* themselves abound in invectives against their respective addressees, insult is apparently reciprocated with insult – in compliance with several Sumerian proverbs, according to which “He who insults is insulted. He who sneers is sneered at”<sup>15</sup> and “He hurled his insult, and (promptly) there was a curse on him.”<sup>16</sup>

While we surely should not envision schoolboys practicing ‘black magic’ by uttering or copying ‘real’ curses, it is nevertheless not difficult to imagine that speeches consisting of nothing but ‘insults’ could have a devastating effect on their target. As the speakers are generally not shy to admit, many insults were deliberately intended as defamatory, and thus designed to harm the (fictive, but paradigmatic) addressee’s status in society. The connection between the exchanges of insults in the disputations and the monologic invectives in the diatribes on the one side, and curses on the other, thus seems to lie in the common belief that the spoken word had power over the addressee.

Returning to the original question, one does wonder, however, if the texts were really perceived of as containing threatening, potentially harmful insults verging on curses, by means of which the respective speaker tried to affect their opponent not just psychologically but even physically – or whether there was not in fact a more playful, humorous note to them. In other words: were the insults funny, and if yes, how, and in which context?

### 3) Possible elements of humour

Since I can quote only a few insults within the scope of this paper, let me start with a brief overview of their content. Generally, the debating schoolboys accuse each other of incompetence in school disciplines, ranging from writing and reciting Sumerian to mathematics, a poor family background, character flaws, and bodily as well as mental deficits. The disputations between women only differ in the area of incompetence, as the quarrelling rivals accuse each other of being unable to run a household, or being unskilled in textile work, etc.

To the modern reader, the ‘insults’ aimed at incompetence in particular might seem more like reproaches, but their designation as ‘insults’ by the texts themselves should be taken seriously: apparently, it was considered defamatory to be accused of incompetence in the profession in which one aspired to excel. In that regard, exclamations like mu ni<sub>2</sub>-za nu-e-da-sar-re im šu-za nu-du<sub>7</sub> “You can’t (even) write your own name, the clay (tablet) isn’t appropriate for your hand!” (*D3* 64) or ... na-aġ<sub>2</sub>-munus-e la-ba-du<sub>7</sub> / siki nu-mu-un-da-peš<sub>6</sub>-e ġeš<sub>6</sub> bala nu-mu-un-da-NU-NU “... she is not fit for womanhood: she cannot comb wool, she cannot operate a spindle!” (*2WB* 66–67) could indeed be taken as insults.

As I have dealt with the content of insults elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> I will not make this my primary concern here. Rather, I would like to focus on the manner in which the respective addressees were being insulted and ridiculed. Since we are dealing with literary compositions, searching for elements of humour often coincides with searching for stylistic devices and figures of speech. However, as I will demonstrate below, it was also possible to express humour on the level of form. The following list is of course far from exhaustive, and the examples presented in the next section could easily be multiplied. It is still hoped that this preliminary study identifies a representative selection of the most common elements of humour and opens the way to further research on the topic.

<sup>15</sup> SP 3.69 (~ 11.22): in-tub<sub>2</sub>-tub<sub>2</sub>-bu-ra in mu-na-an-ġar / giri<sub>17</sub> ur<sub>5</sub>-e giri<sub>17</sub> mu-na-an-ur<sub>5</sub>-re.

<sup>16</sup> SP 1.78: in-a-ni mu-un-tub<sub>2</sub> aš<sub>2</sub>-a-ni mu-un-ġal<sub>2</sub>. Similar notions are expressed, e.g., in SP 1.80, SP 26 Sect. C 11 and UET 6/2, 286.

<sup>17</sup> Matuszak (2016); Matuszak (2017, chapter 7); Matuszak (2018a); Matuszak (2018b).

### a) *Hyperbole*

The hyperbole constitutes the most pervasive rhetorical device in the corpus under scrutiny. It attains its potentially funny effect by exaggerating assertions well into absurdity.

On the stylistic level, exaggeration in Sumerian can easily be achieved by multiplication of ‘adjectives’ or verbal bases. Thus, one protagonist of *2WB* 61, for instance, ridicules her rival as *zi<sub>3</sub> ar<sub>3</sub>-ar<sub>3</sub>-ar<sub>3</sub>-ar<sub>3</sub>-ra* “grinding flour non-stop.” Here, the quadruplication of the verbal base not only highlights the repetitive, strenuous slave work, but (imagine rolling the ‘r’s) also has an onomatopoeic quality, which likely elicited a gleeful laugh. In *The Evil Mouth* 32 the addressee is derided as having [<sup>ĝe</sup>]<sup>š-tu<sup>9</sup></sup>ĝeštu gal-gal siki sal-sal “enormous ears, (but) very thin hair,” the mockery being intensified both by the contrast between “very big” and “very thin” and by the possible internal rhyme between gal-gal and sal-sal.

However, hyperbole can also be defined in purely semantic terms. Thus, the sneer in *DI* 42–43 [39–40] *e<sub>2</sub> ad-da-za-ka ša<sub>3</sub>-gal iti-da kaš zi<sub>3</sub> munu<sub>4</sub> še-ta-am<sub>3</sub> nu-ub-diri / ama-zu-še<sub>3</sub> šu bala AK-a(m<sub>3</sub>)* “In your father’s house (supplies) don’t even exceed a monthly ration of beer, flour, malt (and) barley. (Even) your mum is given in pawn!” is probably not to be taken too literally, as is the following quote from *2WB* 53, alleging the addressee depends on scavenging for food: *deš sila<sub>3</sub> še-am<sub>3</sub> ab-pa<sub>3</sub>-de<sub>3</sub>-en-na-zu* “One litre of barley is all you find!”

In two other lines from *2WB*, mockery verges on sheer malice. One woman derides her rival by exclaiming: *ir-da e<sub>2</sub>-a-ni-im udun pa-paḥ-a-ni(-im)* “The pigsty is her house, the kiln is her best room!” (96) and <sup>NA4</sup>*kinkin dam-a-ni(-im) NA4*š<sub>u</sub>-š<sub>u<sub>2</sub></sub> du<sub>5</sub>-mu-ni(-im) “The lower grindstone is her husband, the upper grindstone is her child!” (98). These grossly exaggerated assertions – note that they are indeed formulated as plain assertions and not as comparisons! – allege that the addressee is all but married to her slave work, possibly leaving her without a real family, and that her work space is in fact her home. That this powerful metaphor might have been considered funny shows that contempt for lower strata of society was barely concealed; the fact that female and male protagonists alike frequently revile each other as paupers and slaves points in the same direction.

But even the respective rival’s human nature is occasionally being denied, as several equations with animals show. In *D2* 68, for instance, one derides the other as *gir a-ab-ba saĝ ni<sub>2</sub>-ba sal-sal* “Fish from the sea, whose head is narrower than himself,” thus exaggerating unfavourable body proportions, with the head being small compared to the rest of the body – which might or might not have had a symbolic meaning as well. Also the insults in *Woman Perfecting Evil* (MS 2865 obv. 10: *gaba daĝal-<sup>1a</sup> niĝ<sub>2</sub>-bun<sub>2</sub>-na ku<sub>6</sub>-gen<sub>7</sub><sup>o</sup> <sup>a<sub>2</sub><sup>?</sup></sup>-[š<sub>u</sub>-ĝi]ri<sub>3</sub><sup>?</sup> nu-tuku-a* “Broad chest<sup>?</sup> of a turtle, who like a fish has no limbs<sup>?</sup>!” and obv. 12: *ĝiri<sub>3</sub>-bi ĝiri<sub>3</sub> ba-al-ge<sub>4</sub>* “These feet are turtle feet!”) should probably not be taken too literally, although people with ‘turtle feet’ are in fact attested in later omen collections.<sup>18</sup>

### b) *Irony and sarcasm*

Malice can, however, also be more indirectly expressed through irony and sarcasm, and the very etymology of sarcasm as a hostile form of mockery that was meant to tear the flesh (σάρξ) is reminiscent of the Sumerian notion of insults afflicting the addressee’s body. In the present group of texts, irony and sarcasm can be detected relatively easily as seemingly positive statements which clearly meant the opposite, as no speaker ever makes positive statements about their respective addressees. The line between milder irony and more aggressive sarcasm, however, is often difficult to draw.

One scathing example of sarcasm is found in *2WB* 48: *ša<sub>3</sub> ku<sub>3</sub> til i-bi<sub>2</sub>-za e<sub>2</sub>-a-na* “Her (ever so) pure womb (is) finished – (it means) financial loss for her house,” equating

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<sup>18</sup> Matuszak (2018b: 263–264).

infertility with poverty. When addressing each other as lu<sub>2</sub> al-ḥi-li-a “gorgeous person” (2WB 11) or ušur kal-la-ḡu<sub>10</sub> “my esteemed neighbour” (2WB 220), the protagonists of 2WB clearly make use of irony. The exact implications of ḥi-li in l. 11 are unclear, but in l. 220 there is no doubt that the speaker positively hated her “esteemed” neighbour for having spread defamatory rumours about her.

Finally, the names of several protagonists of the disputations, as well as of some addressees of the ‘diatribes’, are full of irony. Engar-du<sub>10</sub>, the addressee of *Diatribes B*, is literally a “good farmer”, which apparently was considered a joke by members of the scribal elite, while Ĝiri-ni-i<sub>3</sub>-sa<sub>6</sub> “His foot is good”, the name of the ‘Big Brother’ in *D3*, was hardly a name befitting a competent scribe. While probably related to the concept that executing tasks with one’s foot rather than one’s hand meant doing one’s job badly,<sup>19</sup> a competent scribe should surely be named after his fine hand, not his foot. It comes as no surprise then that Ĝirini’isa fails at being a worthy ‘Big Brother.’ The impudent pupil with whom he engages in a quarrel is named <sup>d</sup>Enki-ma-an-šum<sub>2</sub> “Enki has given it (scil. wisdom) to me” – probably a reference to his perky arrogance, for which he is later reprimanded.<sup>20</sup> In this context, it is likely that the name of the slanderer and ultimate ‘loser’ of the debate in 2WB, Nin-ku<sub>3</sub>-zu (“The mistress (is) wise”), is also used ironically, but since her rival apparently remains anonymous, this is not certain.

In general, however, subtle irony and sarcasm are relatively rare, and bold statements are much preferred.

### c) Puns

Puns are equally subtle – understandable only to the smart, and often incomprehensible to the modern reader. One possible example is the transformation of na-aḡ<sub>2</sub>-lu<sub>2</sub>-tu-mu “status as a liar” in 2WB l. 9 into na-aḡ<sub>2</sub>-du<sub>5</sub>-mu(-)lu<sub>2</sub>(-k) “status as the son of a citizen” in l. 10. Another possible pun between niḡ<sub>2</sub>-ḤAR-ra (perhaps to be read niḡ<sub>2</sub>-ur<sub>5</sub>-ra?) and ur<sub>5</sub>-ra = *ḥubullu* “debt” might be found in *DI* 61 [57],<sup>21</sup> even though the exact meaning of niḡ<sub>2</sub>-ur<sub>5</sub>-ra eludes me.

### d) Jokes

Finally, there are little anecdotes which might be interpreted as jokes, if a joke is defined as a fictional comical miniature culminating in a punchline.<sup>22</sup> In 2WB 62-64, for instance, one of the contestants meticulously recounts how her rival is preparing to bake bread: in-us<sub>2</sub> in-tur-tur in-ar<sub>3</sub>-ar<sub>3</sub>-[...] / i-ni-in-du<sub>8</sub> i-ni-in-bil<sub>2</sub>-bil<sub>2</sub> / aḡ<sub>2</sub> šu du<sub>11</sub>-ga-ni a-ra<sub>2</sub>-še<sub>3</sub> nu-mu-un-ḡar “She pounded (the grain), she shredded it, she ground it. She baked (the bread) – and burned it completely!” Then she gleefully summarizes: “Whatever she touched – she has never done anything properly!”

A similar anecdote in *DI* 77-79 [73-75] tells the story of the greedy thief<sup>23</sup> who wanted to steal soup from the oven: <sup>dug</sup>utul<sub>2</sub> ar-za-na <sup>im</sup>šu-rin-na-ta e<sub>11</sub>-da-zu-ne / ba-e-de<sub>3</sub>-gaz tu<sub>7</sub> al-bil<sub>2</sub>-la-ta / <sup>uzu</sup>ma-sila<sub>3</sub> sa-šal-zu kuš-a ab-zil-zil “When you take the bowl with the *arzana*-soup from the oven, it breaks because of you, (since) the soup is hot,” and the speaker states gleefully: “On *ankle* and *Achilles tendon* your skin got scalded!” – punishment followed swiftly.

<sup>19</sup> Attinger (2015: 244–245).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Ceccarelli (2018: 139–141).

<sup>21</sup> niḡ<sub>2</sub>-ḤAR-ra eḥi(-eḥi)-da ḡen-na ur<sub>5</sub>-ra me-te-zu “(You) who walked the *face of the earth*(?) in the company of vermin – debt is what suits you!”

<sup>22</sup> Schulz-Grobert (2009: 1396).

<sup>23</sup> For more detail see Matuszak (2019a: 11 and 34 ad 77). An allusion in 2WB to a very similar episode suggests theft was implied in *DI* as well.

### e) Parodies

Lastly, elements of humour can also be found on the level of form. While the possibly parodistic nature of Sumerian disputations remains a topic for future research, the diatribes clearly represent parodies of hymns.<sup>24</sup>

Compare, for instance, the beginning of *Diatribes C*, in which the ‘dedicatee’ is ironically invoked as a *du*<sub>10</sub>-*ga ur-ra* “Good seed of a dog,” where in hymns you would find “Foremost son of an important deity” or the like.<sup>25</sup> Then (ll. 2–3 *et passim*), instead of laudatory epithets, follow more derogatory animal comparisons, denying the addressee not only divinity, but in fact any resemblance to a human being.

The first lines of *Woman Perfecting Evil* likewise bear a strong resemblance to the beginning of hymns. Here, the speaker declares his intention to pour abuse over the ‘dedicatee,’ whereas the speaker of a hymn proclaims his intention to sing someone’s praise:<sup>26</sup>

munus<sup>21</sup> nam-ḥulu sa<sub>6</sub>-ga-gen<sub>7</sub> šu du<sub>7</sub>  
ka sun<sub>7</sub>-na a-ra<sub>2</sub>-na ga-bi<sub>2</sub>-ib-du<sub>11</sub>-du<sub>11</sub>  
ka ḥab<sub>2</sub>-ba-ni nu-du<sub>10</sub>-ga KAL(.)UN(= sun<sub>7</sub><sup>um</sup>?) me-te ṛin-na<sup>27</sup>  
ur-ṛgi<sup>7</sup> zi-ga in-na ḡeš ga-bi<sub>2</sub>-ib-tuku

“Woman<sup>21</sup>, perfecting evil like (or: instead of) good,  
The arrogant mouth – I will speak of her ways!  
Her stinking mouth (is) not good, (is) haughty(?), (is) worthy of insult!  
Horny dog, I will make her (or: everyone?) listen to (my) insults!”

– and the insults follow presently. Disregarding their abusive content, the style of the diatribes is reminiscent of hymns, and can be described in Claus Wilcke’s words as “descriptive, more or less connected assertions; often in the form of nominal sentences with or without copula.”<sup>27</sup> It therefore seems that diatribes should be envisioned as inversions of hymns, as praise turned into its opposite – or, in fact, as mock hymns. While *The Evil Mouth* in particular seemed to be a learned, ‘bookish’ composition, a recently identified manuscript from Sippar is written ‘phonetically.’ This opens up entirely new perspectives on the text’s ‘Sitz im Leben,’ as the non-standard orthography, intended to capture the sound rather than the meaning, might suggest this diatribe was actually sung.<sup>28</sup>

As regards verbal contests between schoolboys and women, there are several indications that they had at least the potential to be performed on stage – as it is in fact documented for precedence debates in the Ur III period.<sup>29</sup> While any theatrical performance of our texts in the OB period probably would have been restricted to a scholastic milieu where Sumerian was still understood, the use of demonstrative pronouns could still point in that direction. As Claus Wilcke suggested for a different work of Sumerian literature, deictic elements might have been accompanied by pointing gestures, illustrating what is happening on the stage.<sup>30</sup> In our texts, enclitic demonstratives were mostly added to body parts, and thus had a comical, if not obscene, effect: imagine two adolescent schoolboys on stage, enacting *2WB* (l. 154), with one of them pointing at his rival and exclaiming *galla*<sub>4</sub><sup>la</sup>-*bi-še*<sub>3</sub> *e*<sub>11</sub>-*da ama gan u*<sub>4</sub>-*šu*<sub>2</sub>-*ṛuš*<sup>7</sup>-*a* “It is this vulva which is being mounted – mother giving birth on a daily basis!” In fact, many

<sup>24</sup> For Akkadian debate poems as parodies see Jiménez (2017: 97–108). A study of Sumerian diatribes as parodies of hymns is currently being prepared by the author (Matuszak forthcoming a).

<sup>25</sup> See most recently Metcalf on the “genealogical topos” relating an individual deity to one of the great gods.

<sup>26</sup> See most recently Metcalf (2015: 22–28).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Wilcke (1972–75: 539).

<sup>28</sup> Or is it just a parody of non-standard orthography? Non-standard orthography aimed at rendering sound rather than meaning is otherwise mainly attested for liturgical texts to be sung; see most recently Delnero (2019) with further literature.

<sup>29</sup> AUCT I (Sigrist 1984), no. 794: 2. For the performance of Sumerian literary disputations see most recently Ceccarelli (2018: 134f. with notes 9–10) and Mittermayer (2019: 160f.) with further literature.

<sup>30</sup> Wilcke (2012: 20f. 29f.).

of the allegations of bodily deficits would have been a lot funnier in a live performance due to the (probable) incongruence between the allegation and the actual appearance of the actor. However, all this remains speculation.

#### 4) Discussion and conclusion

In summing up the discussion, it has first been observed that the technical term employed in both disputations and diatribes was ‘insult,’ which occasionally was even approximated to curses – probably on the grounds that both utterings could exert a strong, negative effect on the target. The threatening nature of the insults can best be illustrated by the ironical rhetorical questions often concluding individual speeches in the disputations. After enumerating all the rival’s character flaws and bodily deficits, their low social status and, above all, their incompetence, the speakers ask women “And you, you are a woman?!<sup>31</sup>” and men “And you, you are a man?!<sup>32</sup>” – the implied answer, of course, being ‘no.’ This stresses quite drastically that failure both as a professional and moral human being resulted in exclusion from a social group: if a housewife fails as a housewife, she will not be reckoned among women anymore, and if a scribe fails as a scribe, he will not be reckoned among men. The same verdict implicitly also looms over the addressees of the diatribes, and the punitive pedagogy behind the threat brings us back to Dr. Hoffmann’s stories, where misdemeanour not only resulted in social, but actual death.

But who was being threatened here? Clearly, none of the insults were really *ad personam*, as both the protagonists of the disputations and the addressees of the diatribes were paradigmatic,<sup>33</sup> stereotypical characters, whose all too numerous faults were greatly exaggerated. We therefore seem to be dealing with satire in its purest form: namely, as a didactic attack on vice rather than on individuals.<sup>34</sup> The readers – the schoolboys – were invited to laugh about these impossible fools and to exult gleefully in their ridiculous incompetence, ugliness, poverty, and immorality, which disqualified them as representatives of their trades, and as human beings in general. By inspiring a sense of *Schadenfreude* and superiority in the audience, the authors apparently sought to prevent them from repeating the same mistakes as the protagonists. The threat of expulsion from a privileged social group – in the case of scribes, the intellectual elite – was thus intended to reinforce a sense of belonging, and to motivate students to prove themselves worthy. So, if we can detect any humour in Sumerian didactic literature, we have to acknowledge that it is the humour of the male dominated intellectual elite.

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<sup>31</sup> E.g. 2WB 102 and 120: u<sub>3</sub> ze<sub>4</sub>-e munus-me-en “And you, you are a woman?!” and 2WB 55, 60, 83, 102 and 120: u<sub>3</sub> ze<sub>4</sub>-e ša<sub>3</sub> nu-nus-e-ne-me-en “And you, you belong to womankind!”

<sup>32</sup> E.g. D2 75: u<sub>3</sub> ze<sub>4</sub>-e lu<sub>2</sub>-lu<sub>7</sub>-me-en “And you, you are a man?!” and D2 120: u<sub>3</sub> ze<sub>4</sub>-e ša<sub>3</sub> lu<sub>2</sub>-u<sub>3</sub>-ne-me-en “And you, you belong to mankind!”

<sup>33</sup> Veldhuis (2004: 68).

<sup>34</sup> Meyer-Sickendiek (2007: 447 *et passim*).



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