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“A Flare for Style and Depth of Allusion:  
The Use of Fire and Water Imagery in Enuma Elish Tablet I.”  

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A close examination of the language of the Akkadian creation myth *Enuma Eliš* (Tablet I) suggests that many of the lexemes used in reference to the god Apsû ("fresh water") and the goddess Tiamat ("salt water") were chosen for their allusions to water. Similarly, the text often refers to the brazen god Marduk with words suggestive of fire. These allusions, which the text often achieves through puns and paranomasia (sound play), demonstrate an often unrecognized literary sophistication and bespeak an attempt by the scribes to portray these gods as physical manifestations of the elements they embody.

**INTRODUCTION**

The gap of several millennia that separates modern philologists from their ancient Mesopotamian counterparts often hinders a clear understanding of the more subtle nuances of Akkadian lexemes. While scholars have come a long way in isolating and defining thousands of words and their semantic ranges, it remains clear that what appear to us today as mere nouns and verbs, in antiquity were references alive with significance and allusion. This may be demonstrated by a close examination of allusive word choice in the first tablet of the ancient Mesopotamian creation epic, *Enuma Eliš* (lit. "When on high").

*Enuma Eliš* is probably the most significant expression of ancient Mesopotamian theology. The seven tablets which comprise the epic depict a primordial battle between order and chaos in which the watery forces, the gods Apsû and Tiamat, are defeated by Marduk, the new chief of the Babylonian pantheon. Though the oldest copies of the text date to the first millennium B.C.E., they doubtless are an expanded form of an earlier Mesopotamian cosmology. While the text's theological and historical aspects have received much attention in the scholarly literature, an examination of the tablets' highly sophisticated poetic style remains a desideratum, especially with respect to its use of allusion and paranomasia.

The purpose of allusion and paranomasia is difficult to ascertain because the devices are an integral part of the elevated diction of literary texts. As *Enuma Eliš* was ritually recited at the New Year's festival, however, we may opine that word and sound plays were understood as more than just embellishment. In Joshua Finkel's words, "the ancients probably took a more serious view of the situation and regarded the inherent duality of meaning as replete with marvelous and mysterious potentialities" (Finkel 1953:37). It is likely, therefore, that wordplay was more than just a method of enhancing a story, but a means of shaping a hearer's perception and conjuring images of the divine. As such, allusive language becomes a sophisticated method of character portrayal. In this respect, *Enuma Eliš* is a masterpiece.

**THE WATERY GODS**

An illustration of the epic's brilliant use of allusion occurs with respect to the divine couple Apsû and Tiamat. The importance of recognizing that Apsû and Tiamat represent the watery forces of chaos cannot be overstated, for in portraying these characters the epic continually alludes to water and/or destruction by water. A host of examples refer to calm or rough seas. For instance, when we are told in 1.26: "Tiamat was serene before them," we cannot help but envision the turbulent Tiamat (Sea) calming before her stormy battle. Similar are lines 40: "Tiamat was serene before them," and 58: "they (the gods in Tiamat's midst) seized silence, they sat calm." When it is said of Apsû "imminently, Apsû's face lit up" (1.51), a picture comes to mind of the surface of the fresh water Apsû reflecting light. Similar is the god's rebuke against Tiamat in 1.114: "And you did not go to his side, but lay calm." When we keep in mind that the verb *alāku*, translated "go," may be "said of the coming of a flood," and that *idu* may mean both "side" and "shore," we may read instead: "And you did not flow to his shore, but lay calm." The importance of portraying the characters "true to form" may be linked to the etiology behind the text. It should be

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1 The definitive text edition remains that of Lambert 1966.
3 Unless otherwise noted, translations and transliterations are my own.
5 Cf. the use of "face" in Gen 1:1: "and the spirit of Elohim hovered over the face of the water."
6 *CAD* A/1 308, s.v. *alāku; ilj 15, s.v. idu.*
remembered that in dividing up the corpse of Tiamat later in the epic, Marduk forms rivers.\(^7\) The flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates, therefore, may be the issue addressed by these allusions to water. In this way the epic continually builds its characters and impresses their images upon the hearer.

The verbs employed to describe the actions of Apsu and Tiamat are filled with allusions to water. The verb dalāḥu, “stir up, boil (water),”\(^8\) appears five times in the story, always in connection with Tiamat, the Sea (11.23, 108, 109, 116, 119). Possible translations of some of these lines might read:

23. dalūnimma ta'dītām karassa
“Their stirred up which was Tiamat’s desire.”

108. ušatī agamma udalāh dītām
“He induced a flood wave and made Tiamat turbulent.”

116. Yaddušu kartakima āl nisallal ninu
“...to stir up your depths, and now we cannot rest.”

Similarly used is dalū, which while normally translated “wander around aimlessly” or “watch carefully,” also may allude to dalū, “draw water.” The allusion is underscored in lines 109 and 119 by a close association of dalū with dalāḥu “boil (water).”

109. dalūhat Tiamatama urra u muti idulli
“Tiamat stirred and churned day and night.”

119. āl ummu astī dalulūhiš sadulli
“Are you not a mother? Do you not swirl around astī?”

Apsu is referenced in similar terms in 1.25:

25. lā nātī Apsū regimīn
“Apsu could not diminish their din.”

Also of note in 1.25 above is that nātaru, “diminish, cut off, remove,” also means “pour out.”\(^9\) The verse might be rendered more accurately with the watery nature of Apsu in mind. “Apsu could not douse their din.”

Of interest also is agū, “appear” (l.7). Like dalāḥu its secondary meaning is “blur the eyes (with water).”\(^10\) The subtle allusion to water is perfect for a description of the birth of the gods, who are made to appear (i.e., “made to be seen with the eyes”) by the mixing of the waters of Apsū and Tiamat. This also foreshadows the great confrontation with Marduk in which the vision of the rival gods “blurs” (IV:70; so Heidel 1951:39).

An allusion to water also occurs with sapāḥu, “disperse” (l.39), which also can mean “spill, diffuse.”\(^12\) Apsu threatens: lūštallīgma alkatumu luappid, “Let me abolish their ways and disperse them.” The picture presented here is one of destruction by flood. Further, li-ta-ap-pi-ib also may be read li-ta-ap-bi-ib, i.e., “let me sprinkle.”\(^13\) The author ingeniously has portrayed Apsu as diffusing the rebellious gods like water drops. That “spilling” can mean “killing” may be seen in Tablet IV:18 of the same myth wherein the promise to find the agitator runs: u ilu ta limnī ti suhu tabīk naptasu “But as for the god who espoused evil, pour out his life!”

Still illusions run deep. In line 53 we read:

53. dītummu itedir kitāsu
“Mummu embraced his (Apsu’s) neck.”

Translations do not do justice to the line’s cleverness. The word kitādu means not only “neck,” but also “shore!”\(^14\) The idiom, which is akin to the English “hugged the shore,” is one of the more creative examples of punning in the tablet. The wordplay occurs again in Tablet II:113 where Marduk promises Anšar: kitādu Tiamat urruhiš takabba astā “Soon you will trample upon the neck/shore of Tiamat.”

Allusions to water do not end here. When Ea puts Apsu to sleep we hear:

64. suru irebihiš sū tilisubatis
“He poured sleep on him so that he slept soundly.”

65. ušilimma Apsām rihip sišum
“Put Apsu to rest drenched with sleep.”

Here the III/1 conjugation of rehū, “pour out” and its adjectival form rihip, “drenched” are used appropriately to depict Apsu as sinking into deep sleep.

Shortly after this the epic relates how Mummu took advantage of Apsu’s rest by iptur rikṣitu itabat agālu, “unfastening his belt and taking off his crown” (l.67). When we observe that agū means both “crown” and “wave,” a pun rises to the surface.\(^15\) Fittingly, Apsu was crowned with water. That the secondary meaning of agū was known to the composer of the text is confirmed by the use of agū as “wave” in line 108.

\(^7\) *upari*‘ma utīsi damīlā, tāru italunu ana puqras ulāšīl (IV:131-132). Hence, the assembly’s declaration following Tiamat’s defeat: “May she retreat without hindrance, may she recede forever” (VII:134). So Heidel 1951:59.

\(^8\) *CAD* D 43, s.v. dalāḥu.

\(^9\) *CAD* D 58, 59, s.v. dalū, *CAD* D 56, s.v. dalū.

\(^10\) *CAD* N/2 60, 64, s.v. nātaru.

\(^11\) *CAD* A/2 204-205, s.v. apū, *CAD* D 43, s.v. dalāḥu.

\(^12\) *CAD* S 151, 256, s.v. sapāḥu.

\(^13\) *CAD* Š1 3, s.v. tabāḥu.

\(^14\) Note the example: ana ki-$\text{ṣa-}\text{ad tiāmīm illīlik. *CAD* K 450, s.v. kitādu.}

\(^15\) *CAD* A/1 153, 157, s.v. agū.
Linked with the playful use of agû in line 67 is it-ta-bat, from šaḫātu, “take off.” If one instead reads it-ta-bat, a reading permitted by the ambiguous orthography, another allusion to water emerges, for šaḫātu means “sprinkle, drain, or wash.” In one breath we are told how Mummu “took off his crown” and “washed him with a torrent” (presumably of sleep).

One play on Tiamat’s watery ways is unique in that it constitutes a Janus Parallelism. Janus Parallelism is a literary device in which a pun faces back to a previous stitch in poetry in one of its meanings and ahead to a following stitch in another. The polysemy can occur either in two stitches (“asymmetrical Janus parallelism”) or three (“symmetrical Janus parallelism”) and both types are attested in biblical Hebrew and Akkadian.

While karitu is heard on the line’s surface as “belly, guts,” it echoes within karatu, “catastrophe, annihilation.” With its secondary meaning karatu, “desire, heart, mind,” the text reminds us of Tiamat’s rage mentioned in the previous line. As a metaphoric pun on karatu, “annihilation,” the pun anticipates “shall we destroy!” in the next verse. Thus, it is a symmetrical Janus Parallelism. That Tiamat’s suppressed “desire” was to “annihilate” is made clear by the proximity of karatu to nadu, which means both “throw, hurl” and “let water flow, steep in liquid.”

It is perhaps in the light of such allusions to water that we should understand Tiamat’s epithet:

133. umma Ḫubur pātīqat kalamu
“Mother Ḫubur fashioner of all things.”

As noted by S. Dalley, the line contains a pun on the Ḫubur River, the river of the underworld. Moreover, a river seems a suitable place to envision the birth of snakes, as we find subsequently in lines 134-141.

Later, Tiamat’s omnipotence is boasted:

145. gapta tērētatu lā maḥra šināma
“Her orders so powerful, (they) could not be changed.”

The verb ṭanû, normally translated “change, alter,” also means “flood with water.” The verb is used artfully here; the subtle message conveyed is that one is as likely to change Tiamat’s orders as one is to inundate her.

There may also be a reflection of water in the words of Tiamat to her lover Kingu:

155. ū ṭurbatama Ḫā’iru edû ʿātā
“You will be the greatest, for you are my only lover.”

The fact that Kingu is actually Tiamat’s second lover, second to Apsû, is humorously alluded to by the use of edû, both “only, most notable” and “an on-rush of water.” Therefore, we may translate the verse as a metaphorical term of endearment: “You will be the greatest, my lover, you are an on-rush of water.”

MARDUK AND FIRE

The flood of allusion in connection with Apsû and Tiamat comes to a trickle with the appearance of the epic’s main character, Marduk. His birth sets the stage for the closing of the flood gates of chaos, and the end of Tiamat’s unchecked rule. As Marduk grows in strength and stature the watery powers of Apsû and Tiamat are subsumed into his being. Just as their power was embodied in liquid, so it is by liquid that Marduk absorbs his power. Born of Enki, the god of waters, and after having “sucked the breasts of the goddesses” (I.85), Marduk is ṣatgu mā’dī ṣēlimû atar mimûnu, “elevated far above them, and superior in every way” (I.92). Here ṣatgu, a III1 stative conjugation of the verb ṣaṭqû, “be high,” also can be rendered “he was made to drink.” The notion that powers formerly belonging to Tiamat could be bestowed by drinking is supported by a similar use of ṣaṭqû in reference to Kingu, upon whom Tiamat bestows her love and the command of her hosts.
Marduk's connection with water also may serve to foreshadow his eventual defeat of Tiamat. Witness the following lines: "He who has opened the fountains (and) has apportioned waters in abundance" (VII:60); "He who crosses the wide sea in its anger" (VII:74); "The sea is his craft upon which he rides" (VII:77). In fact, in order to defeat Tiamat, Marduk "raises the rain-flood" (IV:40); so Heidel 1951:38, 56-57.

Later, upon receiving his nourishment, the youthful Marduk is admired:

87. tamhat nabnitu sarir nifi enitu
"Extraordinary his form, the glance of his eyes sparkling."

The word sarir may be read three ways: as "frightening," "flickering," or "flowing." Though it is commonly understood as "frightening" or "flickering," the possibility of it meaning "flowing," in light of other allusions to water, should not be discarded completely. Moreover, there is reason to view the double meaning as a literary embodiment of Marduk's transition to adulthood represented by a miraculous transformation of elements, i.e., from water to fire. Note that "flickering" and "frightening" are apt descriptions of fire, as "flowing" is of water.

When Marduk reaches maturity, allusions of water in reference to him completely evaporate, giving way to images of fire. Marduk is now in his element. The contrast between water and fire is developed further through an ironic twist of words wherein Kingu, who was filled with power by Tiamat, is described with an allusion to fire. Marduk, is later called by the name dGirru, "fire" (VII:155). The metaphor and word play are quite in keeping with the brazen image of Marduk. Again, the allusions to fire may subtly foreshadow the final conflict. When Marduk billows his strength at the battle-line we are told: iškun birgu ina pānītu, nablu mutšam-mitu zanumu umtalla, "Lightning precedes him and fills his body with a blazing flame" (IV:39-40).

That Marduk embodies the element fire is perhaps best seen by another Janus Parallel in line 104.

104. pulhātu ḫatassina elītu kamra
An aura of fear covered him entirely.

Pertinent here is the word "entirely," ḫa-tat-si-na. Though it offers no grammatical problem to the sense of the passage, other readings are possible. For example, we may read the word ḫa-māṣ-si-na, "fires," or ḫa-tat-si-na, "fifty." The reading "fires" is supported by the frequent association of melammu with fire. As such, it puts on the previous line wherein Marduk's radiance is described. If we read instead "fifty," the line serves both as a Janus Parallelism between lines 103 and 105 by referring to a number and as an allusion to the fifty names of Marduk. Indeed, as A. Heidel notes, one of Marduk's names was Fifty: "...the number of names heaped upon him."
Therefore we have reason to read line 104 in a number of ways:

"An aura of Fear covered him entirely."
"Fearful fire rays covered him entirely."
"The Fifty fears are heaped upon him."
"The Fifty, he is fear, he is annihilation."

CONCLUSION

The examples of allusion and paronomasia above illustrate the forethought with which words were chosen for portraying characters. The author(s) took great care to cast the story as an accurate depiction of a confrontation between two opposing elements, water and fire. That the element fire, i.e., Marduk, achieves victory in the end is meant to underscore the miracle behind the event. When water and fire meet in reality, water would naturally be expected to win. Here, however, the laws of nature are reversed. Marduk's victory is no less miraculous.

That Enûma Elîš was read before the populace on the fourth day of the New Year's festival suggests that literary allusions were meant to be described by those attending and that they were in some way important to the ritual (Dalley 1989:231). In this respect, it is interesting to note that fire and water figure prominently in the mythological explanatory works of Babylonian scholars, in particular, in those texts which make references to Apsû, Tiamat, and Kingu (Livingstone 1986:120-121). It is also possible that such allusions served an oracular function, as symbolic manifestations of the divinity.37 We are reminded again of the words of J. Finkel: "In contradistinction to 'poor us' nondescriptive philologists they were linguists of omen and portent by dint of uncanny coincidences of sound and meaning" (Finkel 1953:37).

Unfortunately, a sea of time between then and now drowns all possibility of knowing with certitude the purpose of such allusions. The epic's ritual context, however, suggests that they were regarded as more than just literary embellishments. Yet, despite a gap in our knowledge, we are able to appreciate the literary devices in Enûma Elîš for their profound depth and brilliance. It is hoped that future studies concerning other ancient Near Eastern nature deities will employ the language employed to describe them.38 In so doing, we will arrive at a better understanding of the literary and theological sophistication of the ancients.

ABBREVIATIONS


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Machinist, Peter. "Rest and Violence in the Poem of

35 His comment is based on VII:143-144.
36 CAD K 112, 113, s.v. kamāru.
37 This may be connected with the well-known importance placed on names in the ancient Near East, especially the name of a god. The significance of Marduk’s name is made clear in the epilogue: "Let his name be declared, uttered in the land!" (VII:50); "May his name endure forever!" (VII:54).
38 A similar concern for allusion in character portrayal appears in the Epic of Erra. See Machinist 1983:221-226. See also the Ugaritic epic of the storm god Baal (UT 51, VII:17-31) whose voice is thunder and whose house has a window through which light shines.