“SUFFERING AMBIGUITY IN LUDLUL BÊL NÉMEQI: ON ERUDITION, IDEOLOGY, AND THEOLOGY IN TABLET I”

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Abstract

In this study, I examine several cases of ambiguity in Ludlul bêl nêmeqi that force one to probe the nature and character of Marduk and the cause of human sin and suffering. When understood within the context of a profession that promoted secrecy and that hermeneutically exploited textual ambiguity to ascertain divine secrets, the cases of ambiguity demonstrate theological principles associated with the Marduk cult, including the incomprehensibility of his godhead and his subsumption of gods, demons, and the powers of sorcerers. The essay concludes by looking at the poem’s ambiguities as representative of the divinatory institution’s critical inquiry into the cult’s syncretistic theology and the dilemmas it naturally poses concerning the ultimate cause of sin and suffering.

Ludlul bêl nêmeqi is an abstruse text — deliberately so, one might argue. Its author was a highly learned ritual professional, and he took great pains to make sure that posterity knew it, often employing arcane words drawn from medicine, mythology, and the divinatory sciences.1) Wilfred Lambert describes the poem this way.

The range of vocabulary is far wider than in most religious texts, and hapax legomena or meanings not otherwise attested occur frequently. The author has certainly not coined these rare words himself. He was steeped in the magic literature and seems to have culled from it all the obscure phrases and recondite words.2)

With regard to the poet’s artifice, Benjamin Foster describes it as the work of a master: “The author makes use of every poetic device in the Akkadian repertory. He is fond of wordplays... alliteration, rhyme, intricate parallelism, (and the) inclusion by opposites.”3)

The poet’s message, which ostensibly is about the cause of personal suffering, concludes that, because one cannot fully comprehend Marduk’s will and reasoning, one must extol him. Thus, the poet’s use of difficult language not only embodies his message about divine incomprehensibility, it becomes ironic in its light. Indeed, the long list of scholarly terms and learned literary devices only underscores the author’s predicament that despite all of his acquired wisdom, he can only hunch his shoulders and praise the “Lord of Wisdom.”

It is in this context that I would like to examine the poet’s sophisticated language in Tablet I, with special attention to the opening hymn and the account of the angry king and his seven wicked courtiers. Specifically, I shall argue that the author has charged this section of his poem with a number of ambiguities that represent an ideological and theological engagement with the subject of divine knowledge.4) I divide my study into four sections. In the first, I contextualize my analysis by discussing how the divinatory profession hermeneutically exploited ambiguity to ascertain divine secrets and how secrecy was ideologically vital to that institution. In the second, I turn to the opening hymn in Ludlul and examine several cases of ambiguity that force one to probe the nature and character of Marduk and the cause of human sin and suffering.5) In the third, I present additional cases of ambiguity that demonstrate theological principles associated with the Marduk cult, including his subsumption of gods, demons, and the powers of sorcerers.6) I close the study with a few observations concerning the author and his learned use of ambiguity.

1. Ambiguity and Divine Secrets

We may see the author’s use of ambiguity functioning much like his pseudonymity. Both served to conceal ideological and theological knowledge that was restricted for the inner circle. Indeed, as an ummânâ “master scholar” and/or āšû “exorcist,” the author of Ludlul worked hard to cultivate his authority as a handler of divine secrets.7) His profession held especially close the secret readings of learned texts that were obtained through paronomasia, notariqon, and the polyvalent values of cuneiform signs (both phonetic and...

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3) Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 44-47, places the creation of the poem in the Kassite period, but the development of a universalist Marduk theology in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I. If he is correct, then the ambiguities studied here reflect the theological development of this later period.

logographic). This hermeneutic belonged generally to what Babylonian scholars called the amāt nisirī “hidden words” and pirīšī ša ili “secret of the gods.” As one school text instructs: tupārātu bit bâni nirātī Ḍammanki tâdâlšīṁna nisirāta ukallamka

The scrabal art is a house of goodness, the treasure/secret of Ammanki.

Work ceaselessly with the scrabal art, and it will reveal its treasure/secret to you. It was the task of the advanced pupil to study closely a text’s signs and to apply the learned hermeneutic in order to obtain the divine secrets embedded in it, whether that text was written in the stars, a sheep’s liver, or on a clay tablet. Like the discipline that employed it, the signs could hide in plain sight information that required and reified the role of those who could interpret them properly.

2. The Hymn to Marduk: On the Ambiguity of the Divine and Human Suffering

It is within this context of erudition, ideology, and theology that I turn first to the opening hymn, in which the poet exalts Marduk as a god of extreme contrasts. As he proclaims, Marduk is eizzātî muppašīr ụrri “furious at night, relaxed at dawn” (1 2, 4). The line is more than a poetic description of capriciousness, for as Lambert observes, the Marduk cult held that “all other powers of the universe were but aspects of him.” Thus, the author’s frequent use of merisms to describe Marduk allows him to engrav a profound theological tenet on his audience: as a merism embodied, Marduk is all things. As Takayoshi Oshima remarks, the text is “an embodiment of Babylonian cult dogma in the second half of the second millennium B.C.E.”

Nevertheless, the merisms are not always as straightforward as one might expect, for many of them are ambiguous and impel one to contemplate the meaning of Marduk’s actions. With regard to the aforementioned expression muppašīr ụrri, William Moran observes that it:

...compels attention, and by leaving us to supply the object it also creates rich ambiguity. The indefiniteness allows us to think not only of Marduk’s wrath but of the ‘loosening’ of other things as well — the sins that provoke wrath, the clutch of the demon, disease and pain, the tangle of troubled dreams. ...or does (it) depart even further from expectation and make ụrri... the object, the day cleared and the cloudless symbol of Marduk’s mercy...? The ambiguity leaves us with questions and persuades us to concur with the author’s assertion that Marduk’s intentions cannot be comprehended, even by the other gods (10 3-12).

Moreover, the polyvalency of some merisms allows for interpretations that stress the darker side of Marduk’s character. Thus, in the hymn we learn:

8. musaḥḫīr karassu kabbatša tārat
His mood turns, his emotion pivots,
9. ša nakbat qāṭīšu là ināšša šamā’u
The force of whose hand, the heavens cannot hold,
10. ritnāš rabbāt ụkaššu mītu
Whose palm is gentle, it assists the dying.
11. ṬAMAR.UTU (Marduk) ša nakbat qāṭīšu là ināšša šamā’u
Marduk, the force of whose hand, the heavens cannot hold,
12. rabbātī rittašu ụkaššu mītu
Gentle is his palm, it assists the dying.
13. ša ina šuṭṭatu ṣuttā’ gabrītum
On account of whose wrath, graves are opened (I 9-13).

Here the poet’s repetition and variation simultaneously laud and arraign Marduk’s extreme qualities. Note first the ambiguous wording of I 8: musaḥḫīr karassu kabbatša tārat “His mood turns, his emotion pivots.” One can read the line positively or negatively: it is impossible to know which direction Marduk’s mood is said to swing. In addition, both saḥḫār and tārat have semantic parameters that permit the meanings “turn, return, repeat, and transform.” Further, since Marduk is the subject of the previous line, it is possible to read him as the subject of musaḥḫīr rather than his karaššu “mood.” This becomes meaningful when we recognize the paronomasia by which karaššu (karas) “mood” suggests karaššu “catastrophe” and kabbatu “passion” suggests kabbītu “grievous matter.” The allusions characterize Marduk as the one who brings catastrophe and his emotion as a grievous matter. Moreover, in the Epic of Gilgamesh both karas and kabbītu occur in reference to the great flood about which Ea warns Utanapishtim. By drawing upon that learned

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8) Alasdaí Livingstone, Mystical and Mythological Exploratory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Noegel, Nocturnal Ciphers, We find the same techniques employed in commentaries, which presumably were used in school settings. See Eckart Frahm, Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation (GMTR; 5; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 70-85.


11) See Frahm, Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries. For an examination of such devices in Tablet IV, see Alan Lenzi, “Scribal Hermeneutics and the Twelve Gates of Ludlul Bēl Nemeqi,” Journal of the American Oriental Society 135 (2015): 733-749. I thank Alan Lenzi for sharing an earlier draft of his article with me and for providing helpful feedback on earlier draft of this essay.

12) On the opposing features of Marduk, see Takayoshi Oshima, Babylonian Prayers to Marduk (Orientalische Religionen in der Antike, 7; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 48-58.


14) Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 28.
tradition, the author subsumes Ea’s role into Marduk and offers a fitting follow-up to the previous line: 

azziššu lā māhay ațbāt rābū “His fury one cannot withstand, the deluge is his rage” (I 7). Moreover, in case one did not catch the allusions, shortly afterwards the poet employs karaššā: “Then he (Marduk) raises the fallen from catastrophe (karaššā)” (I 14); and kabittu: “Dangerous in a flash, his grievous (kabitti) punishment” (I 17).

Polysyney also obtains in the repeated verb kāššu (I 10, 12), which means “help, assist” or “delay.” When understood as the former, the hymn describes Marduk’s care for the dying, but when read as the latter, it casts him as a god who cruelly prolongs the death of the sufferer. The former finds support in Marduk’s rittuš rabbāt “whose palm is gentle,” whereas the latter anticipates the mention of Marduk’s wrath and open graves (I 13) and the sufferer’s own protracted illness for which others prepare an open tomb (II 114).

In addition, we can read the signs comprising the word nak-baʿ (I 9, 11) as nag-bi meaning “deep-spring.” This calls to mind the title ĀMAR.UTU ša naqbi “Marduk of the deep-spring,” further representative of his subsumption of Ea’s role.

The change in reading encourages us to translate I 9 as a rhetorical question: “From the deep-spring, do his (Marduk’s) hands not hold up the heavens?”

Another case of ambiguity is the two-fold use of rabbātu, which means “gentle, calm” or “large, powerful, grievous” (617).

One simultaneously hears that the very palm that is gentle can be overbearing, even for the heavens (I 9, 11). The ambiguity thus anticipates I 33: anna kā kabittu ŠU-su (qāssu) ŠA-ba-šā (littuša) rēmēni “As grievous as is his hand, his heart is merciful.” However, here too we have polysyney, because kabitu also means “venerable, honored” and qātu can mean “power, care, control.” Thus, we may understand anna kā kabattu qāssu to mean “As venerable as is his power.” In fact, it is not until Luddil III 1 that the negative nuance of the phrase kabittu qāssu becomes clear: kabittu ŠU-su (qāssu) ul ale’i našaṣa “His hand was grievous, I could not bear it.”

Ambiguity in the service of erudition also appears in I 18-20.

18. ikkarrīmā zamarma iṭar alittuš
He is caring and instantly becomes motherly.
19. ikduduna rīnumu aganna
He darts and dotes on his pitied one.
20. kī āraḥ bāri itanashāra EGISR-šā (arkēšu)
And like a cow (to her) calf, keeps turning around behind him.

These lines offer a veritable cornucopia of allusions. We can derive the verb ikkarrīmā (written ik-karrīm-a) from nakṣutu meaning “show pity, mercy.” Yet the sign rī also has the value rīt, which permits a paronomasia from karatu “strike, cut off.” In addition, alittuš refers to a mother giving birth, but paronomastically one also hears in this word littu “offspring” and littu “cow.” The verb edēdu means “act quickly” or “pointed” (hence my “darts”) in reference to horns and impetuous action. Even rāmu is polyvalent. It can mean “womb, mercy, passion” or a “wild bull,” and it paronomastically suggests rāmu “loved one.”

The possibilities for interpretation are manifold. An alittu “woman giving birth” can suggest maternal tenderness, but also travail. Marduk either is caring towards his loved one or he becomes cut off from his protégé. He is either quick to act or pointed and impetuous. The additional paronomasia suggesting a cow and wild bull only perfects Marduk’s transformation into a bovine. The combined polysyney and paronomasia force one to contemplate which of the characteristics defines him.

31. Supported now by Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Piou Sufferers, 177. CAD I/1 195.
32. See the references on the Hymn to Marduk in Nocturnal Ciphers.
33. "His fury one cannot withstand, the deluge is his rage.” (I 7).
34. See below.
35. Scholars are divided on the exact identification of the god who gives birth in the Text.
36. See below.
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120. See below.
121. See below.
122. See below.
Theological ambiguity continues in I 22-24.

22. ṭuššiš šindāšu uhattari namara
   His bandsage pac[ī]ṣya, they revive (the one afflicted by)
   the Namtar-demon.

23. iqaḫi gilīṭa ỉšrāšu
   He speaks and assigns guilt.

24. iqaḫi l(ū) l(ūm) ištārlū išparṭarē ʾilīti u annu
   On the day of his justice, liablility and punishment are
   absolved.

Of immediate interest is the ambiguity inherent in I 22. While the use of bandsages suggests the revival of someone
inflicted by a Namtar-demon, the fact that we must supply the words “the one afflicted by,” suggests, as Rainer Albertz
avers, that the author implies Marduk’s responsibility for his suffering, and by extension, man’s sin.39

The subject of sin is then resumed in the next two lines. However, here too there is ambiguity. Of note is the cuneiform
form sign raš in uth-raš-ši (I 23), which also has the value kūš. This allows us to derive the verb as a šā-stem causative
form of kūša “delay” (rather than from raši “assign”) and translate: “He speaks and delays guilt.”40 The reading finds
fulfillment in the next line: “[On the day of his justice, sin and
transgression are absolved]” (I 24). With a single stroke the
poet comments on Marduk’s unpredictability in issuing
a verdict or a stay.41 Again, he is a merism embodied.
Annu and Lenzi’s explanation of this passage is apposite: “even
the sufferer’s sin is explained by way of Marduk’s inscrutable
freedom to do as he pleases.”42

Further, I 24 contains two words that one can understand
in varying ways: ʾišitu and annu (from annu). On the one
hand, since both occur after the assigning/delaying of guilt,
we can read them both in a juridical sense, i.e., as “liability”
and “crime/punishment,” respectively. However, both
words also mean “sin,” thus connecting the verdict or stay
to a transgression against Marduk. By identifying his punishment
with sin, the author echoes the conventional theology
of his day that understands suffering as the result of sin,43
and foreshadows the sufferer’s entrance through the eighth
gate: ina KĂ NAM.TAG.GA DUH.A ʾišitu ippatir “In the
Gate of Namtagaduha (lit. “Absolution of Sin”) my trans
gression was dissolved” (IV 45).44

The contemplation concerning sin and punishment in I 22-24 subtly attributes the responsibility for human sin to
Marduk. Note that, up until this point in the text, the sufferer
has confessed to no wrongdoing. On the contrary, before
describing the results of Marduk’s anger, he proclaims:
“I will teach the people their plea for favor is near. May his
favorable concern carry off their sin” (I 39-40). His use of
the third person pronoun only draws attention to the fact that
he has admitted to no guilt of his own. In fact, one hears
nothing of personal sin until much later, in a broken portion
of Tablet III (58-60), following the nocturnal promise of
recovery. As Annu and Lenzi remark, “It is surely sig-
ificant that he mentions sin only after he received divine
aid.”45

Consider a similar case of ambiguity in I 27-28.

27. mušnanoḥi rišišu ʿIM (Adad) mištisu ʾEra
   Who abates the [crushing of Adad,] the wound of Era,
28. musallim DINGIR (išu) n 15 (tīšātu) šabbāsātu
   Who pacifies a furious god and goddess.

There is much hidden in this learned passage. Not only do
rišišu and mištisu rhyme, but the latter term also designates
cuneiform signs and writing. Thus, the phrase mištisu
Erra naturally evokes the “writing of (the name) Era,” i.e.,
ēr-ra. Indeed, a close look reveals that the logographic
meaning of the sign RA in Era’s name denotes both rišišu
“crushing” and mištisu “wound.”46

Moreover, the entire passage is ambiguous.47 Does the
author’s use of mušnanoḥi convey the notion that Marduk will
lessen the impact of Adad and Era’s destruction? Or does
it suggest that he will make it pale in comparison to his own
wrath? Similarly, does musallim signify that Marduk will
reconcile the anger of the god and goddess? Or will he be on
favorable terms with them?48 Again, the ambiguity cautions
us not to assume firm knowledge of Marduk’s character.

The rhetorical queries in I 35-36 are also ambiguous.

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39 Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 180-181, suggests reading “day of offering” (to Marduk).
der Meinung ist, daß Marduk selber Sünde auf einen Menschen bringen
cann.” Note that the sufferer seems an exorcist in his dream who was sent
by Marduk and states that he brought a bandage (šīndāra) for
Šubi-mešē-Šakkan (III 44-45). The passage recalls the author’s ambigu-
ous statement concerning the bandage in I 122: CAD K 295, s.v. kūša,
shows no attestation of a šā-stem, but such refinement is not beyond the abilities of our poet who twice employs this
form elsewhere (I 27, 56). A. Albertz, “Ludlul bēl nēmeqi eine Lehredicht-
ung zur Ausbreitung und Vertiefung der persönlichen Mardukfrömmig-
keit,” 88, 119, notes the alternative reading, but rejects it.
41 The author also registers Marduk’s ambivalence in assigning or
releasing sin by his iconic use of the wax tablet in the dream episode (III
42), which recorded the sufferer’s sins and could be just as easily shelved
or erased. See Pongratz-Leisten, “From Ritual to Text to InterText,” 152-
153. Oshima, Babylonian Prayers to Marduk, 55, suggests that the tablet
symbolized a prayer or incantation of Asarluḫu.
42 Annu and Lenzi, Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi, xxiii.
43 Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 12, sees this sin as
the sufferer’s neglect of cultic obligations to Marduk and his temple.
44 On the learned use of polyvalent signs here and in the names of
the other gates, see Lenzi, “Scribal Hermeneutics and the Twelve Gates of
Ludlul bēl nēmeqi.”
35. štā ʾ hālu šīlu (litibušu) muhāštāš lišāšī
Without his desire, who could pacify his strike?
36. ʾēla kabbātsū atū līšāli Šū-su (qāṣu)
Apart from his emotion, who could restrain his hand?

Notable is the expression muhāštāš lišāšī, which means “pacify his strike” or “heal his wound.”53 The former implies that no one can withstand Marduk’s power, whereas the latter cynically suggests that one must await Marduk’s decision to heal wounds that he himself has inflicted. As Oshima observes, “these lines imply that Marduk is ultimately responsible for people’s adversities as well as for their salvation.”54 In I 36, the words līšāli qāṣu are also ambiguous. If we treat the verb as a causative form of alālu “hang,” it translates “restrain his hand.”55 However, there is another verb alālu that means “hail, acclaim, boast.”56 In fact, the š-stem form of this verb appears twice in reference to hailing Marduk in Enūma elīš (V 81, VII 46). I already have discussed gātu “hand” as also meaning “power, care, control.” This allows us to render the question: “Apart from his emotion, who would hail his power?,” intimating that it is only the threat of Marduk’s violence that compels one to honor him. This informs the sufferer’s statement in the next line: ṣūdā iṣu ṣu usinhī “Let me praise his fury, I, who like a fish, gulped silt” (I 37).57 The sufferer’s double-edged praise continues in I 40-42.

40. hīṣatsu SiG.S (damīq)-u-ānā annūnas lišāt
May his favorable grace carry off their sin.
41. iṣu Šū (u-šu) nī miši inninni
From the day the lord punished me,58
42. 𝑢 aqarrū[a] ʾMAR.ATU (Marduk) ibasu [KJ] īti-ia
And the hero Marduk was wroth with me.

Polysemous here is the verb enēnū. In addition to meaning "punish," it means “grant favor, be favorable.”59 This permits us to render I 42: “from the day the lord found favor with me.” This reading is suggested by SiG.S-ta-[nū] (= damīq-tuqtum) in the previous line, and by I 38-39 just prior, which also uses enēnū “grant favor” to refer to the fortunes Marduk can confer: “He quickly bestowed favor (innimmānu).” Yet, as “punish,” the line points ahead to Marduk’s anger in the next line and the results that it brings in I 43-44. It thus forms a Janus Parallellism.60 Once again the polysemic communica-

cates Marduk’s unpredictability and incomprehensibility; to wit, even a master diviner cannot fully know what Marduk intends, whether for weal or woe.

From a literary perspective, the author’s ambiguity enacts for the reader the sufferer’s experience failing to find a clear sign through divinatory means. As he bemoans:

51. dalḥā tērētā nūppūtu uddakam
Convoluted are my extispicies, ambiguous daily.61
52. īti LU.HAL (bārī) u šā lī li alātikā ul parsat
My sign, the extisipcer and diviner could not parse.62

Like the reader who encounters frightening descriptions of Marduk hidden in the cuneiform signs used to praise him, so too does the sufferer discover terror in the only signs he is able to obtain (I 49, 54-55). As he complains: isākānumma idāt piritti “Omens of terror were established for me” (I 49); an experience in which an expected piritti “secret” became an unexpected piritti “terror.”63

3. Ambiguity and the Subsumption of Gods, Demons, and the Power of Sorcerers

In a number of passages, the author employs polysemy to bolster the theological claim implicit in the merisms that Marduk is the embodiment of all things. Babylonian religion generally held a fluid conception of divine incarnation, as Benjamin Sommer explains: “...in Mesopotamian religions, divine bodies differ from nondivine ones in that a deity’s presence was not limited to a single body; it could emerge simultaneously in several objects.”64 Nevertheless, in the Marduk cult this theology reached new heights. Indeed, the story of Marduk’s creation in Enūma elīš holds the gods Anu, Ea, and Enlil into Marduk’s being (IV 4; VII 101, 136, 142-144).65 In Akkadian Literature, “Nouvelles Assyrologiques Bivres et Utilitaires” (1995): 33-34; “Another Janus Parallelism in the Atra-ḥsis Epic,” Acta Sumerologica 17 (1995): 342-344.
61. The word nuppūtu means “swollen, bloated” in reference to disease or “light fires.” CAD N 2/342, s.v. nuppūtu; CAD N 3/268, s.v. napūpu. However, in reference to extispicy omens it means “ambiguous,” i.e., “swollen with nippu-signs.” A nippu-sign is an abnormal feature on the exta that functions like a “joker sign” to change the meaning of an omen to its opposite. See Heefel, “The Hermeneutics of Mesopotamian Extispicy,” 25-26. CAD N 2/242, s.v. nippu. See Oshima, Babylonian Prayers to Marduk, 192, suggests the word here refers to an omen of evil import.
62. A šā tīlu is not necessarily a dream interpreter, hence my translation “diviner.” In Ludlī II 7, the šā tīlu is connected to libanomy. On the interdisciplinarity of Mesopotamian divinatory professionals, see Noegel, Nocturnal Ciphers, 32-34. Oshima, Babylonian Prayers to Marduk, 192-193, reads itī as a preposition (“by means of”) rather than a noun (“sign”).
65. Earlier syncretism had folded the gods Asaluhī and Tutu into Marduk as well. A similar device obtains in the Song of Ėrra, in which Marduk, Ėrra, and Isšu are brought seamlessly into a single frame that blurs their identities. The device serves to make Ėrra and Isšu appear as manifestations of Marduk. See Noegel, “Word Play’ in the Song of Ėrra,” 162-193. On other deities as manifestations of Marduk, see the one god list fragment of the AN = Anu šā āmēli type that focuses solely on the god Marduk, discussed by Lambt, “The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon,” 191-200. The text appears in CT 24, pl. 50, No. 47406. It does not appear in also “punishing,” a Reconstruction of the Assyro-Babylonian God Lists, AN: 5A-NU-UM and AN: ANU ŠA AMELI (Texts from the Babylonian Collection, Texts from the Babylonian Collection, 3: New Haven, CT: Yale Babylonian Collection, 1998). Additional syncretism with Marduk appears in some incantations to Marduk. See Oshima, Babylonian Prayers to Marduk, 388-394.
I already have touched on this above with regard to the association of Marduk with the deluge and other terms connected to Ea. We encounter it again when the poet describes the fifth of seven courtiers who plotted evil against him: ḫaššu pī ḫa-šē-e sabālut. (63). The word sabālut means to “make someone change their opinion, mood, or allegiance” when it occurs in conjunction with pī “mouth.”(66) So it appears that the fifth adversary is changing someone’s opinion, but whose?

At the heart of the difficulty is the lexeme ḫa-šē-e, which undoubtedly was selected as a paronomastic complement for ḫaššu “fifth.”(67) Annus and Lenzi note the existence of a variant text that reads ḫa-an-šē-e and render it “fifty,” translating the verse: “And the fifth overturned the opinion of fifty.”(68) Oshima similarly renders “The fifth incited fifty people…”(69) This provides an apt description of the case, that one person’s accusations can do in a community. However, as I have noted elsewhere, the presence of odd orthography or peculiar grammar often serves to signal the presence of polysemy — for diviners, an abnormal “sign” constituted a meaningful “signifier.”(70) Nieck Velhuis similarly maintains: “Ungrammaticality, or deviant grammar, is often a mark in that it draws attention to something special, as readers of modern poetry well know.”(71)

I submit that the author employed the odd orthography and chose the hyperbolic number not only to create alliteration, but to underscore the ultimate source of his suffering, namely Marduk, who possessed fifty names, one of which was “Fifty.”(72) As the end of Enûma elīš informs us: tna izki ḫaṣšu itilni rabšt hu ṣumētu imbā “The great gods called the fifty names they pronounced his name ‘Fifty’” (VII 143-144). As a master of Akkadian exegetical and literary lore, the author was well acquainted with the tradition of Marduk’s fifty names as found in Enûma elīš,(73) a text that also expounds on their meanings via polysemy, paronomasia, and notāriqon.(74) Enûma elīš also connects Marduk to the numeral fifty aetologically in the description of his birth: palītu hu-ma-ti-na elīša kamma “a frightening aura covered him entirely” (I 104). Here too odd orthography and a polyvalent cuneiform sign (i.e., mat) allow the word hu-ma-ti-na “entirely,” to bear two other wholly different meanings, both suitable to Marduk.(75) The first is hu-ma-ti-na “burn, be aflame,” a term often connected with the palītu “frightening aura.”(76) The change of mat for mat lets us translate: “A fiery frightening aura covered him.” The second, which reads mat as šat, is ḫa-ṣat-si-na “fifty” (from hanzā).(77) This renders the line: “Fifty frightening auras covered him.”(78) Given such traditions and the erudition of the author, I aver that we understand Ludulī I 64 also to mean: “The fifth altered the opinion of ‘Fifty’ (i.e.,

66) CAD N 1, 17-19, s.v. nabalkatu.
67) The peculiar form also suggests ḫaššu “change;,” which is precisely the context here. In fact, when ḫaššu occurs with pī “mouth,” it means to alter someone’s speech. In fact, this is attested in a medical text that reads: summa KA-tū KUR KUR-šē-ī ḫaššu “If his speech is changed…” CAD § 145, s.v. ḫaššu D. Given the author’s knowledge of medical terminology, this additional allusion is not beyond the scope of possibility. See Annus and Lenzi, Ludulī Bēl Nēmeqi, xxvi.
68) Annus and Lenzi, Ludulī Bēl Nēmeqi, 17, 32. Italics original. George and al-Rawi, “Tablets from the Sippar Library,” 199, call it a “pun.” However, if they understand the word to mean “fifty,” which appears to be the case, then we cannot regard it as a pun, since “fifth” and “fifty” are etymologically related. However, elsewhere in the list of the courtiers’ threats, the author exploits paronomasia on numbers. See, e.g., I 62: erēbu E-anšu 4-ā šāmmu “I will take over (lit. enter) his household,” the fourth said.” Here erēbu “enter” alliterates with rebā “fourth.” Noted by Foster, Before the Muses, 396, n2. The paronomasia on the “fourth” only draws attention to the potential for additional allusions concerning the “fifth” in the next line.
69) Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 212.
73) Note that Marduk references Enlil in the fifteenth line of the Song of Erra (IV 50), a fitting place for such a quote, since both Marduk and Enlil bear the name “Fifty.” See Noegel, “‘Word Play’ in the Song of Erra,” 181. For the text, see L. Cagno, The Poem of Erra (Sources From the Ancient Near East, 1,3; Malibu: Undena Publications, 1977), 52.
74) The poet exploits one of Marduk’s fifty names from the onset: ludulī bēl nēmeqī DINGIR ilā mašāšum “Exalted, mighty mupāṣir arri “Let me praise the Lord of Wisdom, the con[certed] god, furious at night, relaxed at dawn” (I 1-2). The couplet’s use of both mašāšum and ezīs recalls his name Meršakatu in Enûma elīš VI 137: “MER.ŠA. KUS.ĒMUX.UZU “furious and furiously concerned, angry and relenting.” Here the sign MER has the logographic value agāpu “be angry,” a synonym for ezīs “furious.” The sign SA is read as lību “heart,” and the signs KUS.ĒMUX anūš “consider, worry;” thus combining to mean “consider matters of the heart.” As such, they are the equivalent of the Akkadian mašāšum “concerned.” See also Ludulī I 29: bēlum mimma ŠA-bi (lību) DINGIR MEŠ ilānī bārru “The Lord, he sees everything in the heart of the gods.” The line references Marduk’s name SA.ZU “Who he sees the heart” (Enûma elīš VII 35). Espied by Moran, “Notes on the Hymn to Marduk in Ludulī Bēl Nēmeqī,” 259. See also IV 11: mimmanum iṣu amar 4-UTU-lītu “Who would have said he would see the sun (again)” As noted by Victor A. Hurowitz, “As His Name Is, So is He: Word Play in Akkadian Texts,” in S. E. Fassberg and A. Maman, eds., Jubilee Volume for Avi Hurvitz (Language Studies, 11-2; Jerusalem Hebrew University, 2008), 76-77 (Hebrew), the word “see” amar juxtaposed with UTU “sun” comprise the name of Marduk (“AMAR.UTU.” Note here again the definitive orthography of amar for amar lo annar.
76) CAD § 118, s.v. hamātu B. The polysemes at work here are discussed in greater depth in Noegel, Nocturnal Ciphers, 24-26.
77) CAD § 64, s.v. hamātu B. Additional support occurs in Urakkā-Lennātu 11, excerpt 4, line 1: [KLIM]’a nanmī litbātu mulī pālhāti “[ditto] (Asarhuḫī = Marduk) who is clothed with brightness, full of fearlessness.” See Markham J. Geller, Evil Demons: Canonical Urukku-Lennaatu Incantations (State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts, 5; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2007), 155, 234 (throughout I cite Geller, though, in some cases, I have altered his translations slightly. I also dispense with the Sumerian). Marduk’s association with fire and light probably explains the theme of darkness and light in Ludulī, noted by Foster, Before the Muses, 393-394.
78) CAD § 81, s.v. hanzā.
Marduk.) “As such, the line offers the sufferer’s aetiology for his predicament.

When understood as a subtle reference to Marduk, the passage takes on an added seriousness, for in Mesopotamia, altering a god’s behavior towards another person required performative charms and rituals that regularly belong to the realm of sorcery, a craft with which our author certainly was familiar.18 As Zvi Abusch observes, witchcraft “may affect the personal god and goddess and cause this deity to distance itself from its human protégé or to grow angry with him.”19 Major gods too, like Marduk, could be swayed by incantations to remove someone’s personal gods.20

Seeing the actions of the fifth courtier as a veiled accusation of sorcery explains the symptoms of the poet’s suffering, which he frames as Marduk’s displeasure: “He frowns: the divine guardian (šläamma) and protective-spirit (Aldad) withdraw” (I 15). Indeed, from the moment Marduk became angry with him, his god (Dingir.MU) and goddess (šīstārīt) left him, as did his protective-spirit (Aldad) and divinarian (lamassīna) (I 41-46).

The sufferer also later complains that when he looks behind him he sees only ridīti ippiru “persecution (and conflict)” (I 22). Not only are the verb redīti and noun ippiru both used elsewhere in reference to demons,21 as a number of nambrūriti rituals, medical charms, and a great deal of comparative evidence demonstrate, the act of looking behind oneself is a widespread topos for incurring a demonic attack.22 Indeed, already from the start of the poem (I 13), the sufferer stated that Marduk’s wrath opened qabrātum, a term that can refer to graves or the place where demons dwell.23 Moreover, as the sufferer later laments: alā zamū tētēši suhitā “An alā-demon has donned my body like a cloak” (II 71).24 Thus, the suffering experienced by the author in Lūdālat represents the theological development, recognized by Abusch, in which the Marduk cult also subsumed the powers of human sorcerers into the “anger of god.”25

This brings me to the next line: šēša u suhū ireddu šēdūtā “The sixth and seventh (courtiers) ireddu his protective-spirit” (I 64). First, I note that the verb redīti can mean “follow” or “persecute.”26 Observe also that the seizing of a šēdu “protective-spirit,”27 whether done physically or through incantations, renders the poet vulnerable to illness by demonic attack. Thus, the combined actions of the fifth, sixth, and seventh courtiers are far more serious than the previous four in that they unleash the demonic world upon the sufferer,28 and, of course, this is exactly how the story

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18 The wisdom reflected in Marduk’s title hēl nēmēgi “Lord of Wisdom” in I 1 also could be understood as divine knowledge that saves one from witchcraft. Cf. Marduk’s title šir nēmēgi “King of Wisdom” in an anti-witchcraft prayer noted by Zvi Abusch and Daniel Schwemer, Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals (Studies in Ancient Magic and Divination, 81; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 323, line 41’.

19 Zvi Abusch, Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature (Ancient Magic and Divination, 5; Brill: Stvy, 2002), 30.

20 In Mesopotamia, the boundaries between prayer and magic are blurry at best and efforts to distinguish them often reflect modern Western preconceptions. One need only look at the prayers to Marduk published by Oshima, Babylonian Prayers to Marduk, to see that ritual professionals performed incantations on behalf of others in an effort to persuade Marduk both to help their clients and do ill to their enemies. As Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 188, also observes, other deities besides Marduk, such as Istar, could remove one’s protective gods.

21 CAD R 226, s.vv.; see also CAD JII 164, s.vv. ippiru.

22 For example, one nambrūriti instructs the patient that after purification ana aršaka lā tappallu “do not look behind you” (cited in CAD P 52, 55, s.vv. palāsur). Witches in Mesopotamia similarly are said to walk behind people as they cast their spells. See Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), 127. The exorcist in the series Unkākā-Lummūtī II 22, adjures the evil demons that they ana aršaka ā ilakīnu “do not walk behind me.” See Geller, Evil Demons, 101, 197. The topos may be operative in the reference to Lot’s wife, who looked back, despite being warned (Gen 19:17, 26). See also Odyssey V.348-350, X.526-530. The tradition appears to have enjoyed some longevity in Mesopotamia as is clear in the travel account of R. C. Thompson, Semitic Magic: Its Origins and Development (London: Luzac & Company, 1908), 172: “A similar idea was current in Mosul, my servant Mejjid telling me that if a man desired a charm, he was to take a dead hoopoe bird with a piece of inscribed paper tied to it, to a cemetery, and lay it near a grave at night. He must then read some book, while the demons gather round, without turning to look around. If he should look round, the demons will have the power to attack him.”


24 Cf. Unkākā-Lummūtī III 32: aš lēmmu la kîma šubêṭa (iskatama) “an evil alā-demon envelopes (someone) like a cloak.” See similarly the following two apodoses of dream omens that refer to demonic possession as an attachment to the body: šēša šēmūm ina azurāru rākin “An evil demon is attached to his body” (I 140); šēdū ūmēritā “The lamassu and šēdu are attached to the body of this man.” See Franz Köcher, A. L. Oppenheim, and H. G. Güterbock, The Old-Babylonian Omen Text VAF 7525, Archiv für Orientforschung 18 (1965-69): 197. See also: ina šēdū šinhu ina zumru “May Aššēlu (demon of diseases and illnesses) tear from your body with his incantation” (K.6335:17); CAD T 441, s.v. šē. Note that šēmūm here can refer to “tearing out” (as of clothing), not just “tearing out” (CAD N 21, s.v. nasipātu), suggesting, along with the aforesaid comparisons to a garment, that some forms of demonic possession were viewed as an external attachment to the body rather than an inhabitation of the person. On the other hand, ghosts were believed to be capable of entering the ear of a person: ūmam ina bit anēnti ētenmu ana GESITU (uznu) bēl bīt ura “If in a man’s house a ghost enters the ear of the house’s owner...” CT 38, pl. 26, line 32. CAD L 363, s.v. uznu.

25 Abusch, Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft, 14.

26 Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 83, translates “the sixth and seventh followed his (the fifth man’s) devi (šēdu-spirit).”

27 The line is difficult, in part, because of the adverbial -um in šēdūtā, which would suggest the noun is an indirect object (i.e., as šēdū followed ina). Yet, this makes little sense, even if we take the verb redīti to mean “lead, pursue.” Moreover, I know of only two other instances in which šēdū follows ina, both in Neo-Assyrian texts in reference to large orthostat figures, but both appear to mean “with the help of the prospective spirit,” which cannot help us here. See Simo Parpola, “The Murderer of Semnačerib,” in B. Altür ed., Death in Mesopotamia, XXVII Rencontre assyriologique internationale (Mesopotamia, 8 Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1980), 171-182, especially 175; Letters from Assyrian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal (AOAT 5; Kevelaer: BZS & Bercker, 1970 = Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 220, No. 276, Obv. 9-10. Hence, CAD S 1/2, 257, s.v. šēdu, labels Lullûl 1 64 “obscure” and renders simply as “the sixth and the seventh...” I read šēdūtū as the direct object, but I see here, some poetic license on behalf of the author, for the form allowed him to repeat the sounds /ā/ and /ī/; and thus, complete the line’s assonance and alliteration. This would be another case of ungrammaticality in the service of poetry. In an earlier treatment of this text, W. Lambert and O. R. Gurney, “The Sultantepe Tablets III. The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,” Anatolian Studies 4 (1954): 71, similarly rendered the line: “The sixth and seventh will make off with his protective angel,” See similarly, Bottero, “Le problème du Mal en Mésopotamie ancienne,” 12: “Chassons son esprit-protecteur!” W. von Soden, “Der leidende Gericht,” in Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments: Weisheitstexte 391 (1990), 118, n64, admits that his translation, concerning šēdūtā here and in I. 97, “...ist ein Versuch; das Wort ist wohl mit šēdu ’Schutzgeist’ nicht identisch.”

28 Note that the previous four adversaries say something, but the final three do something. The first courtier’s words are not introduced with a verb of speech, but are rendered as such by most translators, because I 57-58 make reference to their malicious words and rumors. The words of the second courtier are introduced with qabitu “speak.” The third courtier follows by reference to the second (i.e., la kîma šalû), and the fourth courtier’s words appear with umûti “speak.”
plays out. Indeed, the suffering that the author endures reads like a list of symptoms found in the following ritual text for counteracting witchcraft.

If a man is constantly frightened and worries day and night; losses are suffered regularly by him and his profit is cut off; people speak defamation about him, his interlocutor does not speak affirmatively, a finger of derision is stretched out after him; where he stands he is not well received; his dreams are confused, in his dreams he keeps seeing dead people; heart-break is laid upon him; the wrath of god and goddess is upon him, god and goddess are angry with him; his case is not cleared up by diviner or dream interpreter; witchcraft has been practiced upon him; he has been cursed before god and goddess.92

Another way that the author reflects on the theology of divine embodiment and its dilemma of causation is by employing polysemes that identify the demons that beset him as manifestations of Marduk. We find this already in the characterization of Marduk in 1: "ša kīma U₄ (ämi)-mi meḫê namû uggassu "Whose fury is like a violent lionstorm-demon of the steppe."93 In I 41, we also hear: "štu U₄ (ämi)-mi ṣuš-idšu-tum "From the day that the lord punished me," a verse that we also may read: "As soon as the lionstorm-demon Bel punished me."94 Abetting the identification of Marduk with a lionstorm-demon is the sign U₄, which in addition to meaning "ämu" "lionstorm-demon," and "ämu" "day,"95 also signifies UTU, the second component in Marduk's name (‘AMAR.UTU, i.e., the "bull-calf of Utu [= Šamaš]").96 As a manifestation of all divine beings, Marduk is both apart from, and a part of, the demonic world. This view is encapsulated well in the incantations series Utukku-Lemmûtû, in which Marduk declares:

\[\text{[anakû 4asarlu]hi nāsiḫ marṣi mu abhit galû ma [...]} \] \[\text{[4asarlu]hi u₄ mu ezzu mutaq[kipu] lā ṭahûra anûk} \]

"I am Asaluḫhi who eradicates disease and destroys gāllû-demons... [...]

I am [Asaluḫhi], a fierce lionstorm-demon who butš[is the one who cannot oppose (me)].97"

Thus, Marduk is both himself and an ämu ezzu "fierce lionstorm-demon."98 As the poet of Ludlul puts it: "šīma ụttu-kka [r)a šaš ụṣšarŠi ina ū ūtiš[lapa]šra šuru[p]a u šuḫbûtu "He transmits the shuddering shaitan, (and) by means of his spell deforges rigors and shivers" (I 25-26).99 The first stitch of which, we also may translate: "(He Marduk) himself is an utukku-demon, he transmits..."100 The identification of Marduk with the demons illustrates Marduk's power as an embodiment of all divine entities,101 but it also blurs the causative connection between them, thus underscorin Marduk's role as the ultimate source of the author's suffering.

Yet our theologian does not stop here. He also identifies his human tormentors with demons. Summarizing the evil deeds of the seven courtiers, he vents: iškurûnimmûma rikīša sebet illašu [U₄]-miš lā pādā ụttuḫi mašši u išṭen širšanuma pā itēddi "The band of seven bound their bunch, lacking lenity like a [lionstorm-demon], resembling an utukku-demon, but one in their flesh, each cast a spell" (I 65-67). No single translation can do justice to the allusive quality of this line, because several of its lexemes are rich with incantatory connotation. The verb kašarû means "bind a (magic) knot," or "group together," but also "plot evil."102 The term rikīša is a contingent of people, but it also occurs in conjunction with magic spells and incantations as the evil


93 CAD U/W 153, s.v. ämu. According to Enûma elīš I 143, an ämu “lionstorm-demon” is one of the demons created by Tiamat for her battle against Marduk. This also was the name of Marduk’s chariot (V 50). On the history and meaning of this demonic entity as a personified Day and manifestation of divine will, see Frans A. M. Wiggermann, Mesopotamian Protective Spirits: The Ritual Texts (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1992), 169-212, who describes it as a “lion-demon” akin to utukku lemmûtû “evil demons.” Hence my “lionstorm-demon.” I add that the mention of the steppe in I 5 is apt as demons are widely associated with wastelands. See, e.g., šiša niššu lemmûtû namû “Let (the demon) leave and run around on the steppe.” In CAD N/1 251, s.v. namû A. See similarly Utukku-Lemmûtû VI 136: ụttuḫa lemmu anā seriška alā lemmu anā seriška “Evil utukku-demon to your steppe! Evil alā-demon to your steppe!” In Geller, Evil Demons, 218.

94 For šitu as “as soon as,” see CAD U/J 284, s.v. šitu.


96 CAD U/W 138, s.v. ämu. Though the phonetic complement -mi shows that UTU cannot be read as Šamaš, the advanced pupil would be aware of the sign’s other values. In fact, the same sign occurs ninety-eight times in Ludlul, though only thirteen of them can be read as UTU and twenty-three of them as UTU. The list of cuneiform signs in Ludlul and their numerous values produced by Annu and Lenzli, Ludlul Bēl Nēmeqi, 61-68, is in itself an illustration of the learnedness behind the text. It reveals that only 98 of the text’s 232 signs (42%) were used with a single value. Moreover, many of the signs in Ludlul have more than two values, e.g., UTU, which appears with no less than thirteen values. Thus, the astute reader of Ludlul must be prepared to encounter the full polysemous range of cuneiform sign values.

97 The text was formerly known as Marduk’s Address to the Demons, and published in W. G. Lambert, “An Address of Marduk to the Demons,” Archiv für Orientforschung 17 (1954-1956): 313, 317. Restored partially also in CAD N/1 158, s.v. nakkû A. The text was later identified as Tablets 10 and 11 of Utukku-Lemmûtû. Elsewhere, W. G. Lambert, “Marduk’s Address to the Demons,” in T. Abusch and K. van der Toorn, Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretive Perspectives (Ancient Magic and Divination, 1; Groningen: Styx, 1999), 291-296, argues that it was an independent composition. In Geller, Evil Demons, 156, 234, the first line that I have translated above appears in Tablet 10, except line 13, but that is the last line of the excerpt. The second line does not appear in Geller. However, a similar line appears in reference to the Šibínu in Utukku-Lemmûtû XVI 11: UT MES (ämû) mutukkūtu DINGIR MES (štāma) lemmûtû šûnu “They are butting lionstorm-demons, evil gods.”

98 Maqlû I 117: UD-lu ezzu šiššanumas “may your fierce lionstorm-demon catch them.” In Enûma elīš I 151 we read of Marduk: UJ GUL.GAL, GAL.LA = rāši₄ mu rabbûtu “he rides the great lionstorm-demons” (cf. IV 50). Some incantations against witchcraft also employ ämu ezzu in the sense of “fierce light” to refer to Šamaš. See Abusch, Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft, 74, 126.

99 Note that the causative use of the verb rašû has a medical nuance: “cause to develop symptoms of a disease.” Hence, my translation “transmit.” However, the verb also means “itch.” See CAD R 193, 207, s.v. rašû A. B. Given the medical knowledge of the author, perhaps we should translate the line: “He is the one who makes one itch with the demon shivers.”

100 Thus, with CAD U/W 340, s.v. utukku.

101 Cf. Enûma elīš VI 149: ša kīma šu₄ma₄na imas₄ši DINGIR u₄ nāti “According to his name, (Marduk is) a protective-spirit of god and land.”

102 CAD K 260, s.v. kašarû. Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 212, notes the literal translation “they bound the knot of the gang of seven.”
“binding” of demons and witches. While illatu can mean a group of people, it also is used to mean “coves.” The expression là pādi “lacking leity” is particularly fitting as it appears in Utukkā-Lennûtu VI 24 to describe an utukkû demon. The phrase also suggests là pādi “unfettered, unbound,” which, of course, demons should never be. Moreover, according to Enûma elîs V 50, 52, là pādi is the name of one of four monsters that Marduk harnesses to his lionstorm-chariot (i.e., āmmi) in his ride against Tiamat. Thus, this creature does Marduk’s bidding. Finally, I note that the phrase pā iteddi can suggest “cast a rumor” or “cast a spell.”

The pericope identifying the seven courtiers as demons, with its long chain of lexemes derived from magical praxis, naturally conjured as Wolfram von Soden espied, the demons of the Sibitti, the “seven” evil demons who bring disease and incite lawlessness. According to Utukkā-Lennûtu XV 36-44, havoc wrought by the Sibitti causes the gods, including Marduk, to flee to the highest heaven and withdraw their protection from earth. In XVI 2, 102, the Sibitti also are described as là pādi “lacking leity.” Indeed, the author of Lullûl embraces his descriptions of the courtiers with so much exorcist and witchcraft terminology that the courtiers effectively become indistinguishable from demons, and his suffering at their hands, increasingly becomes a demonic attack. Thus, summarizing their deeds, he says: muttallu piyya apatiš tēsā “Rein-like they seized my noble speech”

110.) In Utukkā-Lennûtu III 98, the exorcist calls for the breaking of a demonic rikû “bond.” CAD R 348-349, s.v. rikû.
111.) Cf. īṣ phys II-LAT-kunu mēk Ėa maınašt maınašt “May Ea’s son, the exorcist, scatter your (witches’) band” (Maqlitt III 165).
112.) Geller, Evil Demons, 128, 214, 178, 182, 251, 254. Note that in XVI 1, the Sibitti also are referred to as UD.MES (= ūmni) “lionsstorm-demons.”
113.) CAD P B, s.v. pāda A.
114.) Anmus and Lenzi, Lullûl Bēl Nēmeqi, 32, translate the phrase “each had a mouth.” To my knowledge, the idiom naddi “cast + pāti mouth” does not occur. Nevertheless, pā can be a synonym for šiipu “spell.” See, e.g., Maqlitt VI 9: šiippu a qripa pīkā/amākki (KA.MES-kē)i skūdi inni “may your (the witch’s) spell not draw near to me, may your pronounce-ments not reach me.” Moreover, the verb naddi appears with many other forms of speech in addition to “spells” (šiippu or tā): e.g., utter a “cry, scream, (iškīaru) sing a lamentation (tūsā), give a “shout” (varātūru), swear an “oath” (mišāṭu), utter a “sound, cry, complaint” (riṣnum), spread a “rumor” (tukta), and make a “false accusation” (tuṣṣa). See CAD N 190, s.v. naddi. Note: On the usage here we should ascertain that the idiom naddi “cast + pāti mouth” which appears in incantations to counteract witchcraft. See Abusch, Ancient Mesopotamian Witchcraft, 194. On pā meaning “chaff,” see CAD P 471, s.v. pā B.
115.) Note the remark of von Soden. “Der leidende Grechte,” 119, n65: “In z 65-68 werden die 7 Feinde des Duldens ähnlich beschrieben wie in sumerischen Beschworungen die ‘bösene Sieben,’ eine viel genannte Gruppe von Dämonen.” For learned polysemy involving the Sibittu elsewhere, see Noegel’s “Word Play” in the Song of Erra, 164, 172-173, 186. Further encouraging the connection between the courtiers and the Sibitti is their association with fire in Lulûl 68: (jīmnadimmima nūnqisšu ściirī “They (the seven courtiers) became jin[n]flamed against me, ablaze like fire.” Cf. Anu’s command to the second Sibitti in the Song of Erra I 33: kīmi “Girri kahunna ūnum kīmi “scarch like a fire, and blaze like a flame. Note also the paranomastica that connects the nuddhumm “ablaze” to the nazzā “courtiers” (I 57). Daniel Bodi, The Book of Ezechiel and Prayer of Erra (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 104; Academic Press Freiburg; Universitätsverlag, 1991), 106-110, has found similar allusions to Sibittu tradi-
116.) Others include the utûkku, alla, etennu, gali, and îlu (the seventh is unnamed). See Utukkā-Lennûtu VI 40b-40c, 219. With the exception of the rábīsu, each of these entities appears in Lulûl, though the word etennu is used of the sufferer himself (i.e., etennu “ghoulish” IV 30). On the Sibitti, see Charles-F. Jean, “IV 6., Revue d’assyriologie 21 (1924): 93-104.

117.) (I 70), This is a difficult and allusive remark and my translation can be only approximate. The verb ešē-u is known only from this passage and from a lexical list that equates it with the verb šabātu “seize, take hold.” Interestingly, the idiom šabātu “pāti mouth” has three primary applications, each of which is appropriate here. First it describes the effects of a stroke. This offers a perfect parallel to the sufferer’s symptom in the next line: šappāta ša ittābarā ḫassākiši ēne “My lips that gabbled, I became mute-like” (1 71). The second, and related use of the idiom, is to depict attacks by ghosts, demons, and evil gods. Third, the idiom appears in incantations for countering witchcraft, e.g., kaššātup aššat pāti aššat lissāki “I seized your mouth, sorceress, I seized your tongue” (Maqlitt III 92). In the Utukkā-Lennûtu incantation III 50-52, we have a demon’s actions similarly described: upšīl lemmāt šā pāa uskāssā šīṣī lemmā ša lissāunu uṣṣabbātā bennu îlu (DIN-GIR) lemmu “evil praxes that fetter the mouth, evil sorceries that seize the tongue, epilepsies, the evil god.” Thus, the author of Lullûl has integrated the language of exorcism and sorcery so that it is the wicked courtiers who now seize his innocent mouth like a demon or as one might seize the tongue of a witch. Moreover, whereas normally Marduk would assist the exorcist in ridicging the threat of the Sibitti, here the wicked seven appear to be working in consort with him.

By this point in the story, the identification of the courtiers with demons is so thorough that the author no longer characterizes them as human. Illustrating this well is the
author’s clever use of the word a-pa-tiš is 170. As written, we must read it ūpa-tiš “like humans.”120 The author was familiar with this term as we know from the sufferer’s later query: ēkama ilmadu alakti ili apāti “where have humans understood the way of a god?” (II 38).121 Yet, interpreters generally have understood it as a defective orthography for apappiš “like a rein,” based on the context of “seizing.”122 However, since “seizing the mouth” signifies a demonic attack, we may understand a-pa-tiš as a learned case of polysemy that recalls the earlier identification of the courtiers with the Sibitti (I 66-67). In essence, they have become so demonic that their actions only can be compared to those of humans: “Like humans they seized my noble speech” (I 70); a usage that also anticipates the sufferer’s description of the otherworldly dream figure as nisīst “like a mortal” (III 32).

The author’s portrayal of the courtiers’ actions as demonic is so successful that one is compelled to reflect on whether the irate king, whom the courtiers serve,123 also might be understood as a veiled reference to the angry god, Marduk.124 The passage in Ludul I concerning the king reads:

55. Lugal Uzu Dingir.Mes ŠUTU ša UN.MES-šu
The king, flesh of the gods, the sun of his people.
56. ŚA-bašt (libbus) ikašaṣirmu paṭarī aššēmin
His mind was bound, it became (too) malicious to unbind.125

While the epithet UZU DINGIR.DINGIR (šir ilāni) “flesh of the gods” indeed was used to express the divine nature of some human kings, it can mean “divine kin” as well.126 We also know from Énūma elīš I 102 that Marduk is: mār ŠUTU-šī 4UTU-šī ša DINGIR.DINGIR (mār šamīš šamīš ša ilāni) “Son of the Sun (Šamāš), Sun (Šamāš) of the gods” (cf. VI 632).127 One Babylonian AN = Anum list even identifies Šamāš (4UTU) as “Marduk of Justice.”128 In addition, note that the author has used the Semanum DE DIES rather than a syllabic spelling.129 While commentators generally have read UN.MES as nisī “people,” the UN sign also bears the value KALAM meaning māštā “lands,” which in this context recalls Marduk’s epithet anummar mišāti “he who illuminates the lands.”130 Thus, the syncretistic traditions and polyvalent signs encourage us to think of the king also as an allusion to Marduk: “The king, divine kin, the Sun (Šamāš) of his lands” (I 55).131 Indeed, one encounters the merging of Šamāš into Marduk again in the sufferer’s pondering thoughts at the very end of Tablet I: 119 tušama ina urīša damuqum
Perhaps in a day goodness will be put in order,
120. arba urinammar anumera 4UTU-šī šamīši (Perhaps when) the new moon is observed, the sun will shine.

Here the words inumera 4UTU-šī šamīši “the sun will shine,” again recall the frequent association of Marduk as he who munaṃmir “illuminates” lands and “lightens” people’s troubles.132 The sufferer subtly calls for the moment when “Marduk of Justice” (i.e., Šamāš), will heed his prayer. The sufferer’s statement that it is night and his mention of a new moon also evoke Marduk’s subsumption of the moon god Sin in his title “Marduk nunummar mišīti “Marduk who illuminates the night.”133 Moreover, it is on the propitious last

120. Wiggermann, “Flesh of the gods” (Ludul I 80-81, s.v. apātī)
121. It also occurs in Énūma elīš VII 18 in reference to one of Marduk’s fifty names: ēnim₂ ina apātī “May he not be forgotten to human-kind.”
122. CAD A 216, s.v. apātī.
123. It also occurs in Lugal ilāti I 102 that Marduk is: mār 4UTU-šī 4UTU-šī ša DINGIR.DINGIR (mār šamīš šamīš ša ilāni) “Son of the Sun (Šamāš), Sun (Šamāš) of the gods” (cf. VI 632).
day of the month, just before the new moon, when one counteracted the effects of sorcery, and, thus, it is a felicitous day to hope for Marduk’s “enlightenment.”

Thus, the poet makes polysemous use of the king and his attendants. On the one hand, we can understand them on purely human terms as signalling the start of the sufferer’s social ostracization, which spreads from the angry king and his anxious courtiers into the community at large of slander and villainous gossip. On the other hand, we may understand them as allusions to Marduk and the demons in his charge, since the fall of one’s reputation in the community also can be the result of demonic attack. See, for example, the definition of slander offered in the exorcist series Utukkā-Lemmātu XV 146-152:

146. It was named for evil, its name was reckoned for evil,
147. human language named it for evil, its name was created for evil,
148. (it is) the evil slander (eγιρρά λεμμα) that men call out
149. (against) whom the the evil utukka-demon seized, whom
150. (When) Namtar and asakku-demon bind, (when) the
151. utukka-demon binds,
152. from house to house, it (i.e., slander) burns (like) a fire.

Indeed, as Abusch and Schwemer observe:

The ultimate source of the patient’s unjustified suffering is, of course, the sorcery of the warlock and witch; among other charges levelled against them, they are accused of having driven off the patient’s protective deities and of having slandered him before the divine and human authorities, thereby causing his dismissal and rejection.136

With the identity of the courtiers as the Sibitti now complete by Tablet II, the sufferer describes his otherworldly symptoms in a way that again recalls Utukkā-Lemmātu.137

Seemingly from every side, he is beset by a marša munnišu “debilitating disease” (II 50), meḫā “storm” (II 40), imḫallu “evil-wind” (II 40), a di‘e-disease from the underworld (II 52), a šalu lemmu “evil ghost” from the Apsû (II 53), an utukku-demon from Ekur (II 54), and a lamaštu-demon from the mountain (II 55).

The author no doubt listed seven torments to mirror the seven demonic courtiers. In fact, his description of their unified attack not only appears in nearly the same lines as Tablet I, it adopts language that recalls their schemes. Compare his description of the demons: “They joined (innendāma) their group (puḫuršunu), they approached me as one (1-niš = ištēnil)’” (II 58), with his account of the courtiers: They “were plotting (uštanaddanu) malicious speech against me. They grouped (paḫramu) themselves…” (I 57-58). They were “one (išṭēn) in their flesh” (I 67).

The author’s sophisticated rhetorical scheme becomes clear only in increments. By blaming the distinction between Marduk and demons, he makes Marduk a holistic embodiment of all divine beings, but also the true culprit of demonic attacks.138

By blaming the distinction between demons and his human conspirators, he adds the final link to a chain of causation that infers Marduk’s responsibility for human sin.139 In effect, he has made Marduk and the demons, and the king and his courtiers, “one flesh.”140

4. Conclusion

The clever integration of textual and cultural traditions drawn from exorcism, sorcery, and other ritual traditions...
illocutionary practices, demonstrates why Lulul was viewed as a paradigm of scholarship already in antiquity. As Pongratz-Leisten observes: “Profound knowledge of traditional compositional techniques enables the author to conjure up textual as well as ritual settings and interweave them into a complex new reality.” 141)

Assisting in the creation of this new literary reality are a number of learned cases of ambiguity, which the poet employs with three primary aims. First, he uses it to display his erudition, and thus, also his divinatory power and ritual authority. The text’s learned use of signs represents the intellectual and hermeneutical expertise of his profession, and thus, it is institutionally reaffirming. In this sense, we may see the ambiguity as having an ideological function. Second, some of the polysemes serve to demonstrate that Marduk is a god whose being and actions cannot be fully comprehended. These polysemes show him to comprise all divine beings, including demonic entities, and the powers of sorcerers. 142) This use of ambiguity is best understood as serving a theological function, one again, in step with the doctrinal innovations of the Marduk cult. Thus, with Oshima, one might say that the text was studied “in order to contemplate Marduk’s godhead.” 143) Finally, some cases of ambiguity demonstrate that violence lurks in Marduk’s virtues, and thus, they bring into relief the conventional justification for Marduk’s impenetrable actions and absolute power. 144) Others represent the author’s critical inquiry into the cult’s syncretistic theology and the dilemmas it naturally poses concerning the ultimate cause of human sin and suffering. If such thinking indeed was troubling to conventional theology, then we may see the ambiguity as allowing the author to escape potential censure. 145)

However, the author of Lulul was simply too learned a figure to have been an independent thinker peripheral to Babylonian institutions of higher learning. Thus, I aver that we understand his erudite use of ambiguity as representing the sort of genuine theological discussion and contemplation taking place among scholars and between masters and their pupils. With Oshima we may see its portrait of Marduk as “an amalgam of personal belief and the official dogma.” 146)

Indeed, I would assert that the foci of critical thinking veiled by the author’s ambiguities are the very pearls of wisdom that the masters so carefully guarded, precisely because they tested generally held beliefs. 147) For this reason, the author ensconced his more scrutinious meditations in the amāt niṣirti “hidden words” and piriṣṭi ša ili “the secret of the gods.” 148)

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141) Pongratz-Leisten, “From Ritual to Text to Intertext,” 156, made her comment in reference to the episode of the gates in the final tablet of Lulul, but I find it applicable here as well.


143) Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 53.


145) On the poem as a challenge to institutional theology, see Lenzi, “The Curious Case of Failed Revelation in Lulul Bàl Nêmêgi,” 59, 63; Pongratz-Leisten, “From Ritual to Text to Intertext,” 147, 150. Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 231, argues that the text might have intended to assert the supremacy of the Esagil priesthood over other cult centers and of Marduk over other gods. In his view, the poem affirms contemporary Marduk theology: “the acknowledgment of man’s incapability to understand the divine plan and to recognize the specific sins of which he was guilty constitutes the ultimate proclamation of faith in the gods and the justice of their judgment” (69).

146) Oshima, Babylonian Poems of Pious Sufferers, 14.

147) The author’s strategy of bringing the reader ever closer to divine mysteries mirrors the plot development discovered by Pongratz-Leisten, “From Ritual to Text to Intertext,” 156. As she observes, the sufferer at first is far removed from Marduk, but after his incubation, he gets closer, until in the end he obtains special access to Marduk: “The sufferer’s approach to the deity in the temple which takes him out of the human realm into a world which is not accessible to most ordinary people, consequently, forms the climax of the whole composition.”

148) CIL Babylonian Theodicy XXV 256:257: lībah li kīma qereb šamē nesīma lē'ussa šupsaqatma nišē lā lamāh “The mind of god, like the midst of the heavens, is remote. Knowledge of it is difficult, the masses cannot learn it.”