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**“Word Play in the Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur.”**

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Wordplay in the  
Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur<sup>1</sup>

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Research on wordplay in Classical Greek and Latin literature has yielded many interesting results.<sup>2</sup> Among them is the realization that any serious hermeneutical examination of a text also must take into consideration the more allusive poetic devices such as paronomasia (soundplay) and polysemy (plays on multiple meanings). In the words of Frederick Ahl:

The ancient text, be it philosophical or poetical, is a texture not only of sound and words, but of soundplay and wordplay. These are the means by which the ancient writer, poet or philosopher, weaves his text in a fabric of horizontal and vertical Varronian threads. Ovid's or Vergil's Varronian declensions of literary language are not, I suggest, an occasional ornament of the writer's art: they *are* his art ... Once we are comfortable with these larger and more complex associations we will be ready, I think, to begin the long overdue reevaluation and reinterpretation of Latin and Greek literature as a whole, to relish the multiplicity and complexity of what we have so long taken to be, at heart, simple, sincere, and classical.<sup>3</sup>

While scholars of English<sup>4</sup> and of biblical studies have made progress in this area

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1. I would like to thank Profs. D.I. Owen of Cornell University and Anne Draffkorn Kilmer of the University of California, Berkeley for their helpful comments.

2. See, e.g., Frederick Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Poets* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); "Ars Est Caelare Artem (Art in Puns and Anagrams Engraved)," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988): 17-43.

3. Ahl, *Metaformations*, 322-323. The italics are the author's.

4. See, e.g., Helkge Kökeritz, "Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer," *PLMA* 69 (1954): 937-952; Paul F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956): 225-246; James Brown, "Eight Types of Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956): 14-26; M.M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957); Peter Carey, Jaques Mehler, and Thomas G. Bever, "Judging the Veracity of Ambiguous Sentences," *Journal of Learning and Verbal Behavior* 9 (1970): 243-254; "When Do We Compute All the Interpretations of an Ambiguous Sentence?," in *Advances in Psycholinguistics*, eds., Giovanni B. Flores d'Arcais and Willem J.M. Levelt (Amsterdam, London: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1970), 61-75; R. Frank, "Some Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse," *Speculum* 47 (1972): 207-226; M.K.L. Ching, "The Relationship among the Diverse Senses of a Pun," *The Southeastern Conference on Linguistic Bulletin* 2, 3 (1978): 1-8.

of research,<sup>5</sup> Assyriologists have been slow to follow suit, relegating their observations on word and sound play to small and cautious footnotes.<sup>6</sup> To my knowledge, only Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, A. Cavigneaux, and Niek Veldhuis have given the word and sound play phenomena close attention.<sup>7</sup>

The study below aims to help bridge this gap and to add to the observations of the aforementioned scholars by offering an examination of the paronomasia and polysemy in the famous Poor Man of Nippur tale from Sultantepe.<sup>8</sup>

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5. See, e.g., Edward L. Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 968-971; Jack Sasson, "Word Play in the Old Testament," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplement* (Nashville: Abingdon), 968-970; I.M. Casanowicz, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (Boston, 1894); H. Rechenдорff, *Über Paronomasie in den semitischen Sprache. Ein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft* (Giessen: Topelmann, 1909); F. Bohl, "Wortspiele im Alten Testament," *JPOS* 6 (1926): 196-212; G. Böstrom, *Paronomasi iden äldre Hebreiska Maschalliteraturen med särskild hänsyn till proverbia* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1928); D.R. Driver, "Playing on Words," in *Proceedings of the 4th World Congress of Jewish Studies. Papers*, v. 1 (Jerusalem, 1967), 121-129; D.F. Payne, "Characteristic Word-Play in 'Second Isaiah': A Reappraisal," *JSS* 12/2 (1967): 207-229; "Old Testament Exegesis and the Problem of Ambiguity," *ASTI* 5 (1967): 48-68; J.J. Glück, "Paronomasia in Biblical Literature," *Semitics* 1 (1970): 50-78; W.L. Holladay, "Form and Word-Play in David's Lament over Saul and Jonathan," *VT* 20 (1970): 153-189; M. Delcor, "Homonymie et Interpretation de l'Ancient Testament," *JSS* 43/1 (1973): 40-54; B. Beitzel, "Exodus 3:14 and the Divine Name: A Case of Biblical Paronomasia," *TrinJ* (n.s.) 1 (1980): 5-20; A.R. Ceresko, "The Function of Antanaclysis (mš' 'to find' // mš' 'to reach, overtake, grasp') in Hebrew Poetry. Especially in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 44 (1982): 569; Walter Farber, "Associative Magic: Some Rituals, Word Plays, and Philology," *JAOS* 106/3 (1986): 447-449; Robert B. Chisholm, "Word Play in the Eighth-Century Prophets," *BibSac* 144 (1987): 44-52; Russell Thomas Cherry III, *Paronomasia and Proper Names in the Old Testament: Rhetorical Function and Literary Effect*, (Ph.D. Dissertation: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988); Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991); Bill T. Arnold, "Wordplay and Narrative Technique in Daniel 5 and 6," *JBL* 112/3 (1993): 479-485; Moshe Garsiel, "Wit, Words, and a Woman: 1 Samuel 25," in *On Humor and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, eds., Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (*JSOS* 92; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1990), 161-168; John Briggs Curtis, "Word Play in the Speeches of Elihu (Job 32-37)," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 12 (1992): 23-30; Moshe Garsiel, "Homiletic Name-Derivations as a Literary Device in the Gideon Narrative: Judges VI-VIII," *VT* 43/3 (1993): 302-317.

6. See, e.g., O. Neugebauer, "Unusual Writings in Seleucid Astronomical Texts," *JCS* 1 (1947): 217-218; E.A. Speiser, "Word Plays on the Creation Epic's Version of the Founding of Babylon," in *Oriental and Biblical Studies: Collected Works of E.A. Speiser*, eds., L.J. Finkelstein and M. Greenberg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967); Jerrold S. Cooper, "Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu: The Evolution and Dilution of Narrative," in *Memoirs of the Academy of Arts and Sciences: Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein*, v. 19, ed., Maria de Jong Ellis (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977): 41; Maria deJong Ellis, "Gilgamesh' Approach to Huwawa: A New Text," *AfO* 28 (1981/82): 127, n. 12, 128, n. 13; Karl Oberhuber, "Ein Versuch zum Verständnis von Atra-Hasis I 223 und I 1," in *Zikir Šumim: Assyriological Studies Presented to F.R. Kraus on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, eds., G. Van Driel, Th. J.H. Krispijn,

Regarding this text J.S. Cooper remarked:

M. Stol, K.R. Veenhof (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 279-281; Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*. State Archives of Assyria, Volume III (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), 104, n. 11f.; M. Stol, "Ancient Philology in the New Year Ritual," *NABU* 3 (1989): 39; Steve Tinney, "den-gi<sub>6</sub>-du-du: *mutarrû rubê* A note on *Erra* 1 21," *NABU* 1989/1: 2-4; Thorkild Jacobsen, "Abstruse Sumerian," in *Ah, Assyria...: Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor*, eds., Mordechai Cogan and Israel Eph'al (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991) = *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 33 (1991): 282, n. 6, 287-288, 290; M. Civil, "On Mesopotamian Jails and Their Lady Warden," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, eds., Mark E. Cohen, et al. (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 77, n. 19; Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, "A Mirror Belonging to the Lady of Uruk," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 164; Daniel Foxvog, "Astral Dumuzi," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 108; Barry L. Eichler, "mar-URU<sub>5</sub>: Tempest in a Deluge," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 90, 93; Bendt Alster, "Marriage and Love in the Sumerian Love Songs," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 20, 21, 23, 24; Peter Machinist and Hayim Tadmor, "Heavenly Wisdom," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 147-149; Pinhas Artzi and Abraham Malamat, "The Great King: A Preeminent Royal Title in Cuneiform Sources and the Bible," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 37; Herbert Sauren, "Nammu and Enki," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 204, n. 17; Ronald Wallenfels, "Zodiacal Signs among the Seal Impressions from Hellenistic Uruk," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 283; Tzvi Abusch, "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial," in *The Tablet and the Scroll*, 11, and n. 48; Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 251, n. 1, 200, 311, n. 1, 325, 336, n. 1, 355, n. 3, 357, nn. 1-2, 374, nn. 1, 4, 377, 381, n. 1, 398, n. 1, 392, nn. 1-4, 393, nn. 1, 3, 393, nn. 2-3, 396, n. 5, 398, n. 9, 447, n. 1, 499, 505, n. 4, 542, n. 3, 594, n. 2, 616-617, 619, n. 4, 620-621, 624, 625, 675, n. 1, 692, n. 1, 698, 720, 747-749, 768, 773, n. 1, 779, nn. 5-6, 806, 817, 824, 829, 989, n. 2.

7. Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "A Note on an Overlooked Word-Play in the Akkadian Gilgamesh," in *Zikir Šumim*, 128-132; "Les jeux de mots dans les rêves de Gilgamesh et d'Atrahasis," Paper read at the Universaire des Sciences Humaines, Strasbourg, 1983 (courtesy of Prof. Kilmer), 1-7; "The Symbolism of the Flies in the Mesopotamian Flood Myth and Some Further Implications," in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, ed., Francesca Rochberg-Halton (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1987), 175-180; "Appendix C: The Brick of Birth," *JNES* 46 (1987): 211-213; A. Cavigneaux, "Aux sources du Midrash: l'herméneutique babylonienne," *Aula Orientalis* 5/2 (1987): 243-255; Niek Veldhuis, *A Cow of Sin*. Library of Oriental Texts, Vol. 2 (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1991), especially 17-27; and more recently Stephen A. Geller, "Some Sound and Wordplays in the First Tablet of the Old Babylonian Atramḫasis Epic," in *Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, ed., Barry Walfish (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 1993), 63-70.

8. The text was published first by O.R. Gurney and J.J. Finkelstein, *The Sultantepe Texts* (London, 1957), 38, 39; K 3478 = O.R. Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets," *AnSt* 6 (1956): 145-164; "The Sultantepe Tablets (continued)," *AnSt* 7 (1957): 135-136; Maria deJong Ellis, "A New Fragment of the Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur," *JCS* 26 (1974): 88-89. For Corrigenda see Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets I: Corrigenda," *AnSt* 8 (1958): 245-246; "Corrigenda to Volume I." *The Sultantepe Tablets II* (London: The British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1964): 23-25; Additional notes: Erica Reiner, "Another Volume of Sultantepe Texts," *JNES* 26 (1967): 183, n. 7; W. von Soden, "Der arme Mann von Nippur," in *Text aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments III*, ed., O. Kaiser (Gütersloh, 1982-), 174-180; J.S. Cooper, "Structure, Humor, and Satire in the Poor Man of Nippur," *JCS* 27 (1975): 163-174; E. Leichty, "Literary Notes," in *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 19 (1977): 145-146; Alasdair Livingstone, "Two notes à propos de *the Poor Man of Nippur*," *NABU* 1987: 40; William Moran, "Assurbanipal's Message to the Babylonians (ABL 301), with an Excursus on Figurative *Biltu*," in *Ah Assyria*, 327-328.

The humor of deception and satire is both created and maintained by numerous devices of language and style, among which irony and sarcasm are prominent.<sup>9</sup>

Cooper's astute observations fell into three groups: the juxtaposition of a naive or sarcastic statement with a different reality; the ironic or sarcastic use of an ambiguous word or phrase; and role reversal.<sup>10</sup> Of the three, it is the second category which concerns us, for as I hope to make clear, it is through the use of ambiguity, specifically through puns and paronomasia, that the text often exhibits irony and sarcasm.

Though Cooper's study brings out many interesting aspects of the tale, it does not address the subject of wordplay. To my knowledge, O.R. Gurney is the only scholar to suggest the existence of paronomasia in the Poor Man of Nippur. He cited at least one example. The first is the incident of the cash-box full of birds, which Gimil-Ninurta convinces the mayor to guard as gold. Regarding the word "cash-box" (*quppu*),<sup>11</sup> he cautiously commented:

The fact that it also means a bird-cage, and that birds are mentioned a few lines before, is therefore probably a coincidence.<sup>12</sup>

Though he did not regard line 132 as a play on words, Gurney also pointed out that it contained a word which could be read in two ways, as "solid" and as "bed."<sup>13</sup> As the lexeme humorously connects the "solid" ground upon which Gimil-Ninurta beats the mayor with the mayor's "bed," its placement appears deliberate.

Though only a couple of examples have been posited, the use of wordplay in the Poor Man of Nippur is quite extensive. Moreover, it is employed as a method of underscoring the ironic events in the story, i.e., as an integral part of the telling. Wordplay in the Poor Man of Nippur may be organized into the following groups:

9. Cooper, *JCS* 27 (1975): 167.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *CAD* Q 308, s.v. *quppu*; *AHW* 928, s.v. *quppu*.

12. Gurney, *AnSt* 6 (1956): 160. Erica Reiner appears to have been aware of the pun as she noted, "...the box in which Šu-Ninurta pretended to have brought the gold had been weighted by the captured birds," *JNES* 26 (1967): 183, n. 7. Nevertheless, she read *quppi* only as "bird-cage" without reference to its other meaning "cash-box." See now the restoration of l. 97 proposed by Alasdair Livingstone, *NABU* 1987: 40 who sees the object solely as a birdcage.

13. Gurney, *AnSt* 6 (1956): 161. I do not think that Gurney saw this as paronomasia as he discarded the reading "bed" on the basis that it lacked the determinative GIŠ.

polysemy and paronomasia, visual puns, leitmotifs, and leitmotif puns.

#### Polysemy and Paronomasia

Puns involving similar sounding words occur between *biltu* "tribute or burden,"<sup>14</sup> and *baltu/balṭu* "strength/life."<sup>15</sup> The similarity in sound between these three words and the frequency with which they occur suggest that a certain amount of allusion is at work. We first come upon *biltu* in line 67-68: "For the one tribute (*biltu*) which you imposed on me, I will repay you three times!" That this phrase is repeated with minor variation in number in lines 112, 138, and 157, is descriptive of its structural importance to the narrative. As such, it is not surprising to hear the key-word subtly echoed at other points in the story. Such is the case in line 20 where the "tribute" of the mayor is first foreshadowed: *minu ḥibiltikāma katriya našāta*, "What is your outrage, that you bring me a gift?!" It is readily apparent that *ḥibiltikā* "your outrage/crime"<sup>16</sup> contains the very words *biltikā*, "your burden." This sentence is also a humorous double entendre, as the root *ḥabālu* may also mean "to borrow on credit."<sup>17</sup> In effect, the poor man is harassed subtly by the rich magistrate: "What is your credit-line?!"

In line 78 there is a similar allusion to *biltu*: *ša ūmeya apilti ištēn mana rušša ḥurāša* "for my day, a payment of one mina of red gold." Relevant here is the phrase *ume-ya a-pil-ti*, "my day, a payment," which when read together is practically indiscernible from the nominal sentence, *ūmeya bilti*, "my day, (is) a burden." The connection is realized more fully later when Gimil-Ninurta's "burden" (*biltu*) becomes his "payment" (*apiltu*).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in the poor man's repeated taunt regarding his "burden" (*biltu*) and his "payment" (*apiltu*), one also may hear the word "insult" (*piltu*

14. For a similar plays involving *biltu* see Foster's comments on the Etana Myth in *Before the Muses*, 447, n. 1. For a play on *baltu*, see Johannes Renger, "Neuassyrische Königsinschriften als Genre der Keilschriftliteratur - Zum Stil und zur Kompositionstechnik der Inschriften Sargons II. von Assyrien," in *Keilschriftliche Literaturen: Ausgewählte Vorträge der XXXII. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Münster 8.-12.7.1985*, eds., Karl Hecker and Walter Sommerfeld (*Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient*, Band 6; Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1986), 123. CAD B 229-236, s.v. *biltu*; AHw 126, s.v. *biltu*.

15. CAD B 66-70, s.v. *baltu*; AHw 100, s.v. *baltu*.

16. CAD H 3-6, s.v. *ḥabālu*; AHw 301-302, s.v. *ḥabālu*.

17. CAD H 3, s.v. *ḥabālu*; AHw 302, s.v. *ḥabālu*.

18. CAD A/2 160, s.v. *apiltu*; AHw 57-58, s.v. *apiltu*.

[*pištu*]).<sup>19</sup> For Gimil-Ninurta, his treatment is an “insult” for which he intends to repay the mayor. When he brings his revenge, he presents it as if it were a “tribute” (*biltu*).

The same kind of paronomasia occurs with *baltu/ba'ulāte/balṭu*. It appears in various forms in lines 5, 75, 127, and 160. Line 5 reads: *ḥurāša ul išā simat ba'ulāte* “he had no gold, which is appropriate for mankind.” Here *ba'ulāte* “mankind”<sup>20</sup> plays on the sound of *biltu* “tribute.”

In line 75, Gimil-Ninurta calls the mayor *etillu balti nišē*, “Lord, strength of the people.” Here *balti* may also be derived from *ba'āšu* “shame.”<sup>21</sup> Gimil-Ninurta cleverly praises and mocks the magistrate in one breath: “Lord, the shame of the people!”

Another reference to *biltu*, though less pronounced, occurs in the line *ekleti išallimū bulṭūya*, “my cures (only) succeed in darkness.”<sup>22</sup> One cannot help but hear *biltu* echoing in *bulṭu*; “In darkness is the tribute (or burden) recompensed” (l. 127). For the root *šalāmu* having the sense “to recompense,” see lines 110 and 154.<sup>23</sup>

Gimil-Ninurta's stated intention in line 13 to buy a sheep, also may reflect a wordplay on his hungry condition. The sentence runs: *ina ribit āliya Nippuri<sup>KI</sup> immēra lušam*, “in the square of my city, let me buy a sheep.” If taken from the verb *šāmu*, “to purchase,”<sup>24</sup> the line comments on Gimil-Ninurta's poverty, i.e., it reminds us that though he wanted a sheep, he could only afford a goat. If derived from *šamū*, “to boil, burn, roast,”<sup>25</sup> the line serves to whet the appetite we are told he has in the lines immediately prior: “Every day he rested in hunger for lack of food.” (l. 9)<sup>26</sup>

19. *AHw*, 864a, 869a, s.v. *piltu*. I would like to thank Prof. O.R. Gurney for pointing this pun out to me. Personal communication, May 29, 1993. See also Moran, “Assurbanipal's Message,” 327–328.

20. *CAD* B 183b, s.v. *ba'ulāte*; *AHw* 117, s.v. *ba'ulāte*.

21. This was suggested to me by D.I. Owen. The *š > l* shift is frequently found in texts of this period. See also *CAD* B 5, s.v. *ba'āšu* (= *baštu*); *AHw* 112, s.v. *bāšu*.

22. With *CAD* Š/1 216, s.v. *šalāmu*.

23. This may be an example of Akkadian antanaclasis. Cf. Ceresko, *CBQ* 44 (1982), 569. *CAD* Š/1 208, 217–218, s.v. *šalāmu*; *AHw* 1143–1145, s.v. *šalāmu*.

24. *CAD* Š/1 350–358, s.v. *šāmu*; *AHw* 1159–1160, s.v. *šāmu*.

25. *CAD* Š/1 339, s.v. *šamū*. Puns need not be grammatically perfect to be effective.

26. Though the word cannot be directly derived from *šamū*, the closeness of sound serves to connect the two.

In line 22 we find: *ṭaba u damqa lušammera ana kar-ši'-šu'*,<sup>27</sup> "let me wish good and pleasant things for his (the mayor's) stomach." Reading *karšišū* for *karšišu* we find another pun alluding to the mayor's demise: "Let me wish (him) a very good annihilation."<sup>28</sup>

Another possible pun, this time exploiting the semantic range of a lexeme, occurs in line 126, where the mayor, convinced that Gimil-Ninurta is a doctor, declares: *asū lē'ūma*, "the doctor is skilled!" The adjective *lē'ū*, derived from the verb *le'ū*, may mean "prevail" as well.<sup>29</sup> Unknown to the mayor, he is sealing his own fate, "the doctor (Gimil-Ninurta) has prevailed!"

As mentioned above, the word *quppu* can be read both as "cash-box" and as "bird cage." This fits with another link between the mayor and the bird incident in line 130: *ašar ibri u tappu lā iraššušū rēmu*, "where friends and companions could not show him mercy." If we substitute a verb from the root *barū* "to trap birds,"<sup>30</sup> for the noun *ibri* "friends," and connect the conjunction *u* to the previous word, we may translate the line "where he was snared (like a bird), companions could (would) not show him mercy."<sup>31</sup>

A pun similarly forewarns us of the mayor's capture prior to his final beating. We are told that the magistrate, "upon hearing the voice of the man, came outside (*kamītuš*)" (l. 148).<sup>32</sup> We also may read instead *kamītuš*, "capture, bondage," and render the line: "the mayor, upon hearing the voice of the man, went out to (his)

27. Based on the correction offered by Gurney, *AnSt* 8 (1958): 245; *The Sultantepe Tablets* II, p. 23. Cooper suggests the reading *kar-ši'-ya'*, in which case the play on words would not be possible. Cooper, *JCS* 27 (1975): 170, n. 26.

28. The reading *karšišu* is given in *CAD* D 70, s.v. *damqu*. For "annihilation" see *CAD* K 214, s.v. *karašū*. It is interesting to note here Gurney's parallel observation in *JCS* 27 (1975): 168. He points out the humorous use of ambiguity in line 66 (= 111 = 137) where Gimil-Ninurta, in a tongue-in-cheek fashion wishes the "abundance of the gods" on the mayor. Note also that Foster sees here a play on words between "his stomach" and "his mood." Cf. *CAD* K 223-225, s.v. *karšu*; *AHW* 450-451, s.v. *karšu*. See his *Before the Muses*, 829, n. 2.

29. *CAD* L 151, s.v. *le'ū*; *CAD* L 160, s.v. *lē'ū*; *AHW* 547, s.v. *le'ū*.

30. *CAD* B 2, s.v. *ba'āru*; *AHW* 108, s.v. *ba'āru*. Though one might expect *ibar* it should be noted that puns are not bound to rules of grammar.

31. An allusion to Gimil-Ninurta's hunger also may be intended as *barū* also means "to be hungry, to starve." *CAD* B 118, s.v. *barū*. As such it also may be connected to the previous line with *arū*, "destitute" (which occurs in a lexical text for *be-ru-u*, "hungry." [cf. Malku VIII 13f.]). *CAD* A/2 312, s.v. *arū*.

32. *CAD* K 123, s.v. *kamītu*; *AHW* 432, s.v. *kamātūš*.

entrapment."<sup>33</sup>

Allusion also occurs in line 113: *ištēn aribakumma riḫa šitta*, "one I have repaid you, two remain." Here *riḫa šitta* "two remain" reverberates the earlier phrase *raḫi šittu* "sleep overcame him (lit. flowed)" in line 95. What makes the connection especially close is that this is precisely the method by which Gimil-Ninurta's first revenge on the mayor takes place! Though the mayor would not have known that the words *raḫi šittu* had been used of him in line 95, the scribe who composed the text would have. Thus, the scribe employed this wordplay not for the benefit of the characters in the story, but rather, in order to connect the two events for the reader.

One pun on the circumstance of the mayor is of a special significance in that it is a Janus parallel, i.e., in a polysemous way it both echoes the line which precedes it and anticipates the line which follows.<sup>34</sup> Lines 127-130 run:

127. *bēli ina ekleti išallimū bulūya*  
 my lord, in the dark, my remedies are completed,  
 128. [*ašar šēpu parsat*] *ukkulat alakta*  
 (a room) where entry is forbidden, a dark way,  
 129. *ušeribšuma ina bīti ašar lā âri*  
 he made him enter a room where there was no access.  
 130. *ašar ibri u tappu lā irāššušū rēmu*  
 where friends and companions could not show him mercy.

Notable here is the phrase *lā âri*, spelled *a-ri* (l. 129). As an infinitive or verbal adjective of *wâru*, "to go" it means "a place of not going," i.e., a private chamber that one could not access.<sup>35</sup> As the 3pms preterite of *arû* "to light," it means "(a place

33. CAD K 122, s.v. *kamītu*; AHW 432, s.v. *kamītu*.

34. For the concept of Janus parallelism, see C.H. Gordon, "New Directions," *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 15 (1978): 59-66; Scott B. Noegel, "A Janus Parallelism in the Gilgamesh Flood Story," *ASJ* 13 (1991): 419-421; "An Asymmetrical Janus Parallelism in the Gilgamesh Flood Story," *ASJ* 15 (1993): 10-12; Jean-Georges Heintz, "Myth(olog)èmes d'époque amorrite et amphibologie en ARMT XXVI, 419, ll. 3'-21'?", *NABU* 1994: 59.

35. AHW 961, s.v. *wâru*.

where) it was (not) lit."<sup>36</sup> That the stich is a Janus parallel is brought out by the line above it which speaks of the darkness in which Gimil-Ninurta's remedies could only be effective, and the line below it, which concerns the inability of the mayor's friends to access the inner chamber in which the mayor was being beaten. The phrase in the middle stich both comments on the preceding verse and foreshadows the one which follows it.

Another pun is of special interest in that it may allude to the scribe. Line 125 reads: *ašar zu[mu]ršu urasiba miḫištašu ukallamšu*,<sup>37</sup> "the place on his body where he was struck, his wounds he showed him." Of note here is the word *miḫištišu*, "his wounds," which Gurney notes, "...occurs only in the sense "stroke" of the stylus in writing."<sup>38</sup> The lack of attestation of this form is what led W. von Soden to regard it as a phonetic variant for *miḫritu* "front."<sup>39</sup> Though some may be inclined to emend it, this may simply be an artful attempt by the scribe to strike the mayor with his own reed; to illustrate that the stylus is mightier than the sword.

#### Visual Plays<sup>40</sup>

Visual plays also are common in the Poor Man of Nippur. Probably the most obvious are those which occur with the sign SAG. That SAG may be read as a logogram, i.e., *rēšu*, *rēštu*, etc., or as a syllabogram, i.e., *riš*, *šak*, etc., provides the scribe with many playful opportunities. SAG first appears in line 8 where we are told: "Due to his craving for meat and beer, his face was disfigured." Not only does SAG occur as a logogram with KAŠ meaning "choice beer," but it is anticipated in the previous phrase and reflected in the following line syllabographically by *ana iriš*, "due to his craving," and by *biriš*, "hungrily."

The artful interchange between the syllabogramic and logogramic readings occurs frequently. In line 8 one reads: *ana iriš širi u šikāri rēšti lummunu zīmāšu* "Due to

36. BDB 21. s.v. 'Ör. The same word may adhere in the Annals of Sennacherib I:17-19: *dadmēšun izzibūma kīma sutinni mušen nigišši ēdiš ipparšu ašar lā ūri* "leaving their homes and flying alone, like bats of the crevices to a place not lit." Might this be related to *arū*. CAD A/2 313. s.v. *arū*; AHW 1473. s.v. (w)arūm "führen", i.e., "light the way"?

37. Reading with A.R. George, "Ninurta-Pāqidāt's Dog Bite, and Notes on Other Comic Tales." *Iraq* 55 (1993): 75.

38. Gurney, *AnSt* 6 (1956): 161. CAD M/2 60. s.v. *miḫšu*.

39. CAD M/2 54. s.v. *miḫšu*; AHW 651. s.v. *miḫritu*.

40. For similar observations see Foster, *Before the Muses*, 624.



(ŠU) also is ubiquitous occurring in lines 74 (in Gimil-Ninurta's two-handed greeting), 106 (in the mayor's cry "Don't stain your hands with the blood of a protected person"), and 133 (in connection with Gimil-Ninurta's binding of the mayor's hands and feet). Its frequent appearance perhaps is due to the scribe's desire to play upon the main character Gimil-Ninurta's name (lit. ŠU.MAŠ).

Another clever pun appears when Gimil-Ninurta lashes out: "For the one tribute (or burden) I have repaid you, two remain" (ll. 138-139). "I have repaid you" is written *a-ri-ba-kúm-ma*. The sign *kúm*, also may be read, but not pronounced, as DU<sub>14</sub>, "enmity."<sup>43</sup> It stands as a visual reminder that "you" (i.e., the mayor) is also Gimil-Ninurta's "enmity." Moreover, the same line contains a strictly visual pun in the words *ri-ḥat ištēt* "one remains." The signs *ri* and *ḥat*, when read as their respective logograms RI and SIG, foreshadow the demise of the mayor: *adannu miḥṣē*, "the appointed time of bruises!"

Most occurrences of paronomasia tend to ridicule the ignorance of the mayor. We already have seen how *balti* plays on *bašti* "shame" in "Lord, the strength/shame of the people" and the plays between *biltu* "tribute, burden" and *piltu* "insult." In a similar vein is line 132: *irtima ina dun-ni qaqqari ḥamši ḡšsikkāti*, "he fastened to the solid ground, five stakes." As mentioned above, Gurney pointed out that the word "solid," presumably derived from *danānu*, "to be strong," also may be read *mayāltu*, "bed."<sup>44</sup> Thus, the solid ground upon which Gimil-Ninurta pounded the stakes and the mayor, quite ironically, was also the mayor's "bed."

The mayor's defeat also is punned upon in the final line of the tale where we read: [*ḥazann*]u *pašalati eterub ana āli*, "the mayor, crawling, entered the city."<sup>45</sup> Reading *gar* for *šá* and changing the word divisions we get: [*ḥazann*]u *pa-gar lā balḫu* (TI) *eterub ana āli*, (lit.) "the mayor left for the city not alive in body" (l. 160).<sup>46</sup>

In keeping with the use of puns as agents of irony is line 130 where we are told that Gimil-Ninurta took the mayor to a place where his friends "could not help him,"

43. René Labat, *Manuel d'Épigraphie Akkadienne* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1988), 111.

44. Gurney, *AnSt* 6 (1956): 161.

45. With CAD § 141, s.v. *sēru*.

46. Gurney, *AnSt* 6 (1956). There may be an additional allusion to *balḫu* "life" by way of TI in the name of the gate keeper <sup>1</sup>TUKUL.TI.<sup>d</sup>NINURTA. This is in keeping with the frequent plays on *biltu/balḫu*; see above.

*lā i-raš-šu-šu re-mu*. As *rāš* may also be read *kaš*, we may read instead *ikaššušu*,<sup>47</sup> “they demanded service, or fines.” Reading *ri* for *re* we also may see *rēmu* “mercy” as *rimu*, “gift.”<sup>48</sup> The result is a humorous allusion, and an ironic twist of fate. Not only was the mayor taken to a dark and inaccessible place, but in exchange for helping him, “his friends demanded a gift.”

Appearing in line 4, is an abnormal syllabic spelling for “silver,” *kàs-pa*. Normally, the word is written with the logograms KÙ.BABBAR. The unique orthography may signal the presence of a pun.<sup>49</sup> In this case, the polysemy again constitutes a Janus parallel. In context we read:

3. *ina ālišu Nippur<sup>KI</sup> šunuḫiš ašibma*  
     in his city Nippur, wearily he sat,  
 4. *ul iši kàs-pa simat nišīšu*  
     he had no silver, the pride of the people,  
 5. *ḫurāša ul išā simat ba'ūlāte*  
     gold, he had none, the pride of mankind.

By reading *kaz* for *kàs*, *bá* for *pa*<sup>50</sup> in line 4 we arrive at: “he had no bodily exuberance (*kazba*), the pride of people.”<sup>51</sup> In its meaning *kaspa*, “silver,” the Janus looks back to the previous line, and as *kazba*, “bodily exuberance,” it faces forward to line 5. The non-normative orthography also may have been employed in order to strike a visual play with the sign *zik* above it in line 2. Only two *Winkelhacken*

47. CAD K 286, s.v. *kašāšu*; AHW 462, s.v. *kašāšu*.

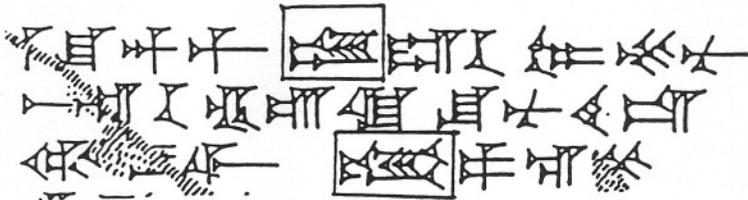
48. AHW 986, s.v. *rimu*.

49. See also Scott B. Noegel, *Janus Parallelism and Its Literary Significance in the Book of Job and Other Ancient Near Eastern Literatures* new citation should read: (JSOT Sup.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, in press).

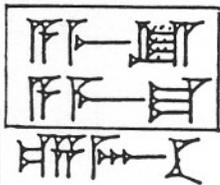
50. Labat, *Manuel d'Épigraphie Akkadienne*, 135.

51. CAD K 310, s.v. *kazbu*; CAD K 614, s.v. *kuzbu*; AHW 467, s.v. *kazābu*. Though *kazbu* is unattested elsewhere as *kās-bu*, a confusion between the phonemes *z* and *s* is not uncommon, e.g., *kasāsu* = *kazāzu*. CAD K 242, s.v. *kasāsu*. CAD K 310, s.v. *kazāzu*. At Ebla, for example, we find *kaspu* written syllabically as *ga-za-bū*. See, Giovanni Conti, *Il sillabario della Quarta Fonte della Lista Lessicale Bilingue Eblaita (Miscellanea Eblaitica, 3 [= Quaderni di Semitistica, 17])*: Università di Firenze, 1990), pp. 78–79. It is also possible that *siltu* may derive from *sili'āti*, “lies, deception” as the form does occur. Cf. CAD S 262, s.v. *sili'āti*: AHW 1043–1044, s.v. *siltu*. As such it would depict Gimil-Ninurta as appearing deceptively weak.

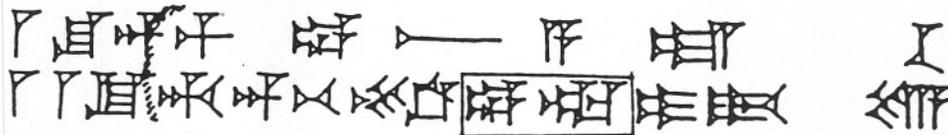
distinguish the signs (fig. 2).



Such puns may have been solely for the enjoyment of the scribes. That many of them are strictly visual suggests that this was the case. Also suggestive of this is another type of visual wordplay which involves clever connections between words and ideas through the writing of identical signs with different readings in close proximity; a kind of visual antanaclasis.<sup>52</sup> The first example occurs in lines 2 and 3, where we find *a-me-lu* "man" artfully placed directly above *a-šib-ma* "he sat" (fig. 3). That each of the three signs composing the words are juxtapositioned one above the other, suggests that the correlation was intentional.



In line 136 the sign KÁ for *bāb* "door" is placed next to the ideogram INIM (= *amātum*), "words," which looks exactly like the phonetic sign *ka*. That this is the only place where the ideogram INIM occurs, despite the frequent repetition of the stock-phrase, (ll. 25, 27, 39, 65, 110, 119) argues for it being deliberate (fig. 4).



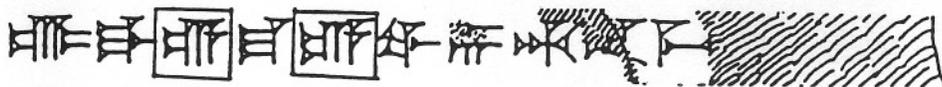
In keeping with the close proximity of visual puns are lines 157 and 158. Though this section of the tablet is badly broken, it is clear that the *dan* sign in *tēmedanni*,

52. For biblical analogues see Jack Sasson, "Word Play in the Old Testament," 968-970.

“you have imposed on me,” appears directly above the same sign read as *rib* in *aribka*, “I have repaid you” (fig. 5). The sign correlation cleverly reinforces the equation and similarity between what the mayor did to Gimil-Ninurta and what Gimil-Ninurta gave him in return.



Strictly visual plays continue in line 116 in the phrase *u-gal-lib-ma kal pi-ir-ti*. Here the signs *lib* and *kal* are identical (fig. 6). That *lib* is used frequently elsewhere in the text with the same phonetic value,<sup>53</sup> argues for its use here as intentional.



#### Leitmotifs

Another type of wordplay occurring in the Poor Man of Nippur is the leitmotif. Of the most common is the word *šalāš* “three.” The first time the use of “three” occurs is when Gimil-Ninurta purchases a “three-year-old she-goat” (l. 15), which is repeated before the mayor (l. 44). The mayor believing the goat to be a bribe gives him “third-rate” beer in return (l. 59), which is repeated again (l. 62). Gimil-Ninurta, angered by the unjust prefect, promises, “I will pay you back three-fold!” (l. 68). His three threats and three acts of vengeance establish the composition of the story and it is noteworthy that following the third vengeful act Gimil-Ninurta’s identity is revealed. It is fitting, therefore, that the tale concludes with Gimil-Ninurta proclaiming his victory, “I have payed you back thrice!” (l. 15S)

In a similar vein is the use of animals, particularly, the sheep and the goat as leitmotifs. It will be remembered that a sheep appears in the text as the animal which Gimil-Ninurta plans to bring to the mayor for a gift and that it, without explanation,

53. Lines 11, 16, 100, 131.

becomes a goat (l. 13, 15). The word goat thereafter is mentioned no less than 8 times (ll. 17, 21, 23, 29, 35, 46, 50, 146). One does not hear again of a sheep, however, until line 92, when the mayor, who is about to be duped by Gimil-Ninurta, slaughters a *pasillu*-sheep to feed them. One cannot help but sense a note of irony here. Though Gimil-Ninurta could not afford even the cheapest of sheep, he now eats of the best.

#### Leitmotif Puns

The importance of the goat and sheep as thematic elements in the story, is reinforced further by punning on them through phonetic and visual correspondence. In line 41, *urtaša* "his demand"<sup>54</sup> occurs in the narrator's mention of Gimil-Ninurta's request. A native speaker would have had little difficulty in hearing an allusion to *uršašu*, "his he-goat." As his "demand" was posed with a "goat" in hand, the pun highlights their inter-connection. Similarly, Gimil-Ninurta's claim: "A good and fair greeting I will wish for him (*lušammera*)," both alludes to the word *immēra* "sheep," and underscores his preference for a sheep rather than a goat (l. 22).

Moreover, an attempt appears to have been made to associate a goat with the mayor, the target of Gimil-Ninurta's anger. This is chiefly done through visual puns on the conflict between Gimil-Ninurta and the mayor. The first appears in lines 35 and 36: "in his left hand he grasped the neck of the goat, and with his right, he greeted the mayor." This is later contrasted with, "he greeted with his two hands the king of the world" (l. 74). Regarding the latter, Gurney commented: "The gesture of greeting with both hands seems to be unique..."<sup>55</sup> Despite the lack of precedent, it is clear that the shift from a one-handed to a double-handed greeting signals the increasing preoccupation of Gimil-Ninurta with pleasing the prefect.

Cementing the connection between the mayor and the goat is the use of *karābu*, "to bless/greet."<sup>56</sup> Though written as *i-kar-ra-ba* (l. 36) and as *i-kar-rab* (l. 74), one also may read *qār* for *kar*<sup>57</sup> and derive them from the verb *qarābu* "to fight/do

54. With Livingstone, *NABU* 1987/3, 40 who follows C. Saporetti, *La storia del siciliano Peppe e del poveruomo babilonese* (Palermo, 1985); Cooper, *JCS* 27 (1975): 171; and Leichty, in *Essays on the Ancient Near East*, 145-146.

55. Gurney, *AnSt* 6 (1956): 159, n. 74.

56. *CAD* K 192-198, s.v. *karābu*; *AHW* 445-446, s.v. *karābu*.

57. Labat, *Manuel*, 173.

battle.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, lines 35 and 36 may be read: “in his left hand he grasped the neck of his goat, and with his right, he fought the mayor,” and for line 74: “he fought with both fists the king of the world.” The unique two-handed greeting, which has been discussed above as a pointer to Gimil-Ninurta’s increasing preoccupation with mollifying the mayor, therefore, may be understood as adumbrating the ensuing confrontation. This also makes the line the second stich of a parallel couplet, the likes of which are so common to ancient Near Eastern literature so as not to merit further attention here. Suffice it to quote a similar couplet: “In their hands is deception, and their right-hands are full of bribes” (Ps 26:10), and to add that, if understood in this way, the verses parallel the mayor and the goat, while mirroring his eventual beatings at the hand of Gimil-Ninurta. Moreover, the above connections are strengthened by an anagramic paronomasia between the “gift” (*šulman*) in line 29, his “left hand” (*šumēlišu*) which brings the gift in line 35, and the frequent occurrence of the verb *šalāmu* as “recompense” (ll. 110, 127, 154).

A connection between the mayor and a goat also occurs in line 117 through alliteration with *naqû*, “sacrificial goat” and a play on IZI/DU<sub>14</sub>, “enmity/fire.” This is in keeping with the passage just prior: <sup>1</sup>Gimil-Ninurta *ana maḥar LÚšuginaki [eterub] ugalibma kal pirti* (ll. 115, 166), “Gimil-Ninurta went before the barber; he cut off all the hair...” Though the remaining portion of the line is broken, that someone is getting a haircut is clear. But who? W. von Soden translated *LÚšuginaki* as one who sacrifices a burnt offering!<sup>59</sup> The assumption that the *LÚšuginaki* is a barber seems to have been made under the weight of the next line which appears to contain the word for “hair,” *pirti*. Yet, an alternative reading is also possible for *pirti*. Line 116 runs: *u-gal-līb-ma kal pi-ir-ti na me-la[m<sup>1</sup>]*. If we divide the line differently and read *lib* for *kal*, *bì* for *pi*, and *NA* for *na*, we get: *ugallibma libbi irti amēli* (NA).<sup>60</sup> Adding to this, the fact that the verb *galābu* also is used for flogging, we arrive at: “He struck the center of the chest of the man (the temple official).” It would appear

58. CAD Q 127, s.v. *qarābu* where it is considered an Aramaic loanword; and AHW 901, s.v. *qarābu*.

59. AHW 1260, s.v. *šuginaki*. This according to R. Borger, “Die Weihe eines Enlil-Priesters,” *BiOr* 30 (1973): 164, 5ff.

60. For problems this may produce in case endings, note that the scribe is an apprentice and that problems in case endings are frequent in this text.

that Gimil-Ninurta displaced his anger on the master of sacrifice.<sup>61</sup>

The final connection between the mayor and a goat appears in line 106: *dam kidinni ikkib* <sup>d</sup>Enlil *qātēka lā talapat*, (lit.) "the blood of a protected person is an abomination of Enlil, do not stain your hands (with it)." When read aloud, the line also may have been heard as *dam kidi nigib* <sup>d</sup>Enlil *qātēka lā talapat*, "with the blood of a whole kid of Enlil, do not stain your hands."<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, the likening of rulers to animals of sacrifice is not uncommon in Near Eastern literature: e.g., in the Hebrew Bible the rulers of Moab are called 'ēlīm, "rams" (Exod 15:15). Witness also the famous "Like a lamb before the slaughter he was led along, as a sheep before his shearer he was silent" (Isa 53:7).<sup>63</sup> Many other examples also could be cited.<sup>64</sup>

Word games like those suggested above may or may not have been perceived by the apprentice scribe who copied this tablet. There is no way of knowing. The very presence of wordplays, however, argues against the notion that the text was recorded solely from recitation and in favor of the existence of a Vorlage. Paronomasia, especially of the visual types, could not have been spontaneous creative acts. Moreover, that the text was based on a copy, is in agreement with the first line in the colophon.<sup>65</sup>

As the examples demonstrate, there is a tendency to pun on the most important and often repeated elements in the story. This phenomenon may occur more frequently

61. Moreover, even if one maintains that *gallabu* refers to the shaving of hair, it still may be that it is an animal which is being cut and branded, and not a man having his head shaved. In a portion of the Gilgamesh Epic translated by D.I. Owen, we read: *ul-tap-pit gallabum šu-u-ra-am pa-ga-ar-šu ša-am-nam ip-ta-ša-aš-ma a-wi-li-iš i-we*. "The barber dressed the hair of his (Enkidu's) body. He anointed himself with oil, and became a human being." From context it is clear that prior to the action of the *gallabum*, Enkidu was not considered a human being, but a wild animal. D.I. Owen, apud Nigel Dennis, "Gilgamesh," *Horizon*, 15/3 (1973): 114-15.

62. There may be an additional play on Gimil-Ninurta's name by way of the sign MAŠ (= BAR) which also may be read as *kidinnu*. Labat, *Manuel*, 69.

63. That similar folkloristic motifs occur here is further suggested by similar verbs: the MT has *yūbāl*, "he was led along," this text, *wabālu*. Further, both refer to the cutting of hair, and to the slaughter of the same individual.

64. Exod 15:27; 16:1, Num 33:9; Ezek 17:13; 31:11, 14; 32:21; 2 Kgs 24:15 where leaders also are likened to 'ēlīm, "rams." Note also Ps 22:13: "many bullocks surrounded me" and Dan 8:20: "The ram which you saw having two horns, are the kings of Media and Persia... and the rough he-goat is the king of Greece."

65. Colophon l. 1, a partial reconstruction notwithstanding: [*kīma labirišu šat*]irma bari. "according to its Vorlage, written and collated."

in Akkadian literature than is currently perceived.<sup>66</sup> Further, polysemy and paronymasia sometimes involve words which are spelled differently than elsewhere in the text. This may be a type of scribal signal to the presence of a pun. The reader perhaps will benefit from an awareness of orthographic oddities occurring in a given literary text. In any event, the evidence here suggests that if one keeps in mind a work's primary characters and motifs, one may be more apt to discover the sophisticated wordplays of the ancients.

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66. In addition, (and this is a speculative remark based purely on personal observation stemming from my own research), there seems to be a greater interest in wordplay in West Semitic texts than in East Semitic texts, until after the Old Babylonian period. Could it be that we are dealing here with a West Semitic phenomenon that has come to Mesopotamia with the Amorites?