

BEFORE JOAN OF ARC: GENDER IDENTITY AND HEROISM
IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN BIRTH RITUALS

By

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In loving memory of my grandparents,

Annie Laurie Burke

and

Jack Layne Burke

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CHAPTER I

BIRTH INCANTATIONS: PERFORMING GENDER THROUGH WORDS AND ACTIONS

Joan of Arc, the fifteenth-century French teenager who led military resistance against the English during the Hundred Years War, is one of the best known female heroes in Western culture. Her heroism is inextricably tied with the gender she performed. Not only did she dress as a man, but she embraced and valorized her virginity, placing her in a long line of Christian virgin martyrs.¹ Such martyrdom was one way Christian sources symbolized women becoming heroic through masculinization.² Joan of Arc's identification with masculine gender was so complete that during her imprisonment at least one inspection was required to verify that she was in fact a woman.³ Since her heroism was so tied to her Christian beliefs, Joan of Arc as a model raises questions about the relationship between religion, heroism and gender identity. Frances Klopper points out the correlation between women's understandings of deities and their own identities, arguing, "If we see God as a man or more like a man or more properly named in male language, we tend to think of men as more like God and women less like God."⁴ Thus, within a Christian context where the only god is identified as male, the possibilities for being like a deity are limited by a person's gender. To achieve leadership, wisdom,

¹ Maud Burnett McInerney, *Eloquent Virgins From Thecla to Joan of Arc*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 198.

² Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 75.

³ McInerney, 198.

⁴ F. Klopper, "Women, Monotheism and the Gender of God," *In Die Skriflig* 36.3 (2002): 423.

piety, and bravery, and subsequently heroism, relies on male gender performance within this context.

However, within religious systems that include both male and female deities, the heroic qualities are not necessarily as closely aligned with gender. Within the ancient Near East, multiple goddesses and gods comprised the pantheon. Due to the presence of female deities, women's roles were less limited: "Goddesses represented women in society with the same positions in the pantheon that women had in the human world and in their families. They served as divine models for women's own social roles."⁵ By examining women's heroism predating Christianity and within the religious beliefs of ancient Mesopotamia, it is possible to discover other ways in which faith determines how the performance of gender can contribute to heroism. Before Joan of Arc, it may have been possible to be a woman and hero without rejecting feminine gender identity.

The concept of a sex/gender system characterized by the polar opposition between two sexes is deeply ingrained within Western culture, in which sex has been considered a "natural, given set of binarily constructed differences between human beings."⁶ The formation of society seemed to depend on this dualism:

It is the socioeconomic needs of particular groups of people that generate the necessity for reproductive sexual intercourse, and that necessity is best served by the ideology of sexual difference, of sexual dimorphism as the primary salient feature for the classification of human beings, and the charge of desire for intercourse that it is designed to produce.⁷

The division of an oppositional two sex system has colored Western interpretation of literary, artistic, historical and cultural material. Understanding the relationship between

⁵ Klopper, 427.

⁶ Daniel Boyarin, "Gender," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. (ed. Mark C. Taylor; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 117.

⁷ Boyarin, "Gender," 118.

sex and gender began with the concept that gender is a social role, while sex is a biological natural state, and moved to a theory that gender is the process by which individuals become sexed in a given cultural system.⁸ Some cultures embrace systems that incorporate more than two sexes, as well multiple gender roles.⁹ Appreciation of multi-faceted relationships between sex and gender presents opportunities, not only for greater insight into contemporary cultures, but also for new interpretations of the material available from ancient communities.

Within ancient Near Eastern studies, a variety of scholars have challenged the concept of dualistic gender division generally and within specific texts and practices. They have raised the prospect for a more nuanced view of the gender roles in the ancient Near East, introducing third or even fourth genders and a separation between bodily markers and the gender performed. However, the studies of Zainab Bahrani, Kathleen McCaffrey, Julia Asher-Greve, and Katarzyna Grosz are largely restricted to discussions of special cases, such as women in specific legal circumstances, ruling women, or followers of a specific cult.¹⁰ Since the act of giving birth is experienced by women of all social classes, legal standings, and beliefs, evidence that points to notions of multiple gender performances in birth incantations provides a wider field in which to explore

⁸ Boyarin, "Gender," 117.

⁹ Boyarin, "Gender," 117.

¹⁰ Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Kathleen McCaffrey, "Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?" in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*. (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379-391.

Katarzyna Grosz, "Daughters Adopted as Sons at Nuzi and Emar" in *La Femme Dans La Proche-Orient Antique: Compte Rendu de la XXXIII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (Paris, 7-10 Juillet 1986)* (ed. Jean-Marie Durand; Editions Recherche sur les Civilizations: Paris, 1987), 81-86.

Julia Asher-Greve, "The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body," *Gender and History* 9.3 (November 1997): 432-461.

gender destabilization. Thus, the conceptualization of gender within these communities may have been, in general, more flexible than has previously been posited.

Fluctuations of Power: Cultures of Mesopotamia and Ḫatti

I will analyze ancient Near Eastern birth rituals using the tools of both feminist scholarship and literary analysis. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will limit my research to ancient Mesopotamia (Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria), and Ḫatti. While the rituals that are the focus of my study can be dated to specific times, due to the nature of the material and the difficulty of pinpointing specific dates of composition, the data used for comparison will thus incorporate a fairly wide time frame, from the third millennium to the first half of the first millennium BCE. During this time period, the Mesopotamian communities existed together in a complex relationship which involved periods of ebbing and flowing influence. The Sumerian civilization developed in southern Mesopotamia and, though existing for a long period, flourished most noticeably from the fourth to the end of the third millennium BCE. The language was Sumerian and the primary deities of the pantheon illustrated “a parallel universe of supernatural personalities whose names reflected their roles.”¹¹ These deities included those who represented the astral world, such as AN for Heaven, UTU for the Sun, and NANNA for the moon, as well as those who represented certain abstract characteristics, such as NAMTAR, who stood for

¹¹ Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 44.

destiny. The deities were heavily anthropomorphized and took on human ideals, as well as human failings.¹²

Babylonia was located in southern Mesopotamia between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. Assyria was in the north, near the upper reaches of the Tigris River. Both civilizations were extremely influential; their power and relationship to one another went through several fluctuations during the second and first millennia BCE. The primary language for both Assyria and Babylonia was Akkadian (of which Assyrian and Babylonian are dialects) and deities in both cultures were related through syncretism, as each community identified foreign deities with their own. Deities included the god of heaven, Anu(m), the Sun-god Šamaš, and the Moon-god Sîn. The fluid relationship between Babylonia and Assyria, in which one of the two would overpower the other for a period of time, accounts for the overlaps in language and religion between them.¹³

The roles of deities within the three civilizations were complex. The Babylonians incorporated Sumerian deities into their own pantheon, often using a syncretistic process of combining several personalities into one.¹⁴ For example, Sîn, the Babylonian Moon-god, incorporated qualities of the Sumerian NANNA. Ištar, the goddess of sexual love and war, received not only the features of the Sumerian INANNA, but also the qualities of several other goddesses.¹⁵ Other syncretistic relationships existed between the Babylonian Ea, god of springs and wells, and the Sumerian ENKI, god of wisdom and craftsmanship;¹⁶ the Babylonian Sky-god Anu(m) and the Sumerian AN; and birth

¹² Bottéro, 46; 66-69.

¹³ Gwendolyn Leick, *Mesopotamia: The Invention of a City*. (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001), 258-259.

¹⁴ Bottéro, 46.

¹⁵ Bottéro, 47.

¹⁶ H. D. Galter, "Aya," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. (ed. Karel van der Toorn et al.; 2nd ed; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 126.

goddesses, Bēlet-ilī, NINTU and Mami.¹⁷ Within Mesopotamian literature, the chronological period and geographical place of composition determines the name of the deity, as well as the particular characteristics attributed to the deity. Current scholarship often refers to the syncretistic relationships by rendering the deities' names as pairs, such as INANNA/Ištar, NANNA/Sîn, or ENKI/Ea. I will generally refer to the deities using these pairs, unless a primary text uses a different name, which will then be noted.

The Mesopotamian pantheon reflected the political system of the communities. Some deities in both Assyria and Babylon were associated with specific cities. As the power of these cities fluctuated, so did the relative power and roles of the gods.¹⁸ For example, Marduk was the city-god for Babylon and, as the city's political influence grew, his cult became the primary cult of Babylonia. Marduk was therefore the king of the gods in Babylonia in the second half of the second millennium.¹⁹ However, in Assyria, Assur played a similar powerful role. Thus, there was a close relationship between individual communities and the deities they worshipped.

Located in Anatolia, Ḫatti was prominent during the second millennium BCE, when power was centralized and its people, known as Hittites, expanded south into Syria and, for a period of time, even conquered Babylon.²⁰ This expansion and the skirmishes that resulted created fragmentary rule for the entire region and reversed the pattern of strong rulers that had held for two centuries.²¹ The main languages of Ḫatti were Ḫattic,

¹⁷ Bottéro, 48-49.

¹⁸ Bottéro, 51.

¹⁹ Marc Van de Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC*. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 111.

²⁰ Van de Mierop, *HANE*, 114.

²¹ Van de Mierop, *HANE*, 112.

Luwian, Palaic, Hurrian, and Hittite²² and the primary gods were the Storm God (Weather God) Tešub, his spouse, the Mother Goddess Ḫepat, and the male and female Sun Deities, Sius and Arinna. In addition, there were local deities and deities of the Netherworld, as well as lesser gods of various natural features.²³ These deities were paired according to a perceived category of gender. They were also divided according to the domains of heaven and of earth.²⁴ Hittite texts also include references to Babylonian deities, such as Marduk and Ištar, as well as to other foreign deities.²⁵

While the areas of ancient Mesopotamia and Ḫatti represent four distinctive cultures, there is a great deal of overlap in the descriptions of the gods, as well as in the symbols and images used in most of the literature, including rituals. While this study focuses on birth rituals, consulting other types of literary texts created throughout the region will help explicate the symbols and images utilized in these incantations. Within ancient Mesopotamia, rituals that describe a hypothetical delivery in order to appeal to a deity, asking for a safe outcome of the birth for both mother and child, were common elements of medical/religious practice. There are approximately seventy-five extant rituals and other literary texts addressing birth in ancient Mesopotamia.²⁶ I will primarily focus on three rituals, while bringing in other texts for comparative purposes. The three

²² Van de Mierop, *HANE*, 112.

²³ Cem Karusu, "Why Did the Hittites Have a Thousand Deities?" in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry a. Hoffner, Jr. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*. (ed. Gary Beckman et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 221.

²⁴ Itamar Singer, *Hittite Prayers*. (vol. 11 of *Writings of the Ancient World*; ed. Harry A. Hoffner, Jr.; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 15.

²⁵ Karusu, 229-230.

²⁶ Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*. (Groningen: Styx, 2000). J. A. Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Incognita* 2 (1991): 137-185.

Gary Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals*, (2nd Revised Edition; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983).

rituals are one from Babylonia, which I call “I am Pregnant”²⁷ after its first line. This ritual is a variant of “The Cow of Sîn” and includes bull imagery. The second, a Middle Assyrian text, “The Baby is Stuck,”²⁸ compares the birthing mother to a warrior. The third, “Steering the Boat,”²⁹ comes from a compendium of Babylonian-Assyrian medical texts and describes the birthing mother as a ship’s captain. In addition to using masculine imagery for the birthing mother, these three rituals appeal to three different male deities. Therefore, they provide the means to explore gender performance surrounding the act of giving birth in ancient Mesopotamia. I will be drawing on other incantations with similar language in order to illustrate the widespread nature of masculine images and to investigate how changes in the words of the incantation reflect on the culture. In addition, where relevant, I will bring in a ritual from Ḫatti, “When a Woman is Pregnant with Child”³⁰ for comparison with the Mesopotamian material.

Birth: The Reproductive Body and Cultural Discourse

Birth provides an ideal subject for analyzing gender roles because it is a quintessential human experience that human beings have in common across chronological, geographical and cultural boundaries. Birth is more than just a private family affair; it is both shaped by and shapes the community as a whole. Given the universal nature of birth, it is possible to examine it from a variety of perspectives:

²⁷ Niek Veldhius. *A Cow of Sîn*. (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1991).

²⁸ W. G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text,” *Iraq* 31.1 (Spring 1969): 28-39.

²⁹ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

³⁰ Beckman, *HBR*, 177.

medical, scientific, religious, supernatural, historical, literary, and political, just to name a few. Holly Tucker offers

. . . the basic observation that conception and childbirth are at the core of the human experience; procreation is never ‘just’ a biological phenomenon. The reproductive body is shared in virtually infinite ways by diverse cultural discourses that are always in dialogue with one another.³¹

These perspectives provide the opportunity to explore different cultures and their views on the practice of medicine, the role of women, and the role of government.³² Examining birth includes sexuality, maternity and paternity, and mortality.³³ The fact that birth is common to all humanity and touches on a variety of aspects of a culture enables it to become a lens through which to view disparate human traits.

In recent years, feminist scholars such as Tucker, Della Pollack and Lauren Dundes³⁴ have highlighted women’s perspectives on birth. Since women are the only ones who can biologically give birth, the birthing process allows exploration of the ways in which feminine identity has been constructed and represented. However, the relationship between maternity and feminine identity is a delicate one and has been fraught with conflict since the early days of the feminist movement in America.³⁵ One area of concern is the danger of privileging biological motherhood over adoptive or spiritual motherhood.³⁶ Adrienne Rich, among others, has sought to teach women to

³¹ Holly Tucker, *Pregnant Fictions: Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early Modern France* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003), 15.

³² Tucker, 87-88.

³³ Della Pollack, *Telling Bodies, Performing Birth* (New York: Columbia University, 1999), 8-9.

Pollack’s work deals with both the medical aspects and with the role of women and Tucker, *Pregnant Fictions* addresses the issue of birth as it affects the political realm, as well as the role of women as seen in folktales dealing with pregnancy and birth.

³⁴ Lauren Dundes, “Introduction,” in *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross Cultural Perspective* (ed. Lauren Dundes; Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003): 1-6.

³⁵ Susan E. Chase, “Motherhood and Feminism,” in *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives*. (ed. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 17-19.

³⁶Ibid.

embrace the power of motherhood,³⁷ but that philosophy too has its problems. Arguing that motherhood is a means for a woman to claim power runs the risk that it will be considered the only one. Being a mother is but one of the ways that women celebrate their identities. However, cultural symbols surrounding maternity do contribute to an understanding of how individual cultures construct gender identity.

Controlling the Uncontrollable: Birth Rituals

All cultures have birthing customs, in which birth is marked by ritual. Cross-culturally, these rituals include a variety of common symbols and elements, including knots, doorways, and stones/bricks. However, these rituals also vary over time and in different regions:

. . . people tend to produce a set of internally consistent and mutually dependent practices and beliefs that are designed to manage physiologically and socially problematic aspects of parturition in a way that makes sense in that particular cultural context.³⁸

Rituals surrounding birth are combinations of actions and words that focus on the moment of delivery and can include elements such as symbolic objects, necessary performed actions by either the mother or a birth practitioner, and words to be recited or read.³⁹ These ritual incantations focus on the birthing mother only at the most crucial moment in the birthing process: the act of delivery itself. They do not provide a complete narrative from conception to delivery. Indeed, the entire delivery process is not even

³⁷ Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton, 1976.

³⁸ Brigitte Jordan, *Birth in Four Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Childbirth in Yucatan, Holland, Sweden and the United States* (rev. and exp. Robbie Davis-Floyd; 4th Edition.; Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1993): 4.

³⁹ Dundes, 3.

described in narrative terms. From rituals, one knows neither a backstory nor an outcome of any particular birth. The act of delivery is the crux upon which the seemingly opposing forces of life and death converge and the ritual is an attempt to control these forces.⁴⁰

A birth ritual is not the story of one individual mother and thus is the story of all birthing mothers of a certain time, place and belief system. The authority addressed in the ritual sheds light on religious beliefs, as well as on the role of the birthing mother, and on the role of the person performing the ritual. The meaning of symbols and images in the culture at large gives insight into their meaning within these incantations. Therefore, the words reveal the roles women played within their cultural context while giving birth.

The customs surrounding parturition varied within the distinct cultures of the ancient Near East. While many anthropologists have examined birth practices and religions of a variety of cultures from a feminist perspective, ancient Near Eastern birth practices have not previously received this kind of treatment. One significant difficulty with ancient Near Eastern materials is that they must be recreated from often fragmentary remnants. As Neal Walls notes regarding ancient Near Eastern mythological texts, contemporary scholars do not have living people or currently practiced customs to witness and therefore lack first-hand information to fully interpret any material from the ancient Near East.⁴¹ Walls's point holds particularly true when applied to any ritual text, as there is no opportunity to observe the ritual being performed.

However, there are a variety of extant, although sometimes partial, ritual texts from the ancient Near East whose purpose is to ease delivery and keep both mother and child healthy. The primary texts of ancient Near Eastern birth rituals are available in

⁴⁰ Pollack, 4-6; Tucker, 18.

⁴¹ Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (Boston, Mass. American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001), 4.

translation through collections, such as Marten Stol's *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*,⁴² three articles by Jo Ann Scurlock,⁴³ and Gary Beckman's *Hittite Birth Rituals*.⁴⁴ The purpose of these studies is not to provide a semiotic or a cultural analysis. In his own words, Stol's goal is to introduce "material much of which was not previously accessible to a general reader."⁴⁵ The texts he presents include the Bible and the Talmud, as well as other ancient Near Eastern materials; for example, laws, pharmaceutical lists, cylinder seals, calendars, and myths, along with the incantations. Despite his references to earlier material, he focuses on Adam and Eve as the beginning of information about birth,⁴⁶ which illustrates a privileging of the Abrahamic religions' perspectives toward birth. Based within these traditions, Stol's commentary also gives the impression that birth is nothing but punishment for women. His introduction begins with the statement that "[t]he travails of pregnancy and birth have always been a woman's lot."⁴⁷ While Stol is, of course, accurate that women are the ones who give birth, by emphasizing the travails, Stol focuses on the hardship of birth rather than acknowledging the possibilities for other emotions, such as joy and anticipation, that are presented by other scholars who write

⁴² Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting*. (Groningen: Styx, 2000).

⁴³ These articles include the following: Scurlock, J. A., "Baby-Snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Incognita* 2 (1991): 137-185.

Jo Ann Scurlock, "Witchcraft and Magic in the Ancient Near East and the Bible." *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion. Vol 2*. (ed. Serinity Young; 2 vols.; New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1999), 1037-1040.

Jo Ann Scurlock, "Translating Transfers in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*. (ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer; vol. 141 of *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*; ed. R. van den Broek, H. J. W. Drijvers and H. S. Versnel; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 209-223.

⁴⁴ Gary Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals* (2nd Revised Edition; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983).

⁴⁵ Stol, *BBB*, ix.

⁴⁶ Stol, *BBB*, ix.

⁴⁷ Stol, *BBB*, ix.

about the birth experience.⁴⁸ Thus, Stol does not explore what the rituals and attitudes surrounding birth in ancient Mesopotamia might have meant about the role of women.

Because of his emphasis on Western religions, Stol does not delve as deeply into the beliefs of ancient peoples. He comments that

[f]or early humans, wanting any rational medicine, the surrounding world was full of dark, demonic powers and an ever present threat to mother and child. The help of the Lord was essential and this is the central focus of Biblical sources. Warding off these dangers is the main concern of the textual material from Babylonia and Assyria.⁴⁹

While Stol rightly observes that demons were widely understood to be the agents of illness and difficulties in childbirth, this statement presents limited information about the religious and medical concepts of the people of the ancient Near East, and dismisses their beliefs as irrational. Moreover, Stol makes no distinction between the biblical sources and the textual material from Babylonia and Assyria, which would necessarily refer to different deities. This criticism prevents Stol from presenting a fully realized picture of the place of birth rituals in the ancient Near East.

Generally speaking, ritual texts incorporate three distinct elements. One is a list of materials to be used in the ritual, which includes items believed to have symbolic power; for example, stones, wool, bones, muscle or ash from animals and the like. The second aspect is the prescription of activities to be performed, such as the place where the birthing mother ought to be, the application of the ritual objects, and words to be spoken. The third element is a narrative portion, which tells the story of a myth of a difficult birth

⁴⁸ Pollack, 133; Jordan, 142; Susan E Chase, "The Institution and Experience of Motherhood," in *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (ed. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 71-75.

⁴⁹ Stol, *BBB*, ix.

or describes the condition of the birthing mother and the child in figurative terms designed to evoke sympathy from the deity.

Scurlock's interest is primarily with medical texts of the ancient Near East; consequently, within birth rituals, she focuses on the first two elements. Scurlock goes further than Stol does by examining the power of various artifacts used in medical procedures, including those connected with birth. She points out the existence of supernatural dangers, but also acknowledges the role of medical practitioners and interrogates the relationship between the physical actions prescribed by these medical experts with the religious faith of the women for whom the rituals were being performed. She explicates the meaning of particular acts executed during the rituals, such as tying a knot to indicate blocking the baby from leaving the womb.⁵⁰ Scurlock's emphasis on the physical is an important component for understanding these rituals, but does not do enough to investigate the words of the incantations and the figurative language therein. Exploring this language contributes to a fuller understanding of these rituals. While she does examine the religious and cultural context, Scurlock does so to gain a greater understanding of the ritual. My goal is the reverse: to use the ritual to gain a greater understanding of the religious and cultural context.

The words of the incantation, in partnership with ritual actions and objects, affected the deity they addressed and encouraged him/her to protect both the birthing mother and the child while bringing about a safe delivery. The narrative portions of birth ritual texts often followed a pattern of describing the preparation for the birth, the danger the birthing mother faced during delivery, and a plea for compassion from the deity. These descriptions focus on symbolic language. Therefore, in these sections, birthing

⁵⁰ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 137.

mothers are compared to animals as well as human beings in either dangerous or secure circumstances, with the understanding that the will of the deity is always in the background. Scurlock does comment on the fact that a belief in magic enabled women hearing a ritual to be encouraged as they faced the dangers of childbirth.⁵¹ She also emphasizes particular images that illustrate compassion for the birthing mother and argues that the purpose of the ritual is to provide reassurance to her.⁵²

While the psychological element is important, there is more to learn from the narrative portion of these rituals. For example, it is relevant to point out that the words of these rituals were offered as prayers to a deity.⁵³ Another element of these narratives, more crucial to the subject of this study, is how gender is represented for both the birthing mother and the deity. Beckman addresses this issue briefly in his discussion of deities relating to birth in Hatti. He points out that “Numerous deities are mentioned in the Hittite birth rituals, but only several seem to have had any special connection with the phenomenon of human reproduction and birth. These divinities [were] all female.”⁵⁴ As he discusses these female birth deities, he neglects elements of male divinities, such as the Storm-god Tešub, that indicate their governance of fertility.

Within the ancient Near East, fertility implied reproduction and the creation of new life.⁵⁵ Although linked, this concept could be separated from sexual performance and sexual pleasure. In her analysis of sex in ancient Mesopotamian literature, Gwendolyn Leick separates male sexuality, which was valued for the reproductive

⁵¹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 138.

⁵² Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

⁵³ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 138.

⁵⁴ Beckman, *HBR*, 238.

⁵⁵ B. B. Schmidt, “Moon” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn et al.; 2nd Edition; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 587.

possibilities, as well as for the satisfaction of orgasm, from feminine eroticism, which was valued for pleasure.⁵⁶ In this context, sexuality included performance of sexual acts, which could result in pleasure, reproduction or both, while eroticism focused on enjoyment of sexual acts. Since male sexuality provided semen, believed to be the only essential component of reproduction,⁵⁷ male gods primarily governed fertility and therefore influenced birth. The focus on female divinities governing birth illustrates a bias for seeing birth as solely a female enterprise.

Birth requires the body of a woman. However, it is possible for someone sexed female to transcend the boundaries of feminine gender. Men and the masculine have not previously been a primary topic in study of birth rituals in the ancient Near East. Scurlock points out that “men seem as a rule, to have been banned from the birth room, perhaps on the grounds that their presence there would mean disaster.”⁵⁸ She notes that births were generally attended by a midwife or *qadištu*,⁵⁹ but “if there were complications, a male exorcist had to be called in.”⁶⁰ Stol devotes a section to goddesses evoked during birth,⁶¹

⁵⁶ Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 54.

⁵⁷ Leick, *SEML*, 29.

⁵⁸ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 144.

⁵⁹ Midwives were women who assisted with the birthing process. Their activities included, but were not limited to, delivering the child and taking care of the child immediately after birth by washing the child, cutting the umbilical cord, and disposing of the afterbirth. Please see:

Stol, *BBB*, 171-176.

Beckman, *HBR*, 232-235.

In addition, one can find references to midwives in a variety of ancient Mesopotamian literature, including myths, such as “ENKI and the World Order” and “Atraḥasīs”, with particular references to goddesses as midwives.

The *qadištu* was a woman in service of a male deity. *Qadištu*-women also assisted with birth and primarily had responsibility for wet-nursing. Their service to birthing women may have been spiritual rather than physical. In Sumerian hymns, this term has also been used for goddesses. See Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “Tamar, *Qēdēšā*, *Qadištu* and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia” *Harvard Theological Review* 82:3 (1989): 250-255.

⁶⁰ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 142.

⁶¹ Stol, *BBB*, 74.

but does not give similar attention to gods addressed during birth rituals Scurlock notes that the divine division of labor mirrored that of the medical division:

Although female birth goddesses were honored in the birth ritual and celebrated in hymns and prayers as divine midwives, when appeals had to be made to divinities because things were not going well, it was from male patrons of childbirth such as the Moon-god Sîn and ASALLUḪI/Marduk that assistance was typically sought.⁶²

The prevalence of goddesses in texts surrounding birth may have contributed to the interpretation that they were the only ones concerned with birth. However, multiple rituals designed for difficult or complicated births include language that invokes male deities. Therefore, birth in the ancient Near East does require addressing elements that are not traditionally feminine.

Moreover, there are rituals that include masculine figures for the birthing mother, such as warriors and ship's captains, or evoke the actions of the male bull. These symbols call into question the gender that the birthing mother performs as she gives birth. Masculine images in rituals surrounding the woman-centered act of childbirth permit examination of the construction of gender in these texts and possibly in the ancient Near East in general. Because motherhood and femininity are so closely intertwined, looking at the images and symbols related to birth rituals can shed light on feminine identity. However, this analysis can also challenge the assumption that maternal identity is only feminine. The experience of the birthing mother is central to the narrative portions of these rituals. While it is not possible to know the identity of the authors of these rituals, the centrality of the mother provides insight into ancient Mesopotamian concepts of the body, the changes it undergoes and the dangers it faces.

⁶² Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 168, note 58.

In a contemporary frame, Pollack describes the differences in birth accounts when women tell their own stories. She notes,

... “[B]irth stories” are not limited to accounts of labor and delivery. Their center shifts with each telling. Given the opportunity, women made what is typically left to the margins of birth discourse – the mother’s body, prenatal deaths, sex, conception, genetic counseling – the primary subjects of their birth stories.⁶³

In the ancient Near East, the birth ritual texts are not usually presented in the voice of the birthing mother. However, a variety of these incantations bring some of the marginal elements Pollack mentions – the mother’s body, prenatal death, sexuality – into focus. The central place of the birthing mother, the changes in her body, the possibility of her death, and her relationship with the deity, illustrate the importance of telling the birthing mother’s story.

My theoretical framework requires analyzing the figurative language, such as metaphor, simile, parallelism and repetition, within birth rituals in order to discover how this language functions in constructing gender roles during the act of birth. Within the rituals I have selected, two, “Steering the Boat,”⁶⁴ and “The Baby is Stuck,”⁶⁵ involve traditionally masculine figures, the ship’s captain and the warrior, for the birthing mother. The third ritual, a variant on “The Cow of Sîn,” called “I am Pregnant,”⁶⁶ includes allusions to male bulls. These rituals, taken together, create a complex picture of gender performance within the ancient Near East. Drawing upon the ways that these images function in other texts from the same time and place will allow me to place the symbols

⁶³ Pollack, *Telling Bodies*, 7.

⁶⁴ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

⁶⁵ W. G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text,” *Iraq* 31.1 (Spring 1969): 28-39.

⁶⁶ Niek Veldhuis. *A Cow of Sîn*. (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1991).

in the birth rituals in context and gain greater insight as to what they might mean regarding gender in these rituals specifically and in the ancient Near East generally.

Comfortable with Ambiguity: Ancient Near Eastern Literature as Context for Ritual

Given that Stol, Scurlock and Beckman have not discussed the symbols, images, and poetic devices present in birth ritual texts, it is necessary to look at the methods other scholars of the ancient Near East have provided for understanding semiotic techniques and the ways that they functioned in these sources. Niek Veldhuis, Erica Reiner, Joan Goodnick Westenholz, Jeremy Black, W. G. Lambert, and Jerrold S. Cooper⁶⁷ are among a significant group of scholars who have developed techniques to study literary tropes and figurative language in extant texts, particularly in poetry, from the ancient Near East. The incantations employ many types of figurative language, including metaphor, simile, repetition, parallelism and ambiguity.

Investigating the ways that masculine metaphors function in birth rituals, requires examining the ways that metaphors are believed to function generally. I. A. Richards was one of the first scholars to examine the meanings of metaphor. He proposed naming the two halves of metaphor: the tenor (main idea or subject) and the vehicle (terms that

⁶⁷ Niek Veldhuis, "The Poetry of Magic," in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual Historical and Interpretive Perspectives*. (ed. Tzvi Abusch and Karel Van Der Toorn; vol. 1 of *Ancient Magic and Divination*; Groningen: Styx, 1999), 35-48.

Erica Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut*, (Ann Arbor: Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan, 1985).

Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "Symbolic Language in Akkadian Narrative Poetry: The Metaphorical Relationship Between Poetical Images and the Real World," in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian*. (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H.L.J. Vanstiphout. Groningen: Styx, 1996), 183-206.

Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

Lambert, "A Middle Assyrian Medical Text."

J. S. Cooper, "Magic and M(is)use: Poetic Promiscuity in Mesopotamian Ritual," in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian*. (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout. Groningen: Styx, 1996), 47-57.

describe it).⁶⁸ While Richards was the first to offer this theory, later scholars have refined it. As Cynthia Chapman points out, in Richards's system, the vehicle describes the tenor and hence the relationship only moves in one direction.⁶⁹ Later views of metaphor focus on the relationship and interaction between the two terms and how they both affect one another.⁷⁰ Moreover, both the tenor and the vehicle have a multitude of associated meanings or commonplaces that contribute to the meaning of the metaphor.⁷¹ As I will demonstrate, within the birth rituals of the ancient Near East, there are a variety of connotations for women, mothers, men, fathers, ship's captains, warriors, cows and bulls that contribute to the function of metaphors within these rituals.

Another element of metaphor is how similarity and contrast communicate meaning. Veldhuis specifically examines the ways that these elements function both in poetry and in magical rites. While similarity and contrast perform different functions within magic, examining their literary function can contribute to the understanding of their magical function. Veldhuis argues:

The transfer of attributes from the *materia magica* is based on similarity and contrast. Similarity and contrast are the two basic mechanisms for the transfer of meaning in poetic language. Similarity and contrast provide the building blocks of metaphor and simile but also engender features like rhyme and parallelism.⁷²

In this way, similarity and contrast work together to enhance the meanings of both the tenor and the vehicle within metaphor. Within ritual, the relationship affects the deity and helps to bring about the desired outcome.

⁶⁸ I. A. Richards, "The Philosophy of Rhetoric," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (ed. M. Johnson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1981), 52-53.

⁶⁹ Cynthia Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 11.

⁷⁰ Max Black, "More and About Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought* (ed. Andrew Ortony; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 27.

⁷¹ Chapman, 12.

⁷² Veldhuis, "Poetry," 41.

Parallelism is a significant aspect of both Mesopotamian poetry and ritual texts.⁷³ It functions through the repetition of one word in structurally parallel sentences or repetition of a phrase with slight alterations in each term.⁷⁴ The changes mirror a change in the state of the subject of the poem or ritual. In the case of ritual, it may create a desired change in the status of the person for whom the ritual is being performed. Parallelism enables the similarity and contrast present within metaphor and simile to cover a wider range of symbols and reinforces the meaning of these symbols within the ritual.

Another crucial element in examining these rituals is the multiplicity of meanings available from the different images. H. L. J. Vanstiphout points out that

Imagery in itself also generates seriality and multiplication of images. The reason for this is . . . the image's ambiguity: on the one hand it 'stands for' what it is not; on the other the *significant* [emphasis Vanstiphout's] naturally holds on to its portion of reality.⁷⁵

Thus, the images utilized in these rituals lend themselves to various interpretations. In order to gain greater knowledge of these meanings, one strategy is to examine parallels in various genres produced within the same culture.⁷⁶ In addition, Black focuses on the ambiguity that is present in many poetic images and symbols within Mesopotamian culture.⁷⁷ This ambiguity reflects a resistance to easily divide or to categorize the world. Cooper also notes the presence of ambiguity in key words within magical rites.⁷⁸ While

⁷³ Cooper, 53.

⁷⁴ Veldhuis, "Poetry," 43.

⁷⁵ H. L. J. Vanstiphout, "Ambiguity as a Generative Force in Standard Sumerian Literature," in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 157-158.

⁷⁶ Shlomo Izre'el, *Adapa and the South Wind: Language has the Power of Life and Death* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 110.

⁷⁷ Jeremy Black, 127.

⁷⁸ Cooper, 50.

none of these scholars explicitly mentions gender ambiguity, it is possible that the emphasis on ambiguous meaning lends insight into the construction of gender.

Speech-act theory also contributes to analysis of these rituals. The basis of speech act theory is that “to speak . . . is not merely to refer to the world or state propositions; it is also and, more fundamentally, to perform actions.”⁷⁹ J. L. Austin, the first to outline speech act theory, broke utterances into the locutionary (the act of saying something), illocutionary (the act in saying something), and perlocutionary (the response of others to this act).⁸⁰ Birth rituals, by their nature, have illocutionary force as they do not just communicate information but accomplish something, as well as perlocutionary force, in that performance brings about the birth of the child. Speech act theory is not widely incorporated into ancient Near Eastern or biblical scholarship, although there are a few examples.⁸¹ However, birth rituals provide a means to reveal how the speech acts of the rituals affect the birthing mother.

Scholarship on Sex and Gender as Performative

The pioneering work of Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble*⁸² creates the foundation for the concept of how sexed bodies can perform multiple genders,

⁷⁹ Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 14.

⁸⁰ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), 1-4.

⁸¹ Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation: Towards a Hermeneutic of Self-Involvement* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001).

Derek Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

Bridget Gilfillan Upton, *Hearing Mark’s Endings: Listening to Ancient Popular Texts Through Speech Act Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

⁸² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999).

as they do within these rituals. Butler argues that both the materiality of sex and the effects of gender are constructed. She articulates her theory of gender performativity, a citational process in which cultural norms are reinforced through the language and practices iterated through the body. Consequently, for Butler, gender is not something imposed upon a sexed body, but rather the process of gender construction produces the sexed body. Butler's emphasis on the performative illustrates the relationship between the body and action in creating gender roles. She writes, ". . . it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative* [emphasis Butler's], inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification"⁸³ Therefore, according to Butler, the social role of gender functions to place the body within a sexed system.

Rituals function as discursive practices. Butler argues that the sex of a body is created through repeated practices in which "discourse produces the effects that it names"⁸⁴ Therefore, the material body is inextricable from language: "Sexual difference. . . is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices."⁸⁵ Both the words and the actions of the ritual serve to construct gender, not only at the moment rituals are repeated, but also as they are considered in context with other discourses, such as poetry and myth. Butler examines some discursive practices in contemporary novels in order

. . . to understand how what has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of 'sex' . . . might at once be produced as a troubling return, not only as an *imaginary* [emphasis Butler's] contestation that effects a failure in the workings of the inevitable law, but as an enabling

⁸³ Butler, *BTM*, 30.

⁸⁴ Butler, *BTM*, 2.

⁸⁵ Butler, *BTM*, 1.

disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter not at all.⁸⁶

While Butler does not address the ancient Near East, her strategy for examining sex and gender roles in contemporary novels can be used in examining ancient literatures for both what they articulate about gender roles, as well as what they leave out. People of the ancient Near East would have “foreclosed and banished” different aspects of sex than people might today. Although she herself focuses on contemporary literature, Butler’s work allows exploration of different gendered possibilities within the materials available from a variety of cultures.

The tension in the relationship between body and speech allows for multiple understandings of gender, not limited by bodily shape. According to Butler, bodies that do not fit the mold of the speech act destabilize categories:

The body which fails to submit to the law or occupies that law in a mode contrary to its dictates, thus loses its sure footing – its cultural gravity – in the symbolic and reappears in its imaginary tenuousness, its fictional direction. Such bodies contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex.⁸⁷

Bodies that cross imposed boundaries make it possible to call into question the binary definition of sex and the certainty that body alone determines gender.

Language and symbol are equally essential to the process of gender citationality.

Butler states:

The symbolic is understood as the normative dimension of the constitution of the sexed subject within language. It consists in a series of demands, taboos, sanctions, injunctions, prohibitions, impossible idealizations and threats – performative speech acts, as it were, that wield the power to produce the field of cultural viable sexual subjects: performative acts, in

⁸⁶ Butler, *BTM*, 23.

⁸⁷ Butler, *BTM*, 139.

other words, with the power to produce or materialize subjectivating effects.⁸⁸

However, incantations are part of a cultural network of speech acts that serve to reinforce the ideals of gender. Various speech acts, such as those included in ritual, play an essential part in both creating and calling into question gender roles. By analyzing speech acts, one can learn as much about gender as one can by analyzing bodily characteristics.

In the case of the birth incantation, there is a practitioner who is not the birthing mother who performs the speech act of the ritual. The mother is nevertheless at the same time performing a bodily act.⁸⁹ Amy Hollywood argues that while Butler's point about the importance of language is well taken, "bodily practices shape the subject" and these bodily practices are equally important as the speech acts in creating sex. A birth ritual includes both a speech act and a bodily act, illustrating how the words of the ritual and the action of the birth change the body. Taken together, the speech act and the bodily act create the sex of the birthing mother. Moreover, this construction of gender in the ancient Near East is inextricably tied with religion, particular in birth rituals addressed to deities. Butler's work is useful in this exercise because

Her ongoing investigations into the relationships between bodies, language and cultural norms in identity construction should interest religionists, given the role of bodily practices (including linguistic ones) in the production of religious identities.⁹⁰

This process of taking on a cultural gender role is directly related to the cultural gender roles of the deities in the ancient Near East, as individuals establish their gender according to the model of the deities.

⁸⁸ Butler, *BTM*, 106.

⁸⁹ Amy Hollywood, "Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization," in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 253.

⁹⁰ Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, "Judith Butler – In Theory" in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006), 10.

Fracturing Binaries: Gender in Ancient Near Eastern Scholarship

Although recent work on gender and the ancient Near East has incorporated some of Butler's strategies,⁹¹ early work tended to uncritically accept binary sex/gender division and even later work is colored by preconceived notions of male and female. Early scholarship on masculinity in ancient Mesopotamia focused on prowess in battle and the ability to father children.⁹² Current scholarship makes a similar case, as Bahrani argues, "In Akkadian and Sumerian literature, allure and seductiveness are the most desirable qualities in a woman, as is vigour for a man."⁹³ However, these statements do not accurately reflect the attributes found in historical, legal, iconographic and literary representations of men and women in the literature of ancient Near Eastern communities.

Reasons for adhering to this binary system are myriad. As Marc Van De Mierop notes, "Women are found only when we think the female domain is involved Therefore, the search for women will concentrate on particular aspects of life: the domestic world, marriage and sexual behavior, the cult."⁹⁴ Thus, modern scholars in some ways reinforce contemporary conceptions of masculine and feminine in the ancient world. Van de Mierop cites two possible reasons for the pervasiveness of this dichotomy. One is that ancient Greece placed women in the private sphere and men in the public and

⁹¹ Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001).

McCaffrey, "Gender Ambiguity," 379-391.

Asher-Greve, "Essential Body," 432-461.

⁹² Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "Symbols for Masculinity and Femininity: Their Use in Ancient Near Eastern Sympathetic Magic Rituals," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (85.03): 327.

⁹³ Bahrani, *WoB*, 88.

⁹⁴ Marc Van de Mierop, *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History* (London: Routledge, 1999), 146.

this division is unconsciously believed to exist in other ancient societies.⁹⁵ The second is that modern women living in the geographical region of the Middle East are perceived to be living in an oppressive patriarchal regime, which is believed to have been rooted in antiquity.⁹⁶ More innocuously, it is simple to use our modern concepts of what constitute masculine and feminine and overlay them upon ancient Near Eastern culture, no matter what evidence one finds.

One subject where the development of the scholarship is evident is the study of the goddess INANNA/Ištar, who incorporates aspects of both feminine sexuality and militarism. This figure illustrates the merging between traits stereotypically thought of as masculine and those stereotypically thought of as feminine. INANNA/Ištar represents both love and war and provides a model for exploring the relationship between power, life, birth, and death. Scholars of the late 1980s and early 1990s such as Rivkah Harris⁹⁷ have described INANNA/Ištar's duality as bisexuality or androgyny and argued that this conflation of characteristics is unique in the pantheon. Harris states unequivocally

Central to the goddess as paradox is here well-attested psychological and more rarely evidence physiological androgyny. INANNA-Ishtar is both female and male. Over and over again the texts juxtapose the masculine and feminine traits and behavior of the goddess. She can be both compassionate, supportive, and nurturing and assertive, aggressive, and strong-willed. In short, she breaks the boundaries between the sexes by embodying both femaleness and maleness⁹⁸

The qualities that Harris contrasts have functioned in opposition along gender lines. However, Harris does not allow for the possibility that maleness and femaleness may have had different definitions in the ancient Near East than they do today. In fact, she

⁹⁵ Van De Mierop, *CTWH*, 154.

⁹⁶ Van De Mierop, *CTWH*, 151.

⁹⁷ Rivkah Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites," *History of Religions* 30 (1990): 261-278.

⁹⁸ Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar," 268.

explicitly rejects this idea: “Apart from INANNA-Ishtar . . . the gender boundaries are strictly adhered to in Mesopotamia . . . War was a masculine occupation and preoccupation.”⁹⁹ Harris argues that INANNA/Ištar’s androgyny provided the rare opportunity for boundaries between the genders to be shattered in worship of her.¹⁰⁰ The premise that such opportunities were rare discounts several other instances of the blurring of gender boundaries in Mesopotamian culture.¹⁰¹

Despite these pervasive biases, there have been significant challenges to the binary sex/gender system within ancient Near Eastern scholarship. For example, in recent years, scholars have presented a more complex picture of INANNA/Ištar. Kathleen McCaffrey offers Ištar’s cult as evidence the options of third or fourth genders in the ancient Near East. Her argument includes a reference in “A Hymn to the Goddess INANNA” to INANNA’s ability to alter gender, which includes the line: “To turn a man into a woman and woman into a man are yours, INANNA.”¹⁰² Hymns of praise to Ištar include similar lines, as found in the hymn, “Ishtar, Queen of Heaven,” a conflation of texts related to Ištar. This hymn reads “[A]nunu, creatress of subject peoples/ [Who can tu]rn man to woman and woman into man.”¹⁰³ In these cases, the movement between genders does not indicate bisexuality or androgyny, but rather that gender fluidity is possible within this culture. McCaffrey notes, “Disagreements over the nature of INANNA’s power to determine gender have seldom been presented with a clear

⁹⁹ Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar,” 268, footnote 36.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar,” 277.

¹⁰¹ McCaffrey, 379-391..

Katarzyna Grosz, “Daughters Adopted as Sons at Nuzi and Emar” in *La Femme Dans La Proche-Orient Antique: Compte Rendu de la XXXIII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (Paris, 7-10 Juillet 1986)* (ed. Jean-Marie Durand; Editions Recherche sur les Civilizations: Paris, 1987), 81-86.

Asher-Greve, “Essential Body,” 432-461.

¹⁰² McCaffrey, 380.

¹⁰³ “Ishtar, Queen of Heaven,” (iii 69-70) (Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, [Third Edition. Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 593).

definition of terminology and assumptions.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, scholars have articulated interpretations for lines praising INANNA/Ištar’s power over gender that refer to actual changing of a person’s biological sex, to a change in role played, to a change in dress, to an acceptance of a third or fourth gender category.¹⁰⁵ These multiple interpretations illustrate how contemporary attitudes toward sex and gender function in approaches to these texts. However, they also emphasize the concept that INANNA/Ištar points to possibilities for multiple gender identities. While the birth rituals that use masculine imagery do not address INANNA/Ištar, her presence within ancient Mesopotamia and interpretations of her roles shed light onto the ways that the birthing mother’s gender is determined through the discursive practices of the birth rituals. Moreover, she provides a model for understanding other deities whose traits transcend gender.

Gwendolyn Leick also analyzes the complexity presented by INANNA/Ištar and her followers to raise the possibility of a conceptualization of a third gender within Mesopotamian culture. She argues that there were individuals who did not fully perform either the feminine or the masculine gender and thus could not easily be categorized.¹⁰⁶ The notion of INANNA’s being able to alter sexual identity led Leick to explore the concept of genital differences among the followers of INANNA.¹⁰⁷ Her evidence comes from a linguistic analysis of specific words in hymns that describe her followers as cross-dressing and or carrying emblems representative of the other gender, such as hoops for men and weapons for women, as well as her focus on the possible frequency of infants born with ambiguous genitalia: “This text describes the ritual acceptance of liminal

¹⁰⁴ McCaffrey, 380.

¹⁰⁵ McCaffrey, 380.

¹⁰⁶ Leick, *SEML*, 159.

¹⁰⁷ Leick, *SEML*, 158.

sexuality under the aegis of the goddess.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, she suggests that in the ancient Near East, people who did not fit cleanly into a binary system could not only be accepted but celebrated within INANNA/Ištar’s cult.

Walls also considers INANNA/Ištar a challenge to binary gender definition. In his discussion of her role in *The Epic of Gilgameš*, Walls notes that

Ishtar voices a counter-theme of feminine desire that challenges the patriarchal emphasis on both womb and phallus yet retains its compulsory heterosexual perspective. The epic’s nuanced presentation incorporates these thematic variations without resolving the ambiguities and tensions of its sexual discourse.¹⁰⁹

Ištar illustrates feminine desire and sexual pleasure, both in this epic and other love lyrics. As she makes sexual advances to Gilgameš, she may possess stereotypical masculine traits of aggression and agency; however, even here, she is consistently portrayed as an agent of feminine desire. The tension between her female role and masculine characteristics proved too difficult for Harris to resolve.¹¹⁰ Walls makes the point that it was not necessary to resolve it:

Ishtar’s examples of erotic excess demonstrate the instability of cultural categories of erotic desire; in fact, the goddess actively destabilizes the normative (and thus repressive) categories of her culture’s discourse of sexuality.¹¹¹

This destabilization challenges a distinct separation between male and female that is so widely offered as an interpretive strategy for this material.

The concept of Ištar as destabilizing force is echoed in Zainab Bahrani’s work, which relies heavily on Butler.¹¹² She notes that the contrast between Ištar’s perceived

¹⁰⁸ Leick, *SEML*, 159.

¹⁰⁹ Walls, 36.

¹¹⁰ Harris, 268.

¹¹¹ Walls, 47.

¹¹² Bahrani, *WoB*, 17.

masculine attributes and her female identity is “not answered satisfactorily in terms of sexual bipolarity.”¹¹³ The sexual categories of the ancient Near East were, quite simply, different from contemporary ones and the biases of past scholarship have made it difficult to interpret gender-bending behavior as the “displacement of normative sex.”¹¹⁴ Bahrani argues for Ištar’s cult as incorporating the “instability or fluidity of male/female.”¹¹⁵ Using the work of Bahrani and Walls, one can argue for a more multi-faceted picture of not only Ištar and her cult, but attitudes toward gender in the ancient Near East that are reflected in visual representation as well.

INANNA/Ištar is not the only Mesopotamian deity whose traits did not conform to binary gender definition. Multiple gender categories exist for the Mesopotamian deities who governed childbirth. As previously discussed, fertility included the creation of new life, but could be separated from both the act of birth and from sexuality. Within the study of fertility in the ancient Near East, there is the assumption that fertility must be the realm of the women and consequently goddess worship.¹¹⁶ However, in analysis of fertility in other religious contexts, male deities governed fertility far more often. Examples include Greek deities, such as Dionysius, but also the male Yahweh providing fertility in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹⁷ The ancient Near East is no exception, since while INANNA/Ištar represents eroticism and love, she does not govern fertility. That task is left to gods such the Babylonian Marduk, the Sumerian/Babylonian ENKI/Ea, and the Sumerian/Babylonian NANNA/Sîn, the primary ones invoked in the birth rituals under

¹¹³ Bahrani, *WoB*, 144.

¹¹⁴ Bahrani, *WoB*, 145.

¹¹⁵ Bahrani, *WoB*, 145.

¹¹⁶ Bahrani, *WoB*, 49.

¹¹⁷ Arthur De Vries, *Elsevier’s Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (2nd edition; Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), 219-220.

discussion.¹¹⁸ There has been less feminist scholarship on the role of gods than there has on the role of goddesses; however, the gendered analysis that calls into question binary definitions for the goddesses can also be used to address the gender roles of male gods. Marduk, ENKI/Ea, and NANNA/Sîn, like INANNA/Ištar, illustrate qualities that indicate a less rigid definition of gender roles for ancient Near Eastern deities.

The fact that war was considered a masculine enterprise, yet it was governed by a female deity, and that the process of birth was considered a female enterprise, yet was governed by male deities, suggests that, in ancient Mesopotamia, while the deities were organized in the pantheon along perceived gender lines, the role the deity played was more important than the deity's gender. Veldhuis points out that gods in the ancient Near East played different roles in different contexts and that therefore the role of a god in any given text depends upon the social context of the literary artifact.¹¹⁹ These roles were not limited by gender. Therefore, one can argue that the role of deities, in fact, transcends the boundaries of gender.

In the modern West, it is generally assumed that bodily markers will reflect the gender being performed.¹²⁰ However, within the ancient Near East, it was possible for bodies to perform multiple genders. The binary sex/gender model does not provide an adequate means to discuss the ways that gender is performed in the birth rituals of ancient Mesopotamia; therefore, it is necessary to seek another model. In her analysis of the body in Buddhism, Susanne Mrozik offer one. She argues that it is possible to view

¹¹⁸ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 14; Lambert, "Middle Assyrian," 28-39; Stol, *BBB*, 62.

¹¹⁹ Niek Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature and Scholarship: The Sumerian Composition Nanše and the Birds with a Catalogue of Sumerian Bird Names* (Leiden: Brill/Styx, 2004), 17.

¹²⁰ Butler, *BTM*, 4.

Buddhism with an omnigendered frame that transcends the limits of strict division between male and female.¹²¹

Mrozik evaluates the ways that bodies are presented in Buddhist literature in order to describe the omnigendered role she perceives for both the Bodhisattva (a being who is working to become a Buddha) and the Buddha (a being who has attained the highest goal of Buddhism, to become liberated). Her goal in creating this model is to contest the assumption that male sex is a mark of excellence and she does so by “challenging the very notion that there are only two sexes (male and female) in these sources.”¹²² She defines a sex which is completely other to male and female sexes as alterior sex.

Mrozik examines a text in which a woman changes her sex on her path to becoming a Buddha. In Buddhism, the body is governed by faculties: male and female sex faculties determine both behavior and appearance.¹²³ In this story, the woman is able to create masculine qualities in her body before the body changes its sex faculty. Thus, Mrozik redefines Butler’s concept that bodies that do not fit gender norms must be “abjected or delegitimated bodies.”¹²⁴ Mrozik suggests that the qualities the woman in this text generates, strength, power and vigor, are Bodhisattva qualities, rather than masculine, and thus are alterior to both men and women.¹²⁵

Mrozik continues by analyzing the Buddha’s representation of alterior sex, by pointing out that the Buddha often expresses maternal love. However, this maternity does not correlate with femininity. The Buddha, in fact, destabilizes the culture’s

¹²¹ Susanne Mrozik, “Materializations of Virtue: Buddhist Discourse on Bodies,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 19.

¹²² Mrozik, 18.

¹²³ Mrozik 20.

¹²⁴ Butler, *BTM*, 15.

¹²⁵ Mrozik, 29.

understanding of sexuality. Moreover, the Buddha reflects the Bodhisattva qualities, and thus exhibits an alterior sex, rather than a combination of specifically masculine and feminine qualities. This bodily identity does not remain fixed; it, like all reality in Buddhism, is fluid.¹²⁶

While the connections between Buddhism and ancient Mesopotamian religious practice may seem tenuous, the omnigendered model provides an alternative means for understanding the capacity of both the ancient Near Eastern pantheon and humans to transcend gender. As the role of ancient Mesopotamian deities superseded their perceived gender, these deities, like the Buddha, could reflect an alterior sex. The conflicts within scholarship over INANNA/Ištar's gender can be resolved by arguing that her seemingly masculine and feminine qualities of compassion, support, nurture, assertiveness, aggression and strong-will are in fact the qualities of ancient Mesopotamian deities. Thus, INANNA/Ištar, rather than being androgynous or bisexual, like the Buddha presents an alterior sex. The male deities Marduk, NANNA/Sîn, and ENKI/Ea invoked during birth rituals also exhibit these alterior qualities, such as maternity, and thus can be characterized as omnigendered.

Unlike in Buddhism, there is no concept within ancient Mesopotamian religious practice of the ability for humans to achieve a sacred status. However, the fact that the deities were conceptualized as humans with superior qualities, paves the way for humans to try to achieve the qualities of the deities. Veldhuis points out that in the ancient Near East there was no distinction between religion and other aspects of life because beliefs in gods and other supernatural elements permeated all aspects of a person's life.¹²⁷ This

¹²⁶ Mroziak, 31.

¹²⁷ Veldhuis, *RL S*, 11-13.

interrelationship between humans and deities makes it possible for the omnigendered model to describe not only the Mesopotamian pantheon, but also the human realm.

Studies of ancient Mesopotamian iconography, laws and histories support the viability of this omnigendered lens for humans. Julia Asher-Greve was one of the first scholars to address the concept of the gendered body in ancient Mesopotamia in order to present new interpretive possibilities.¹²⁸ She goes further when she notes that ancient Mesopotamia focused on a holistic understanding of the human being:

Ancient Mesopotamians did not develop a system of binary gender equating male with positive and female with negative values. The Mesopotamian holistic concept of the human being was based on a physical system, with the body as fundamental point of reference.¹²⁹

Thus, while scholars pursue understanding of the body based on contemporary gender binaries, there were other possibilities in ancient Mesopotamia. The ancient Mesopotamians had multiple gender categories, including those of ambiguous sex and castrated men. Due to the belief that the human body was divine,

. . . neither the female gender nor persons of no, or naturally ambiguous, sex were denigrated or assumed to lack culture, mind and reason because they were still considered divine creations.¹³⁰

This concept of the whole person and the ways in which each person was a divine creation, no matter their sex, is an avenue that has not received much attention, but it is crucial to understanding the possibilities for gender role complexity in the human realm. This holistic understanding clarifies the presence of multiple gender identities within birth rituals, as well as other literary materials, and makes it feasible to argue for the omnigendered system.

¹²⁸ Asher-Greve, "Essential Body," 432-461.

¹²⁹ Asher-Greve, "Essential Body," 453.

¹³⁰ Asher-Greve, "Essential Body," 453.

Politics also provided an opportunity for powerful human beings to perform multiple genders. Kathleen McCaffrey analyzes various representations for “the possibility that the gender concepts of the ancient Near East may have included third and fourth gender categories.”¹³¹ The examples she uses involve visual representation and the use of male clothing and names as indicators of political power. The first example is the Ur-Nanše statue from Mari, which depicts a person with feminine features, such as “an effeminate face and bulging breasts,” but dressed in male clothing and bearing a male’s name.¹³² Another example is a scene in the gold bowl of Hašanlu, in which a person with male physiology is depicted wearing female clothing. The third example is queen of Nineveh, who is represented on tile fragments as wearing a weapon and as having a beard. McCaffrey notes that weapons were emblematic of the masculine gender in the ancient Near East.¹³³ Asher-Greve points out that “[c]onsidering the emphasis on masculine strength and heroism in royal ideology these figurines are difficult to integrate into the royal imagery.”¹³⁴ These examples of gender boundary fluidity all apply in specific cases and are consequently characterized as aberrations, even by the scholars who highlight them.¹³⁵ However, the fact that there are several examples of such exceptional depictions illustrates the need for some reinterpretation of the ancient Near Eastern sex/gender system.

In addition, McCaffrey cites other female monarchs who employed male imagery, such as Ku-Baba, an early king of Kish, who was depicted in female dress and hairstyle

¹³¹ McCaffrey, 379.

¹³² Asher-Greve, “Essential Body,” 438.

¹³³ McCaffrey, 383.

¹³⁴ Asher-Greve, “Essential Body,” 438.

¹³⁵ Van De Mierop, *CTWH*, 159.

but with a beard and brandishing weapons.¹³⁶ Stol asserts that figures such as Ku-Baba, who “combined male function with female gender” were negative omens in Babylonia.¹³⁷ However, Julia Asher-Greve’s argument is that that such figures would not be unusual considering that with art and texts which were contemporary to Ku-Baba “royal women presided over large institutions, were buried with their entourage, represented in a ‘masculine’ manner and as equal to kings.”¹³⁸ Thus, despite the difficulties of modern reconciliation between strength, heroism and feminine markers, within the ancient Near Eastern context, the power that royal women exhibited lent itself to the gender ambiguous figures described here.

As McCaffrey’s last example, she cites the case of Hatšepsut, the woman who became king of Egypt.¹³⁹ Betsy Bryan notes that Hatšepsut’s rule is “well-documented, even in comparison with most male rulers.”¹⁴⁰ While Egypt falls outside the parameters of my study, Hatšepsut’s use of masculine images sheds light on the power that was exemplified by such imagery within the ancient Near East. Hatšepsut’s iconography progressively added male elements, such as a masculine crown, and the title of pharaoh, as well as male poses and emblems used only by male kings. In addition to the iconography, Hatšepsut also used titles modeled on those used for kings and depicted herself making offerings directly to the gods, which was the prerogative of kings.¹⁴¹ As

¹³⁶ McCaffrey, 390.

¹³⁷ Stol, *BBB*, 164.

¹³⁸ Julia M. Asher-Greve, “Decisive Sex, Essential Gender” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*. (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki : Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 20.

¹³⁹ McCaffrey, 390.

¹⁴⁰ Betsy M. Bryan, “In women good and bad fortune are on earth: Status and roles of women in Egyptian culture” in *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt*. (ed. Anne K. Capel and Glenn E. Markoe. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1996), 30.

¹⁴¹ Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 46.

her reign continued, she gradually added male dress and a long beard.¹⁴² Hatšepsut, however, did not completely eradicate her feminine identity:

Although some statues portray her wearing female clothing and royal headgear, most of the sculpture from her temple . . . represents her as a man, despite associated texts that sometimes use feminine endings and pronouns.¹⁴³

Narrative texts used both masculine and feminine pronouns. There is no evidence that she used male dress in life, as she did in her monuments, although one cannot exclude the possibility that she may have.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, Hatšepsut's masculine identity was not all encompassing. Gay Robins notes that "Since there was no provision for a female king within Egyptian ideology, she had to adapt to a male gender role."¹⁴⁵ Hatšepsut's performance of the masculine gender produced the power of her kingship and rendered her sex moot. The Mesopotamian rulers that McCaffrey cites could have experienced this same "tension between biological sex and male gender role of king."¹⁴⁶ Despite this tension, biological female sex, at least in these few cases, did not prevent one from playing a masculine gender role. Because these women performed the male gender but possessed the physical bodies of women, they could be omnigendered.

McCaffrey illustrates the modern biases as she explores previous interpretation that has sought to rectify the contrast by arguing that Ur-Nanše could be a female name, that cross-dressing may have been common to biological third gender individuals, part of a cultic function or a product of age, or that the Nineveh tiles have been joined

¹⁴² McCaffrey, 391.

¹⁴³ Bryan, 32.

¹⁴⁴ Robins, 47.

¹⁴⁵ Robins, 50.

¹⁴⁶ Robins, 51.

incorrectly.¹⁴⁷ She points out that these types of explanations are a result of the Western predisposition to equate sex and gender and points out the possibilities for a multi-gender system, in which “third and fourth genders allow incongruity between sex and gender.”¹⁴⁸ In this way, McCaffrey posits that it was possible in the ancient Near East to perform a social gender role that did not match one’s biological sex. In the cases she discusses, the masculine social gender role allowed for more political power than would necessarily have been possible for someone of feminine social gender role. While birthing mothers do not physically use male dress or male secondary sex characteristics, the masculine metaphors suggest that they may create traditionally masculine qualities in their bodies as they give birth. However, just as Hatšepsut did not completely eradicate her femininity, the birthing mothers must remain women in order to give birth. The omnigendered model gives the option to redefine the qualities exhibited by both birthing mothers and these ruling women as alterior rather than masculine.

This symbolic adoption of the masculine is also present in the realm of legal/economic power. Katarzyna Grosz investigates the roles of women in Nuzi¹⁴⁹ and confronts the phenomenon of daughters adopted as sons at Nuzi and Emar.¹⁵⁰ She examines the wills of several men who apparently did not have any biological sons, but did have a daughter who could inherit. In the texts from Emar, the testator “makes his daughter a man and a woman [and] gives her his gods and family spirits.”¹⁵¹ In the texts from Nuzi, “the father invests his three daughters with the status of sons and gives them

¹⁴⁷ McCaffrey, 381-383.

¹⁴⁸ McCaffrey, 388.

¹⁴⁹ Katarzyna Grosz, “Bridewealth and Dowry at Nuzi,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity* (ed. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University, 1983), 193-206.

¹⁵⁰ Katarzyna Grosz, “Daughters Adopted as Sons at Nuzi and Emar” in *La Femme Dans La Proche-Orient Antique: Compte Rendu de la XXXIII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (Paris, 7-10 Juillet 1986)* (ed. Jean-Marie Durand; Editions Recherche sur les Civilizations: Paris, 1987), 81-86.

¹⁵¹ Grosz, “Daughters,” 82.

his entire property and his gods.”¹⁵² Zafira Ben-Barak places these texts in the context of adoption of sons-in-law, which was one strategy for attempting to keep the land in the testator’s family, as eventually his grandsons might inherit. However, adopting one’s son-in-law did not guarantee that the testator’s wishes would be granted.¹⁵³ Grosz explains that this terminology was necessary to prevent the inheritance from becoming the property of her husband’s family.¹⁵⁴ The role these daughters took on included management of the family’s property, as well as acts of worship for the family gods.¹⁵⁵ Thus, the daughters are the “means of providing the household with a male heir.”¹⁵⁶ The power the daughter gained was not only legal and economic but religious as well.

These daughters in one sense became both men and women for the good of their families. The language of the text from Emar is particularly useful for understanding the interpretation that the daughters were omnigendered in that the testator “makes his daughter a man *and* a woman [emphasis mine].” Ben-Barak posits that the expression “man and woman” or “female and male” is a figure of speech used for emphasis and means to give the formal status of male to a female.”¹⁵⁷ The daughter in question, therefore, does not lose her female identity but overlays it with the power of the masculine social gender role. Grosz argues that this practice could be perceived

as an integral and indeed indispensable part of the patrilineal system and one which made it even more durable – a safety measure which made it

¹⁵² Grosz, “Daughters,” 83.

¹⁵³ Zafira Ben-Barak, “The Legal Status of the Daughter as Heir in Nuzi and Emar” in *Society and Economy in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1500-1000 B.C.): Proceedings of the International Symposium held at the University of Haifa from the 28th of April to 2nd of May 1985*. (ed. M. Heltzer and E. Lipiński; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1988), 89-90.

¹⁵⁴ Grosz, “Daughters,” 83.

¹⁵⁵ Grosz, “Daughters,” 84.

¹⁵⁶ Ben-Barak, 96.

¹⁵⁷ Ben-Barak, 93.

possible to continue the family even in cases when no sons were born to it.¹⁵⁸

While it may be true that this practice reinforced the patrilineal system, the fact that the option to adopt one's daughter as a son was available illustrates that it was possible for a woman to gain power within such a system, at least in very specific circumstances of inheritance. Moreover, it allows her to play an omnigendered role.

The wealth of examples in which women were able to perform omnigendered roles suggests that such performances were not, in fact, exceptional. The presence of masculine images suggests that birth rituals are a place in which all birthing mothers, not merely powerful female rulers, or women born without brothers in Nuzi, can express alterior traits. The specific examples of gender variability offered by Bahrani, Grosz, and McCaffrey illustrate the possibility for a more universal gender performance in the ancient Near East. Through their work on iconography, art, literature, and law, they provide means to examine ancient texts without applying modern definitions of gender roles or assumptions about women or about patriarchal societies to these texts. My goal is to bring the work of these scholars together in conversation with each other and with my own work. In the interactions between their ideas, one can appreciate the possibilities for transcending fixed gender boundaries in the ancient Near East.

Strength, Power, and Vigor: Heroism Reflecting Alterior Sex

The studies above seek to understand the role of women who did not conform to traditionally feminine roles. In each of the cases, the women played an alterior role, either

¹⁵⁸ Grosz, "Daughters," 86.

for the good of the community as a whole, in the case of the women who ruled, or for the good of the family, in the case of the daughters adopted as sons. In this way, one can read these women as being heroes to the people they ruled or to their families. Generally, heroes are those who have “inspired, entertained and epitomized the aspirations and values of tribes and peoples for centuries.”¹⁵⁹ The complex nature of this heroic portrait can be investigated referring to Daniel Boyarin’s *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*,¹⁶⁰ which illustrates how different communities establish heroic figures and how often heroes are tied with concepts of gender identity. However, each community decides what constitutes heroism for itself.

In discovering what characteristics a given community values, it is necessary to call into question assumptions about what constitutes heroic action. Boyarin makes a point of arguing that

...the image of the ideal male as nonaggressive, not strong, not physically active is a positive product of the self-fashioning of rabbinic masculinity in a certain, very central, textual product of the culture, the Babylonian Talmud.¹⁶¹

While Boyarin’s focus is on rabbinic Judaism, his analysis of the way in which that culture defined action, heroism, and masculinity for itself illustrates the need to examine particular cultures for their own definitions of these terms. Just as rabbinic culture conceptualized heroism in ways that differed from more widespread models that incorporated aggression, physical strength and physical activity, the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia had their own ideals of heroism.

¹⁵⁹ John Renard, *Islam and the Heroic Image: Themes in Literature and Visual Arts* (Columbia S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1.

¹⁶⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

¹⁶¹ Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 81.

On the surface, heroism in the ancient Near East conforms to this mainstream definition. Asher-Greve discusses reliefs of nude heroes that emphasize their physical strength.¹⁶² Vanstiphout lifts up ambition as heroic trait.¹⁶³ However, Mesopotamian heroic narratives focus on the protagonists' "piety, their cleverness, and their moral, intellectual and military superiority over their enemies."¹⁶⁴ These qualities were not necessarily understood as purely masculine in Mesopotamia. In her description of Buddhist literature, Mrozik argues that

[t]he qualities of strength, power and virility, however, need not be interpreted as explicitly masculine qualities. The narrative also supports an interpretation of these qualities as *Bodhisattva*, rather than *masculine*, qualities.¹⁶⁵

A close analysis of ancient Mesopotamian deities will support the interpretation that strength, courage, vigor, motherliness and love were neither masculine nor feminine characteristics, but were the alterior qualities of the deities. In this way, ancient Mesopotamian human heroes, like the Buddhist Bodhisattva, could transcend gender. Asher-Greve argues, "Analytically gender was multiple, but only men and women were defined and inscribed at birth, the third was a neither/nor assignment."¹⁶⁶ Mrozik defines this neither/nor category as indeterminate sex.¹⁶⁷ However, descriptions of ancient Mesopotamians deities and heroes reflect the alterior both/and assignment, rather than the indeterminate neither/nor. Heroic figures, both divine and human, perform omnigendered roles that transcend concepts of masculine and feminine in ancient Mesopotamia.

¹⁶² Asher-Greve, "Essential Body," 443.

¹⁶³ H.L.J. Vanstiphout, "Sanctus *Lugalbanda*" in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (ed. Tzvi Abusch; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 284.

¹⁶⁴ Veldhuis, *RLS*, 67-68.

¹⁶⁵ Mrozik, 29.

¹⁶⁶ Asher-Greve, "Decisive Sex," 21.

¹⁶⁷ Mrozik, 18.

Heroism through childbirth is not necessarily an obvious correlation. However, from a contemporary perspective, scholars have examined the ways that women illustrate their heroism through giving birth. As she examines birth stories, Pollack notes that the unspoken aspect of many of these stories is the danger. She writes when people are not allowed to tell stories of births that end badly, “. . . [D]eath seems both more mysterious and more impossible, both more monstrous for not being seen and more tractable, less frightening, for appearing only as the dragon slain.”¹⁶⁸ This reference to the death as the dragon slain brings up the question of who in the scenario slays the dragon and is consequently the hero: the mother, the baby, or the performer of the ritual?

Pollack’s analysis of the dangers of childbirth and the ways that those dangers are overcome presents a context for the birthing mother as heroic. Tucker also addresses the ways that giving birth can be heroic in her description of the commemorative medals of Henry IV’s second wife, Marie de Medicis.¹⁶⁹ When the country was desperate for a male heir, the act of giving birth could redeem and protect the country as whole. Susan E. Chase also briefly touches upon the connection between motherhood and nation building after the American Revolution.¹⁷⁰ Looking at the ways in which giving birth to a healthy child is heroic in different cultures raises possibilities for the meaning of heroism reflected in the birth rituals of the ancient Near East. Just as figures like Ku-Baba and the daughters adopted as sons in Nuzi played an omnigendered role for the sake of their communities, whether on a public or more private scale, facing the danger of childbirth in order to benefit the life of the community could be a heroic act. Within these birth rituals,

¹⁶⁸ Pollack, 6.

¹⁶⁹ Tucker, 1-3.

¹⁷⁰ Susan E Chase, “The Institution and Experience of Motherhood,” in *Mothers and Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (ed. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 63.

the symbols and images echo those used to recount the tales of male heroes in the ancient Near East and thus incorporate alterior characteristics, reflecting the omnigendered nature of heroism within the ancient Near East.

“To Turn Woman into Man”: Gender Fluidity and Birth Rituals

Examining birth rituals through both semiotic and feminist lenses demonstrates that masculine images in birth rituals reflect a multifarious concept of gender in ancient Mesopotamia. The ancient Near Eastern understanding of gender was not limited to the materiality of the body. In fact, there are multiple examples of texts that “materialize sexed bodies that defy our limited and limiting definitions of male and female.”¹⁷¹ Butler’s analysis of the relationship between performance, sex, and gender paves the way for a more fluid understanding of gender roles in the ancient Near East. Viewed through a binary lens, birth rituals are texts in which the body can only be sexed female and the role being played illustrates the feminine gender. However, through an omnigendered lens, masculine metaphors in these speech acts suggest that at the moment of birth the mother’s body takes on the alterior qualities of physical strength, bravery, wisdom, motherliness and love. Therefore, at the moment of giving birth, mothers retain their identities as women while becoming extraordinary.

¹⁷¹ Mrozik, 35.

CHAPTER II

“THE COW OF SÎN”: BIRTH RITUAL AND EMBODIMENT

Birth rituals, through descriptions of human experience and the invocation of deities, provide opportunities to investigate the relationship between the perceived genders of the divine and human figures. The first ritual I will examine is “I am Pregnant,” a variant of the “The Cow of Sîn”,¹⁷² one of the best attested birth incantations in Mesopotamia. There are five extant versions of this ritual, beginning in the mid-second millennium BCE, which vary in the details and in the length of the text. This ritual is one of two that were discovered on the back of a tablet including the longest and most well-known version of “The Cow of Sîn.” While the ritual does not include an explicitly masculine metaphor for the birthing mother, bovine imagery within it evokes both masculine and feminine symbols. In this ritual, the symbolism gives the birthing mother qualities of the deities, while continuing to emphasize human reliance on the divine. Sîn, the Babylonian Moon-god, and Ea, the Babylonian god of wisdom and craftsmanship, are both invoked through this ritual. In texts outside of this ritual, these two male deities exhibit alterior sex qualities. Thus, they perform omnigendered roles and provide models for the birthing mother to do so as well.

¹⁷² Niek Veldhuis, *A Cow of Sîn* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1991), 4.

Nature, Nurture, Strength and Fertility: Humans and Cattle in the Ancient Near East

In order to examine the ways that the metaphor of the cow and bull function in this ritual, it is important to interrogate the associated commonplaces for woman, man, mother, and father, as well as cow and bull within the ancient Near East. In this section, I will focus on the symbols of woman, mother, man and father. Within ancient Near Eastern texts and iconography, “woman” represented “allure and seductiveness,” passivity, nature, and grief while “man” represented with vigor, activity and sociability, in addition to “courage, strength, combativeness, and sense of honor.”¹⁷³ In a Hittite ritual, the opposition was set up with men embodying “manhood, courage and vigor” and women typifying “motherliness and love.”¹⁷⁴ Here manhood includes strength; vigor includes the ability to take decisive action, which includes both the wisdom to determine the best course, and the ability to follow that course; and “motherliness” includes protection and nurture.¹⁷⁵ It is important to note that “mother” and “woman” symbolically function in two different ways and thus are not equated. The term “father” in ancient Mesopotamian texts refers only to the role of procreation; thus, it primarily

¹⁷³Bahrani creates a contrast between the role of women and the role of men by arguing that the symbol of man has opposite connotations to that of woman: vigor rather than allure (88), and activity and sociability rather than passivity and nature (68). In his commentary on *The Epic of Gilgameš*, Neal Walls cites “courage, strength, combativeness and sense of honor” as the ideal masculine characteristics epitomized by Gilgameš and Enkidu (Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* [Boston, Mass. American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001], 56).

¹⁷⁴ Billie Jean Collins, “Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 164

¹⁷⁵ The symbol of mother has not been given as much clear description in ancient Near Eastern material. However, its associations can be gleaned from the literature of the period. For instance, protectiveness is associated with the maternal in *Gilgameš* (VIII, 60-61) [trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003], 65. R.D. Biggs’s biological analysis notes that nurture was the provenance of the mother rather than the father (R. D. Biggs, “Conception, Contraception, and Abortion in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert.* [ed. A. R. George and I. L. Finkel; Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2000], 2).

indicates fertility.¹⁷⁶ The father's connection to reproduction and the mother's to nurture, through protecting the child and helping the child to grow, coincides with ancient Near Eastern biological concepts.¹⁷⁷ These commonplaces come into play when analyzing the metaphors and other elements in "The Cow of Sîn" and "I am pregnant."

The meanings associated with cow and bull images in ancient Mesopotamia are complex. Cattle were a significant element of ancient Near Eastern agriculture. They were first domesticated in Anatolia as early as the late seventh or early sixth millennium.¹⁷⁸ In addition to beef, cattle also provided leather and milk products.¹⁷⁹ While sheep and goats were easier to keep and feed, cattle were primarily valued for their efficiency as work animals, as they plowed the ground, both before sowing and during the seeding process.¹⁸⁰ The fact that many families kept cattle that were mentioned in correspondence and given names that honored the Moon-god Sîn indicated the importance of cattle in more than economics.¹⁸¹ The fact that cattle pulled plows, and showed both strength and fertility, made them appropriate symbols for Sîn. Cattle were thus more important iconographically in the ancient Near East than the numbers of cattle found in archaeological records of livestock and sacrifices might suggest.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁶ Biggs, 2.

¹⁷⁷ Biggs, 2.

¹⁷⁸ Brian Hesse, "Animal Husbandry and the Human Diet in the Ancient Near East," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol I* (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 214.

¹⁷⁹ J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 163.

¹⁸⁰ Postgate, 163.

¹⁸¹ Postgate, 164.

¹⁸² Hesse, 214.

Wild Bull and Wild Cow: Cattle in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

Traditionally, cattle represent a variety of facets of life in religious iconography. Bulls and cows usually signify opposite characteristics, such as aggression and passivity.¹⁸³ However, such a binary division does not illustrate all the shades of meaning available from cattle imagery. Jack Tresidder notes, the bull “has represented both moon and sun, earth and sky, rain and heat, feminine procreation and male ardour, matriarch and patriarch, death and regeneration.”¹⁸⁴ These differing attributes indicate what a powerful symbol the bull was. More generally, the traits most often ascribed to the bull include fertility, brute force and sacrifice.¹⁸⁵ In contrast to the male figures of bulls, cows are generally noted for representing maternity, as well as slenderness.¹⁸⁶ Another meaning for the cow symbol was sustenance of individuals, as well as nourishment on a cosmic scale.¹⁸⁷ Themes of fertility, as well as sacrifice, can also evoked by cow imagery.¹⁸⁸ Thus, the bull and the cow, while male and female figures, do not create a symbolism based simply on a binary division.

Ancient Near Eastern cattle symbolism expresses these general themes of fertility, protection, and brute force, with particular nuances. Catherine Breniquet notices the multiplicity of options available for these types of representation: “Bovines depicted in Mesopotamian art could be young calves or pregnant cows, that is to say pacific animals.

¹⁸³ Catherine Breniquet, “Animals in Mesopotamian Art,” in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Billie Jean Collins; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 160.

¹⁸⁴ Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 80.

¹⁸⁵ De Vries, 88.

¹⁸⁶ De Vries, 143.

¹⁸⁷ Tresidder, 123.

¹⁸⁸ De Vries, 143.

Or they could be terrifying auruchs with impressive horns that fight the king himself.”¹⁸⁹ The multiplicity of meaning implied by this statement applies equally well to Mesopotamian literature. In addition, there are also symbols that fall in the middle of this continuum represented by bovine imagery in ancient Near Eastern texts.

Descriptions of deities symbolize strength through bull figures. Leick notes that “‘Wild bull’ or ‘bison’ is a common epithet for gods, stressing untamed masculinity and strength.”¹⁹⁰ Benjamin Foster argues that “There were areas in which specific animals were observed or considered superior to a weaker humanity, hence by anthropomorphism, these superiorities were transferred to the gods.”¹⁹¹ In this way, the physical fact that bulls were stronger than humans connected them with various deities.

This epithet of the bull is not limited to male gods. In the “Agušaya Poem,” a hymn of praise to Ištar¹⁹² from 1850-1500 BCE, Ištar is described: “She is more fearsome than a bull, her clamor like its raging,/In her might she set forth, turning not a hair.”¹⁹³ Here, both Ištar’s power and the force of her anger are like that of a bull. There are further examples, including the “Self-Praise of Ishtar” in which she describes herself with bovine terms: “I am the charging wild ox that gores/[I am she wh]o slays the king’s enemies!”¹⁹⁴ In this case, the power and ferocity of the bull symbolize Ištar’s strength and protection of her people. Examples such as these illustrate the fact that at least one

¹⁸⁹ Breniquet, 160.

¹⁹⁰ Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 23.

¹⁹¹ Benjamin Foster, “Animals in Mesopotamian Literature” in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*. (ed. Billie Jean Collins; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 283.

¹⁹² See Chapter I, 5; 26-31.

¹⁹³ “Agushaya Poem,” (vi 15-16) (Benjamin R.. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 99).

¹⁹⁴ “Self-Praise of Ishtar,” (15-16) (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 679).

female deity could be ascribed the qualities of the male bull, just as easily as male deities could be.

In addition to strength, bulls represented fertility in depictions of deities. One example is this hymn to the sky god AN,¹⁹⁵ in which AN is described as “fecund breed bull.”¹⁹⁶ This fecundity indicates his prowess in fathering many children. Gwendolyn Leick notes that fertility was an important aspect of godhood when she analyzes texts in which the god ENKI must prove his generative power and is described as a “lustful bull.”¹⁹⁷ Since this text refers to his ability to fill the riverbeds of the Tigris and Euphrates with water, the focus here is on the creation of new life, rather than sexual performance. This description emphasizes procreation, characterized as “masculine strength.”¹⁹⁸ Thus, the ability to create life is worthy of praise.

There are texts in which the bull solely represents human fertility. Leick cites several ritual texts in which this is the case.¹⁹⁹ Consequently, the fertility of the livestock represented the fertility of the community as a whole. Ancient Mesopotamians were aware that sexual intercourse was necessary for reproduction and thus did link sex with fertility.²⁰⁰ Even more specifically, some bridal songs to INANNA²⁰¹ are explicit with their symbolism: “The young woman is compared to a field waiting to be rendered fertile, by the plough (i.e. the penis) driven by the bull (i.e. the man).”²⁰² In this case, the symbolic overlay between the natural world and humans is obvious through the sexual

¹⁹⁵ Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 48-49. See Chapter I, 5.

¹⁹⁶ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1976), 98.

¹⁹⁷ Leick, *SEML*, 25.

¹⁹⁸ Leick, *SEML*, 55.

¹⁹⁹ Leick, *SEML*, 49.

²⁰⁰ Biggs, 1.

²⁰¹ The Sumerian name for Ištar. Abusch. “Ishtar,” 452. See Chapter I, 5.

²⁰² Leick, *SEML*, 91.

metaphors. However, sex was also valued for pleasure, separate from its reproductive value.²⁰³ An example of bulls representing sexuality in addition to fertility is “The Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld,” an Akkadian poem from the 1500-1000 BCE believed to have Sumerian origins,²⁰⁴ the first sign that things have gone awry in Ištar’s absence is that “The bull would not mount the cow.”²⁰⁵ The additional examples within this poem discuss the lack of impregnation among other animals and people. Since the bull example only mentions intercourse, and not necessarily pregnancy, Ištar’s absence not only deprives the world of fertility but also of the pleasures of sex.

In addition to representing human fertility and sexuality, the bull image also represented individual extraordinary humans. In the “Ninurta Myth Lugal-e,” Ninurta’s enemy Azag is described “fighter – in appearance a great wild bull/endued with strength, honey ably encombed.”²⁰⁶ This aspect makes him even more threatening to Ninurta and his kingdom. King Hammurabi, who ruled Babylon in the early second millennium BCE is also described as a “rampaging wild bull goring enemies”²⁰⁷ on a stela commemorating his rule. These descriptions connote strength and combativeness, which are classic allusions for bull and masculine images.

Female cows, like male bulls, symbolized deities suggesting the characteristics of the gods represented alterior sex. While Ištar is represented by the bull metaphor, there are also references to her Sumerian counterpart INANNA²⁰⁸ as a wild cow in “The

²⁰³ Biggs, 6.

²⁰⁴ Foster, “AML,” 498.

²⁰⁵ “The Descent of Ishtar into the Netherworld, (77) (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 501).

²⁰⁶ “The Ninurta Myth Lugal-e,” (67) (Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once ...Sumerian Poetry in Translation* [Yale, New Haven, 1987], 240).

²⁰⁷ “Hammurabi, King of Justice,” (iii 5) (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 129).

²⁰⁸ Abusch, “Ishtar,” 452. See Chapter I, 5.

Exaltation of INANNA,” a hymn of praise.²⁰⁹ These references emphasize her power and her praiseworthiness. The first reads “Impetuous wild cow, great daughter of SUEN/Lady supreme over AN, who has (ever) denied (you) homage?”²¹⁰ Though impetuosity can be a negative trait, in this instance, it is a sign of praise for INANNA, accentuating her power and the fact that she deserves the service of the people. Moreover, these lines immediately follow a reference to a woman no longer having intercourse with her husband, emphasizing INANNA’s power over sexuality. Later the same words have different emphasis: “Oh my divine impetuous wild cow, drive out this man, capture this man!”²¹¹ These lines illustrate INANNA’s ability to punish those who do not show her reverence. In yet another hymn, “The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and INANNA,” the wild cow epithet is repeated as a descriptive term for INANNA: “She likes wandering in the sky, being truly Heaven’s wild cow.”²¹² In this case, the emphasis on wandering illustrates that she cannot be controlled, just as the word impetuous does in the earlier text. Hence, the wild cow illustrates untamed strength, rather than the strength of the bull that can be harnessed for plowing.

Moreover, images of cows introduce an element of nurture not generally found in bull allusions. In a Sumerian composition in praise of a personal deity, “Man and His God,” the speaker of the work addresses the deity: “My god, to you, who are my father that begot me, let me [lift] my eyes, ‘Good cow’, god (?) of mercy (and acceptance of)

²⁰⁹ William W. Hallo, “The Exaltation of INANNA,” *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 520. This hymn is one of three attributed to Enhéduanna.

²¹⁰ SUEN is one of the Sumerian names of the Moon-god, later rendered Sin. AN is the sky god and chief of the gods. See Chapter I, 5.

²¹¹ Hallo, “The Exaltation of INANNA,” 520.

²¹² Thorkild Jacobsen, “The Sacred Marriage of Iddin-Dagan and INANNA,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 555. This hymn may have been used as part of a sacred marriage rite between the king and the goddess INANNA.

supplication, let me [acquire (?) through (?) you] lofty strength!”²¹³ In this case, the cow, rather than the bull, represents strength, as it did in the images of INANNA, but here it also denotes mercy. Also, although cows are gendered feminine, the gender of the deity is not here explicitly stated. In fact, the lines alternatively refer to the deity using male images, such as “father” and female images, such as “cow,” emphasizing that the deity’s personal characteristics are more important than the deity’s gender. In his translation of this poem, Jacob Klein notes that “‘Good cow’ is a frequently attested epithet of mother-goddesses, especially when their mercifulness is stressed; it also refers to divine mothers of Sumerian kings.”²¹⁴ In this case, mercy is admirable trait, regardless of gender. Also, in the lines of this poem, mercy and strength are both stressed and accessed through the feminine figure of the good cow.

This type of tender image describes the god Marduk in the “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer.”²¹⁵ The poem reads

Like a cow with a calf,
he keeps turning around watchfully.²¹⁶

This image of the cow and calf also evokes the tenderness and care of the mother of any species, and emphasizes the protective aspects of bovine imagery, but without the connotations of brute force or strength. A later lament, “The Piteous Sufferer,” is addressed to a personal god rather than to a named god. However, the cow trope also describes the state of the sufferer: “He lows like a cow to his merciful god.”²¹⁷ In this

²¹³Jacob Klein, “Man and His God,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 574.

²¹⁴ Klein, 574, footnote 9.

²¹⁵ “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,” (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 394-409).

²¹⁶ “PRS,” (197-20), 395.

²¹⁷ “The Piteous Sufferer,” (6’) (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 723).

case, the mercy of the mother cow is reinforced, as well as the tender relationship between the cow and the calf. This type of image recurs in the Old Babylonian text, “In the Desert by the Early Grass,” in which the god Damu dies. As his mother searches for him, he addresses her, saying,

Mother who gave birth,
Cow, low not for the calf,
Turn your face toward me!
Cow who will not make the calf answer,
turn your face toward me!²¹⁸

In this poem, the cow image exemplifies the strong bond between the mother and child. Further, ritual objects with the symbol of the mother cow and her calf signified protection and love: “A typical animalian charm is the ubiquitous representation of a cow suckling a calf the calf suckles in one direction, while the cow turns to lick in the opposite direction, thus forming a magic circle of protection and motherly concern.”²¹⁹ While protection might more commonly be represented by the fierce, strong, aggressive bull, in ancient Mesopotamia, it was represented by the loving relationship between mother and calf. Thus, protection, while represented by the feminine image of cow, is not necessarily gendered.

“For the Sake of My Cow”: Cattle in Rituals of Birth

As discussed earlier, cattle have symbolized fertility, strength, and protection. All of these elements are relevant in birth ritual texts. A ritual text differs from the types of

²¹⁸ “In the Desert by the Early Grass,” (100’-101’) (Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once ...Sumerian Poetry in Translation* [Yale, New Haven, 1987], 66).

²¹⁹ J. A. Scurlock, “Animals in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion,” in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Billie Jean Collins; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 367.

texts discussed previously in that the goal of a ritual is to create a relationship with the deity, and that the words have power not ascribed to the words of a poem.²²⁰ Several birth rituals mention cows or bulls. For example, an incantation from Sumer in the period between 2600 BCE and 2500 BCE reads, “The fecund bull has mounted the [cow/woman] in the stable, the holy cattle compound. He has poured into the belly the fecund seed of mankind.”²²¹ In this case, the cattle imagery simply indicates fertility. This beginning again illustrates the belief that the male is primarily responsible for conception.

In some ritual texts, the image of the cow denotes fragility. In the following example, “She Has Never Given Birth,” from the 1850-1500 BCE, the focus is on the sympathy the plight of the pregnant cows creates in the deities Sun and Moon:

The cow was pregnant, the cow is giving birth
 In the paddock of Šamaš, the pen of Šamkan.
 When he saw her, Šamaš began to cry,
 When the Pure-rited One saw her, his tears were flowing down.
 Why is Šamaš crying,
 Why are the Pure-rited one’s tears flowing down?
 “For the sake of my cow, who had never been breeched!”
 “For the sake of my kid, who had never given birth!”
 Whom shall I [send with an order to the daught]er(s) of Anu,
 seven [and seven],
 [May] they [] their pots of [],
 May they bring this baby straight forth!
 If it be male, like a wild ram,
 If it be female, like a wild cow (?) may it come into the world.²²²

The narrative portion of this ritual text illustrates the extreme sympathy that Šamaš the Sun-god exhibits towards the birthing cow. While he clearly loves the cow, this love is not communicated as lust, but rather in a more protective and familial sense. The

²²⁰ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 138.

²²¹ Stol, *BBB*, 60 -61.

²²² “She Has Never Given Birth,” (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 170).

incantation does not describe the birth pangs or the birth process. This cow's delivery is free from difficulties, but even a birth without complications is, of course, painful. The source of Šamaš's sympathy is the fact that it is the cow's first birth, hence the emphasis on the "cow, who had never been breeched!" and the "kid, who had never given birth!"²²³ In this case, breeched refers to the fact that cow is not open and ready to give birth, rather than any implication of virginity.²²⁴ Therefore, while the cow can represent maternal love; in this ritual, she is an untried mother and is not yet ready to give birth, when Šamaš intercedes.

This ritual is not a plea for a deity to intervene; it is rather a description of the deity intervening. The entire ritual is consequently reassuring. The fact that there is no vivid description of the dangers of hardship or death creates a positive impression of the birth process overall. The deity does not need a description of the cow's state to be persuaded to intervene. The mere fact of giving birth is enough. The god is immediately sympathetic and immediately offers the help of the daughters of Anu to bring the baby "straight forth."²²⁵

The end of the ritual does perpetuate a binary gender structure in dividing the possible genders of the unborn child. Despite this schism, the characteristics of the animals hoped for is the same for each gender. No matter the gender, Šamaš hopes that the child will arrive like a "wild" animal, which could not readily be separated from

²²³ Irving J. Finkel, "The Crescent Fertile." *Archiv für Orientforschungen* 27 (1980): 44, note 12.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Anu was the sky god and chief of the gods. Jean Bottéro. *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 48-49. See Chapter I, 5. The daughters here are referred to by different names in different texts, such as Lamassus, Narundi and Naḥundi, or daughters of Anu, as in this example. Primarily, they are protective spirits who spirits associated with an individual or place. Also, they were doorkeepers. See Veldhuis, 1.

domesticated animals.²²⁶ It is odd that in a text dominated by bovine imagery that the ram rather than the bull would represent the male child. However, the ram is known for its reproductive abilities and does symbolize wealth more clearly than the bull does.²²⁷ Stol notes that the pairing of a wild ram and a wild cow occurs in other literary texts but does not elaborate.²²⁸ Scurlock's translation presents a different possibility: "Whether it be a male like (his) begetter or a girl like a second-rank wife (?), may (the infant) fall to the ground."²²⁹ With either translation, the gender is not a strong determining factor. A healthy child is the hoped-for outcome. Moreover, other than being represented by a cow, the mother is not described in gendered terms, nor is the deity Šamaš.

"The Cow Trembled and Terrified her Herdsmen": The Cow of Sîn

"The Cow of Sîn" is a paradigmatic example of cow and bull imagery in birth rituals of the ancient Near East. The fact that there were several versions, five of which have survived, indicates its popularity. The longest and most comprehensive translation comes from Assur in the Neo-Assyrian era. It is designated by Niek Veldhuis in his study of various versions of "The Cow of Sîn," as Manuscript A:²³⁰

Incantation: There was a cow of Sîn, Geme-Sîn by name.
 With ornaments decorated, tempting of shape she was.
 Sîn saw her and fell in love with her.
 The brilliance (?) of Sîn he laid (. . .?) upon her.
 He appointed her at the head of the herd, the herdsmen followed her.
 In the lushest grasses she grazed, at the abundant well they watered her.

²²⁶ Annie Caubet, "Animals in Syro-Palestinian Art" in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Billie Jean Collins; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 221.

²²⁷ Breniquet, 158; Caubet, 222.

²²⁸ Stol, *BBB*, 64.

²²⁹ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 149.

²³⁰ Veldhuis, 4.

Hidden from the herd boys, not seen by the herdsman, the wild bull mounted the cow, he lifted her tail (?).

When her days came to an end, her months were finished, the cow trembled and terrified her herdsman. His head was bowed, all the herd boys lamented with him.

At her crying, at her screaming in labour, Nannāru was downcast.

Sîn heard her screaming in heaven and lifted high his hand.

Two Lamassus descended from heaven. One of them carried ‘oil-from-the-jar’, the other brought down ‘water-of-labour’. With ‘oil-from-the jar’ she touched her forehead, with ‘water of labour’ she sprinkled her whole body.

Once again, she touched her forehead with ‘oil-from-the-jar’, with ‘water-of-labour’ she sprinkled her whole body.

When she touched for the third time, the calf fell down on the ground like a gazelle’s young.

‘Milk-calf’ she called the calf.

Just as Geme-Sîn gave birth normally, may also this girl in labour give birth.

Let the midwife not tarry, let the pregnant one be all right.²³¹

While this incantation is similar to the earlier one just discussed, it resonates differently as a discursive practice in establishing gender roles. It possible to form a picture of the main actors in this ritual narrative: the cow giving birth, called Geme-Sîn, whose name means “Maid of Sîn,” the Babylonian Moon-god Sîn, the herdsman, and the Lamassus, or protective spirits.²³²

Geme-Sîn is a follower of Sîn, on both literal and symbolic levels. Sîn’s journey across the sky represented the natural life cycle of birth and death.²³³ Hence, Sîn governed, not only fertility, but also fate.²³⁴ The herdsman are those set to look after Sîn’s flock on earth. The Lamassus’ role as doorkeepers makes them effective in rituals of childbirth,²³⁵ since images of opening and unlocking are common in birthing rituals

²³¹ Veldhuis, 9.

²³² The Lamassus appeared in the previous ritual as the daughters of Anu. Primarily, they are protective spirits who spirits associated with an individual or place. Also, they were doorkeepers. See Veldhuis, 1.

²³³ Schmidt, 586.

²³⁴ Schmidt, 587.

²³⁵ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 40.

generally and in ancient Mesopotamia specifically.²³⁶ Examining the role that each of these characters plays provides some insight into how this ritual reflected and shaped gender roles.

One question that must be addressed that of why to represent the birthing mother with a cow. Stol points out that Geme-Sîn was also a common woman's name, so that the metaphors of the ritual could be read literally, in that Geme-Sîn may have been an actual woman who had trouble giving birth and for whom this ritual was composed.²³⁷ Stol is correct that Geme-Sîn was a very common woman's name in this period; however, I suggest that this fact is evidence of the universality of the application of the ritual, rather than an indication that it was created for a specific woman. In fact, the very popularity of the name may have helped to insure that the ritual was accessible to a large number of women and shows that it could be applied in a number of different circumstances. Therefore, the reference to the cow has a more global application. Based on the other references to cows in the literature, it symbolizes the birthing mother's strength and maternal love.

The ritual is divided in to two sections, the narrative and the supplication. In turn, the narrative is divided into three parts, the situation (introduction), problem and solution.²³⁸ It begins simply enough, with an introduction of the cow, Geme-Sîn, who is described as "tempting of shape." Veldhuis argues that "From the outset Sîn is active and the cow is passive."²³⁹ However, from the beginning, Geme-Sîn as an embodied individual is crucial to this ritual. Her body is the reason that Sîn immediately loves her

²³⁶ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 143.

²³⁷ Stol, *BBB*, 68.

²³⁸ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 28.

²³⁹ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 33.

and grants her favor: laying his brilliance on her, making her the head of the herd, assigning her herdsmen, allowing her to graze on the lushest grasses and to drink from an abundant well. The rewards she receives are through her body as well as they change her appearance, as Sîn lays his brilliance on her, and allows her the best food and water. Her body allows her to be “the first of the herd, including the herdsmen. . . . she is appointed to the position directly under her lover, Sîn.”²⁴⁰ In this way, Geme-Sîn could have all the earthly power, as the herdsmen answer to her. Scurlock offers that this activity could be similar to the “pampering of pregnant women.”²⁴¹ There could be more to it than that, since Geme-Sîn is not yet pregnant. She simply has the favor of the god and all the blessings that come with it.

However, while being tempting of shape led to favor from Sîn and many blessings, it also led to her being mounted by the wild bull. Most interpretations assume that the wild bull is Sîn himself.²⁴² Scurlock argues that Sîn “took his will of her in the form of a vigorous but invisible bull.”²⁴³ The bull’s invisibility is only moderately supported by the lines that say the bull mounted Geme-Sîn while hidden from the herdsmen. However, the interpretation that Sîn is the wild bull is not the only one available from the text. H. L. J. Vanstiphout argues for the importance of ambiguity in understanding Mesopotamian literature.²⁴⁴ “Wild bull” symbolizes a variety of figures, divine and human, and therefore this image creates the ambiguity that Vanstiphout describes in the ritual interpretation. The term could also identify another figure that

²⁴⁰ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 31.

²⁴¹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 147.

²⁴² Stol, *BBB*, 62.

²⁴³ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 147.

²⁴⁴ H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “Ambiguity as a Generative Force in Standard Sumerian Literature,” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 157-158.

plays the role of wild bull. The fact that the bull is unnamed leaves this possibility open. Thus, the beginning description of his favor for Geme-Sîn is fatherly rather than sexual. In the previous ritual involving Šamaš, there is little notion that Šamaš is the father of the cow's child; his interest in the cow is clearly paternal toward her and not the calf.

Regardless of the identity of the bull, Geme-Sîn is mounted, which brings about the need for the ritual. In this case, it is the action taken on Geme-Sîn's body which moves the ritual along: "The transition from mating to labour takes only one sentence. Thus the paradox of procreation is demonstrated; sexual pleasure leading to pain and fear."²⁴⁵ While anthropologists discussing the paradoxes of birth do consider the relationship between sexual pleasure and the pain of childbirth,²⁴⁶ other paradoxes are also possible. Since sexual pleasure is not actually described within this incantation, the contrast here may be between enjoyment of her embodied self and the violation of that body. In his analysis of Sumerian poetry, Black notes, "Literal and figurative meanings intermingle as different levels of expression appear to flow in and out of each other."²⁴⁷ In this ritual, the interplay between the cow's favor and her violation consequently allows for multiple understandings of meaning. The wild bull mounting the cow is the action that moves the ritual from the idyllic scene to a situation of "movement, pain, and hope"²⁴⁸ which focuses on the birth of the child but affects Geme-Sîn and those around her.

As the time comes time to deliver, Geme-Sîn trembles and terrifies her herdsmen. These lines are the first in which Geme-Sîn's body acts, rather than being acted upon by

²⁴⁵ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 34.

²⁴⁶ Mary F. Rogers and Susan E. Chase, "Mothers, Sexuality and Eros," in *Mothers & Children: Feminist Analyses and Personal Narratives* (ed. Susan E. Chase and Mary F. Rogers; New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001): 116.

²⁴⁷ Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 12.

²⁴⁸ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 35.

another. She trembles, which can be taken as a sign of fear or anger or both. In this case, the actions of her body affect those around her. The herdsman in this ritual reacts to her body's changes with his own bodily response of bowing his head. Veldhuis points out several poetic elements that play a role in this ritual, including patterns with sound that include repetition and parallelism.²⁴⁹ In this incantation, parallelism equates Geme-Sîn's trembling with the herdsman's bowed head. Just as her action creates a connection with him, his bowed head creates a connection with the herd boys, who then lament with him. While one could argue that this attitude takes the focus away from Geme-Sîn and other birthing mothers, it reiterates the power of her body. It also joins the female birth-giving body and the male care-giving body of the herdsmen. The union between Geme-Sîn and the herdsman and herd boys creates a closer bond with a woman and the men who, while not overtly feeling her pain, do care about her and sympathize.²⁵⁰ While none of the herdsmen are depicted as being the father of the Geme-Sîn's calf, they are nonetheless affected by the birth.

There are examples in various cultures of fathers or other male relatives who wish to observe the actual birth or whose activity is ritually restricted in order to help the mother through her birth process.²⁵¹ While neither is the case here, the fact that the herdsmen are physically affected by Geme-Sîn's pain, illustrates that they are linked to her birth process. "The Cow of Sîn" hence provides an ancient Near Eastern example of a

²⁴⁹ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 21.

²⁵⁰ Tina Cassidy, *Birth: The Surprising History of How We are Born* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 204.

²⁵¹ Niles Newton and Michael Newton, "Childbirth in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (ed. Lauren Dundes; Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2003), 22-23.

Margaret Jolly, "Introduction: Birthing Beyond the Confinements of Tradition and Modernity?" in *Birthing in the Pacific: Beyond Tradition and Modernity* (ed. Vicki Lukere and Margaret Jolly; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 22.

ritual that acknowledges the difficulty for those who care about a woman in labor in hearing her cries.²⁵² In addition to the god Sîn and the wild bull, the herdsmen provide another example of male behavior, one that emphasizes compassion for the birthing mother. The wild bull and the aggressive action he represents are only mentioned in one line, but the type of care offered by the herdsman continues throughout the incantation and provides an image of men taking on maternal roles as they cares for new life after the moment of conception.

The third section focuses once again on Geme-Sîn and her response, crying and screaming, which is yet another embodied action. While the herdsman and the herd boys are aware of Geme-Sîn's plight as soon as she begins to tremble, Sîn does not notice until her cries are heard in heaven. Unlike the herdsmen, Sîn has the power to intervene and does so. As Scurlock puts it, "ancient Mesopotamian gods were not above concerning themselves with the problems of women in childbirth."²⁵³ One purpose of this ritual is to illustrate how important the act of childbirth was to the gods, as they intercede regularly when hearing of the pain of those in childbirth.

While Sîn does not intervene directly, he does send the two Lamassus, or protective spirits. The Lamassus bring "oil-from-the-jar" and "water of labour." Applying these substances, whatever they might represent, to the forehead and to the whole body three times bring about the desired effect. Rubbing a birthing mother with oil is a significant element of the prescriptive portion of birth rituals.²⁵⁴ While this is another instance in which Geme- Sîn's body is acted upon, in this case, the actions comfort her. Veldhuis points out that while Sîn sent the Lamassus, they then take over the

²⁵² Cassidy, 204.

²⁵³ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 149.

²⁵⁴ Stol, *BBB*, 124.

action and Sîn disappears from the text.²⁵⁵ Despite Sîn's absence from the text, in contrast to Veldhuis, I believe that Sîn's influence continues to be felt through Geme-Sîn. Not only does her name literally mean that she belongs to Sîn, but this belonging is confirmed through the favor that he shows her. Therefore, Sîn and Geme-Sîn are inextricably linked and, as long she is present, he cannot completely leave the text. Moreover, the Lamassus' actions would not have been possible without the intervention of Sîn; therefore he continues to be responsible for Geme-Sîn's well-being. In this way, although the wild bull brings about movement and pain, Sîn provides loving care, first in the pampering of Geme-Sîn and then in sending the Lamassus. This aspect of Sîn's character allows for the ritual not only to move through pain but to return to the peacefulness depicted at the beginning of the ritual. In this way, Sîn exhibits alterior characteristics as he nurtures Geme-Sîn.

At the point the Lamassus enter the action, the very rhythm of the ritual changes. Veldhuis argues that, "This repetition of words, sounds and syntactical patterns gives the impression of a very detailed and accurate account of what is happening, following the events step by step."²⁵⁶ While there is no way to ascertain how accurate this account was, it does echo the birth process. The repetition in the language of the ritual illustrates the increasing urgency²⁵⁷ and mimics contractions coming quickly. At the third enactment, of the words and actions, the calf falls down on the ground. This image of the calf falling to the ground functions as a simulative image of the type frequently found in childbirth rituals. As Bryan Bates and Alison Newman Turner note,

²⁵⁵ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 25.

²⁵⁶ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 41.

²⁵⁷ Black, 85.

It would seem reasonable to suppose . . . that the mother participating in symbolic childbirth rituals would create perceptual images emphasizing the releasing and expelling qualities of the environmental cues being presented to her.²⁵⁸

These images often consist of opening, binding and knotting and create an unconscious physiological response of release within the mother's body.²⁵⁹ Consequently, after the building up of the repetitive actions of the Lamassus, "the calf fell down" creates a moment of relaxation in which the birthing mother would presumably release her tension. This example shows how the words of the ritual can have an effect on the body of the mother for whom the ritual is uttered. The gazelle represents "rapid movement and especially rapid flight from danger."²⁶⁰ As the calf falls down, it is thus removed from danger.

At the moment the calf appears, it receives its name. Naming is an important element of birth rituals generally, since naming includes "both rites of individuation and rites of incorporation, through which the new child becomes a separate person and a member of a social group."²⁶¹ As Veldhuis noted, it difficult to know who actually does the naming since the subject of the verb is unclear.²⁶² Regardless of who does the naming, this act of naming creates the new person in the calf.²⁶³ Naming creates distinctions, in addition to bringing someone "over the last threshold of nothingness into being."²⁶⁴ The name itself is important in solidifying the meaning of this incantation.

²⁵⁸ Brian Bates and Allison Newman Turner, "Imagery and Symbolism in Birth Practices," in *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (ed. Lauren Dundes; Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2003), 91.

²⁵⁹ Bates and Turner, 91.

²⁶⁰ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 42.

²⁶¹ Margarita Artschwager Kay, *Anthropology of Human Birth* (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1982), 42.

²⁶² Veldhuis, *CoS*, 25.

²⁶³ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 42; Butler, *BTM*, 153.

²⁶⁴ Della Pollack, *Telling Bodies, Performing Birth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 137.

Calling the calf “Milk-Calf” brings to mind the image discussed above of the suckling calf being licked by the mother cow, representing protection and maternal love.²⁶⁵ This type of love is reflected not only in Geme-Sîn’s love for Milk-Calf, but also in Sîn’s love for Geme-Sîn.

The moment of delivery is not the only moment in which the rhythm of the ritual changes. Veldhuis also points out how the end of the text shifts from an emphasis on different types of parallelism and repetition when the calf is born.²⁶⁶ The last part of the ritual illustrates and slowing down of the action and does not take up the urgency, mimicking the actual birth process once the child has been born. The final couplet makes the purpose of the ritual explicit. The story of Geme-Sîn is told in order to bring about the same result for the birthing mother:

The comparison implies a parallel: the parallel between the cow who ‘gave birth normally’ and the woman in childbirth. The request implies a contrast: the things as they are (negative) and as they should be (positive): this chasm is bridged by the comparison²⁶⁷

It connects the ritual practitioner and the god Sîn, intimating that Sîn sent the ritual practitioner just as he sent the Lamassus. In addition, it functions psychologically to create a link between Geme-Sîn and the birthing mother. Just as Geme-Sîn was beautiful and treasured by Sîn, so too is any pregnant woman for whom this ritual is performed. The description of blessings at the beginning could relax the birthing mother.

In addition, the descriptions of Geme-Sîn’s pain and the sympathy it invokes illustrate for the birthing mother that her pain is not a sign of a problem; all women who have given birth have endured it. Furthermore, the sympathy from everyone around

²⁶⁵ Scurlock, “Animals in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion,” 367.

²⁶⁶ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 43.

²⁶⁷ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 44.

Geme-Sîn indicates to a birthing mother that there people who take care of her. The emphasis on “normally” in the final lines illustrates that even a birth without complications, the pain is part of the process and that it does not mean that the mother or her child will die. Scurlock notes that such a ritual would “reassure the expectant mother that the treatment she was receiving had been tried successfully at least once before.”²⁶⁸ By telling the story in which the calf comes and the mother names it, it also illustrates for the birthing mother the end result of the pain she is enduring: the child. While there is also concern for the calf, just as the ritual begins with Geme-Sîn, the ritual ends with a hope that the pregnant one will be “all right,” returning the focus to the birthing mother. Hence, the mother ideally feels cherished by Sîn, by the ritual practitioner, and by the other people around her.

“The Cow of Sîn” does not depict the birthing mother with a male symbol, nor does it depict any of the actors with binary gendered characteristics. As in the other texts in which a god was asked to pay attention to the mother’s cries, this text provides an example in which the god was moved by the cries of the mother as she gave birth. The implication for the birthing mother, then, is that Sîn, and those around her, will be sympathetic to her plight.²⁶⁹ Sîn’s care for the birthing mother reflects maternity but not femininity. Thus, Sîn’s characteristics are alterior in this ritual.

²⁶⁸ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 147.

²⁶⁹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 147.

“I am pregnant and ready to gore”: A Variant on the Cow of Sîn Birth Ritual

Another version of this incantation brings the omnigendered nature of the birthing mother into a clearer focus. This incantation shifts the voice of the speaker into that of the birthing mother:

The big cow of Sîn, of Sîn I am.
I am pregnant and I am butting all the time.
With my horns I root up the soil.
With my tail I whirl up dust clouds.
At the quay of death the ship is held fast,
At the quay of distress, the cargo boat is held fast.
. . . . Ea, lord of incantation!
[At the quay of death] let them loosen the ship,
[at the quay of distress let] them untie the cargo boat!²⁷⁰

This ritual can be divided into two portions. In the first three lines, the birthing mother introduces herself and her reactions to her pregnancy. She does not have a name, as Geme-Sîn does, but rather identifies herself as “the big cow of Sîn” and then reinforcing that she belongs to Sîn.²⁷¹ Unlike the situation described in “The Cow of Sîn,” the relationship with Sîn does not bring benefits to the speaker of this ritual.

The description of her situation does not begin in a peacefully, or with images of love, and tender care. This ritual begins after the cow has become pregnant; thus, it begins in the middle of the movement and pain that characterize the birth process. The cow in “I am Pregnant” is not only trembling and crying, but “butting”, “rooting” and “whirling” the soil around here. Butting, rooting up the soil and whirling up dust clouds are images more commonly connected with the wild bull or wild cow than they are with a

²⁷⁰ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 14.

²⁷¹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 148.

mother cow. Such an image emphasizes strength and lack of control, rather than maternal protection, love or nourishment. Scurlock's translates the opening line as "I am pregnant and ready to gore,"²⁷² which makes the connotation of the wild bull more explicit. While in the primary version, the cow's trembling and crying evoke sympathy from those around her, this text provides another connotation for those actions, indicating the violence of the birth process.

By depicting the birthing mother as the wild bull, this version of the incantation illustrates an aspect of the bovine imagery that contrasts with idyllic images of Geme-Sîn in her pasture in the primary version. While in that version, the mother takes the actions of crying out and of naming her calf, in this ritual, the actions include more movement and pain. In this version of the ritual, the story of the cow's impregnation is not told; thus, the cow is not acted upon by a wild bull, but rather she acts as a wild bull would in an effort to deliver the child. While this ritual mentions the danger of death for the child, it mentions the mother's pain, not in language designed to create sympathy but in language that evokes her power. This language also makes the actions of the mother's body crucial to this ritual; therefore, while the characteristics the mother shows are not feminine, she continues to embrace her female body as it struggles to give birth. In this case, the mother attempts to take action herself, stirring up the soil and being ready to gore, before calling upon the deity for help.

Consequently, in this version of the ritual the birthing mother plays an omnigendered role, evincing combativeness as well as courage and strength, while less obviously expressing motherliness and love for her child.²⁷³ In this case, the birthing

²⁷² Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 147.

²⁷³ Walls, 56.

mother fights for herself and for her child. As this description of her actions focuses on her pain and frustration, it might be difficult to perceive her as heroic here. However, in accounts of heroes within the ancient Near East, all of them experience periods of suffering and pain, a “sojourn in the wilderness,”²⁷⁴ such as the birthing mother experiences.

The last five lines include a ship motif which will be explored further in a later chapter.²⁷⁵ The cow’s actions are caused by the ship within her being held fast at the quays of death and of distress. Such images were common in ancient Near Eastern childbirth rituals.²⁷⁶ Despite her being a cow of Sîn and repeating her allegiance to him, in this case, the birthing mother calls upon Ea as the lord of incantation to loosen the ship and to bring the child safely through distress and death.²⁷⁷ In this case, she is not ministered to by protective spirits or other gods, but acts alone. When that is not successful, she importunes Ea to help her but the ritual does not provide the outcome of Ea’s intervention. However, there is no reason to suppose that this depiction was any less successful than other versions of this incantation.

This ritual vividly describes the birthing process from the point of view of the mother, emphasizing the pain with words that connote anger and power, rather than in ways designed to create sympathy. Since it appears on the same tablet as the primary version, this opposing aspect to the cow’s experience creates new interpretations for both versions. After reading “I am Pregnant”, one might interpret Geme-Sîn’s crying out as

²⁷⁴ H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “Sanctus *Lugalbanda*” in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (ed. Tzvi Abusch; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 285.

²⁷⁵ See Chapter IV, 143; 151.

²⁷⁶ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

²⁷⁷ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

more powerful. The herdsmen may have been terrified of her anger and strength rather than saddened by seeing her suffer. Reading “The Cow of Sîn” highlights the fact that the speaker is alone in “I am Pregnant;” she does not have Sîn or the herdsmen to attend to her needs, so that she must act for herself and, failing that, cry out to Ea. While versions of this ritual are common, the differences between them can shed light on the possibility for an omnigendered heroic role for the birthing mother in childbirth rituals.

Raging Bull and Midwife: Sîn and Ea’s Omnigendered Roles

In Mesopotamian literature, the two gods, Sîn and Ea, who mentioned in “I am Pregnant” present alterior gender characteristics. In order to understand the role of the deities within this ritual, it is first necessary to reflect on the ways Sîn’s characteristics were alterior and what it meant to be a cow belonging to Sîn. While “the raging bull empowered with the vigour to insure the longevity of the herds, the authority of the earthly king, and the security of the people” often represented Sîn.²⁷⁸ However, this raging bull is not the only aspect of Sîn’s character. He could equally be represented as a calf or as a shepherd, offering care as well as restorative powers.²⁷⁹ While in many cultures, the Moon-deity is female, Sîn is male. As the Moon-god he embodies features that are neither masculine nor feminine:

Because of his horns, which are clearly visible when the moon is waxing, he is often associated with cattle. ‘Wild bull’ is one of his well-known epithets. On the other hand, in astrological texts the moon is frequently designated as a shepherd, the stars sometimes being his flock . . . In our text both notions are present: Sîn is bull and herdsman.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Schmidt, 587.

²⁷⁹ Schmdit, 587.

²⁸⁰ Veldhuis, *CoS*, 1.

While the shepherd or herdsman is a male figure, this aspect of nurture adds dimension to the more aggressive role of the wild bull. As he presents alterior gender, Sîn is thus omnigendered.

There are other texts which, as Veldhuis notes, Sîn is described as more of a caretaker than the “wild bull.” This composition, a poem in praise of the Sumerian SUEN²⁸¹ emphasizes the caring aspects of the herdsman image:

How many are there grazing? How many cows there are grazing!
How many cows of SUEN there are grazing!
The dark ones are bright lapis lazuli;
The pale cows are the light of the risen moon.
The little ones trickle down like barleycorns;
The large ones graze like wild bulls
The Glory of Heaven has undone the halters
Of those grazing cows, of that grazing herd.
He has brought fresh cows’ milk from them to the table,
His bright hands ever bring the milk.
After my lord has completed the work,
. . . (*two incompletely preserved lines*) . . .
He has been the cowherd of the cows.²⁸²

This composition reflects the aspects of Sîn found in the opening of “A Cow of Sîn.” It presents an idyllic picture of the cows, which are compared to precious things such as lapis lazuli and the risen moon. SUEN’s tender care of the cows is an alterior characteristic expressed through his hands and thus his body. This tender care is an essential component of SUEN’s care of his people and is equally as important as the traits of the wild bull that SUEN also exemplifies. This type of nuanced role is common in the Sumerian pantheon.

In various analyses of the character and role of INANNA/Ištar, scholars go to great lengths to attempt to reconcile the fact that she is clearly sexed female but often

²⁸¹ Schmidt, 586. See Chapter I, 5.

²⁸² Black, 12.

expresses traditionally masculine characteristics, such as violence and aggression.²⁸³ Such attention is not given to gods who are clearly sexed male and yet present traditionally feminine characteristics. Moreover, the presence of male gods of fertility has given many scholars pause in analyzing these rituals. Stol notes that “In our compendium, we find only male gods, one of whom even acts as ‘midwife’. This is in accord with the diminishing importance of the third millennium female deities which occurs over time.”²⁸⁴ However, this theory discounts the fact that fertility was always the realm of male deities in ancient Mesopotamia.²⁸⁵ Stol observes that Sîn has power over childbirth when he comments that one of Sîn’s names is “midwife” and that in the list of his powers is providing fertility and keeping the birthing mother and her child healthy²⁸⁶ but does not explore further. Stol credits the fact that Sîn is “qualified to help” in childbirth to the fact that is the god of the kings of Ur.²⁸⁷ While this is an important aspect of Sîn’s power, it discounts the fact that childbirth is Sîn’s realm.

Scurlock argues that this ritual is “an aetiological myth invented to ‘explain’ how a male god (the Moon-god, Sîn) came to be a patron of childbirth.”²⁸⁸ While one could read this ritual as functioning that way, as Scurlock herself noted, male gods were often called upon when births went awry.²⁸⁹ In the case of “The Cow of Sîn,” the birth was not a difficult one, and yet Sîn intervened. Therefore, Sîn’s role could cover all births, even those without complications. Considering that at least two male gods governed childbirth

²⁸³ Bahrani, *WoB*, 143. Also, see Chapter I, 26-31.

²⁸⁴ Stol, *BBB*, 71.

²⁸⁵ Marduk/Assaluḫi governs fertility through his association with storms and thus growth of vegetation; Sin governs fertility through the waxing and waning of the moon and thus rebirth. See Schmidt, 587 and T. Abusch, “Marduk,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn et al.; 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 1999), 544 .

²⁸⁶ Stol, *BBB*, 72.

²⁸⁷ Stol, *BBB*, 72.

²⁸⁸ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 147.

²⁸⁹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 168, note 58.

in the ancient Near East²⁹⁰ and that Sîn was believed to determine fates, it is logical that he would be a patron of childbirth. Thus, in the ancient Near East, the phenomenon of a male god governing childbirth would not have needed any explanation. Moreover, this ritual states its purpose explicitly, to allow the birthing mother the same safe delivery that Geme-Sîn experienced, so there is no need to search for an alternative function.

“The Cow of Sîn” calls in to question stereotypes of binary sex/gender division in the ancient Near East. Bahrani notes that in ancient Near East, “Woman is equated to passivity and to nature, to the body itself, while man is a social active being with agency.”²⁹¹ However, in this ritual, Sîn performs multiple gender roles. He presents maternal qualities of protectiveness, nurture, and love, but these are not feminine. The majority of lines referring to Sîn in this ritual refer to his protectiveness of Geme-Sîn. In the beginning, he provides for her with all of the best things he can offer, including the service of the herdsmen. After he hears her cries, while he does not directly offer her comfort, he does send the Lamassus to do so. Examples of this type of protectiveness are represented by the female cow in other texts of the ancient Near East.²⁹² Exhibiting these alterior qualities is a source of Sîn’s power, since through performing omnigendered roles he can provide the necessary steps to ease Geme-Sîn’s birthing process. As Butler notes, “No ‘act’ apart from a regularized and sanctioned practice can wield the power to produce what it declares.”²⁹³ This birth ritual, of which versions exist across time in the ancient Near East and in a variety of areas of the region, provides both sanctioned

²⁹⁰ See note 285 above.

²⁹¹ Bahrani, *WoB*, 68.

²⁹² “PRS,” (17-20), 395

²⁹³ Butler, *BTM*, 107.

practice that illustrates the importance of nurturing for the deity/hero and allows a “both/and” alterior gender within the omnigendered system of the ancient Near East.

Despite the fact that Sîn does govern childbirth and intervenes in the primary version of “The Cow of Sîn,” the speaker in “I am Pregnant” appeals to Ea to help her through her delivery. ENKI/Ea also reflects an omnigendered role since he “is not a god easy to characterize”²⁹⁴ and plays an important role in creation accounts within the ancient Near East. *Atraḥasīs*²⁹⁵ presents an explanation for the creation of humanity, later destruction by a flood, as well as the origin of human activities, such as birth, marriage, procreation and death.²⁹⁶ At the beginning of the story, three gods, Anu, the god of heaven, ENKI/Ea, the god of the waters, and Enlil, the god of earth, have divided the world according to their separate domains. Enlil forces a group of gods to work and they rebel against him. Consequently, he requests that Anu fix the situation with gods who refuse to work, which leads to the creation of the human race to do the deities’ work. NINTU/Mami,²⁹⁷ the birth goddess, is originally asked to do it, but she asks for help from ENKI/Ea.²⁹⁸ Therefore, the two of them create humankind from clay and the blood of the slain god who led the rebellion. ENKI/Ea says:

²⁹⁴ Samuel Noah Kramer and John Maier, *Myths of ENKI: The Crafty God* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 2.

²⁹⁵ “Atraḥasīs” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 235.

²⁹⁶ Abusch, Tzvi, “Ghost and God: Some Observations on a Babylonian Understanding of Human Nature,” in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience* (ed. A. I. Baumgarten, J. Assman, and G. G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 363.

²⁹⁷ NINTU, Mami and Bēlet-ilī are used interchangeably as the name for the birth goddess in this myth, due to the fact that there are four versions: Old Babylonian (from the seventeenth century BCE), Middle Babylonian (known in two versions), Late Babylonian (very similar to the Old Babylonian) and Late Assyrian (which diverges considerably from the other version). See “Atraḥasīs” (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 228). My references for each version will follow Foster. Thus, references to Old Babylonian version will use standard format, references to the Assyrian version will use lower case roman numerals and primes for verses.

²⁹⁸ Due to the multiple versions, ENKI and Ea are used interchangeably as the name for the god of wisdom and skills in this myth so for this myth I will use ENKI/Ea.

On the first, seventh, and fifteenth days of the month
I will establish a purification, a bath.
Let one god be slaughtered
Then let the gods be purified in it
Let NINTU mix clay with this flesh and blood²⁹⁹

Thus, ENKI/Ea is instrumental in human creation. Moreover, Ea governs the waters, a role not determined by masculine or feminine gender markers.³⁰⁰ Later in *Atraḥasīs*, he protects Atraḥasis from the life-destroying flood, illustrating once again that his provenance over water enables him to protect life. However, he can also take life. In the Akkadian story of *Adapa and the South Wind*, which describes the relationship of the gods and humankind, Ea also prevents Adapa from gaining eternal life by misleading him on how to answer Anu's questions.³⁰¹ Thus, while Ea does not have the direct responsibility over childbirth, he does control life and death.

Moreover, Ea governs magic: "The one who knows the secrets of the gods and the ways of the other world is, not surprisingly, the god who knows the words and rituals to control the spirits."³⁰² In addition, he employs cleverness and craftiness to accomplish his goals.³⁰³ His ability to effectively manipulate the spirits may be the reason that the speaker in "I am Pregnant" addresses Ea. Moreover, his provenance over water qualifies him to control the waters mentioned in the last lines of "I am Pregnant." These roles are not marked by gender but simply indicate which deity played a role most likely to help the birthing mother.

²⁹⁹ "Atraḥasīs" (I 206-211) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 235).

³⁰⁰ Kramer and Maier, 2.

³⁰¹ Shlomo Izre'el, *Adapa and the South Wind: Language has the Power of Life and Death* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 119.

³⁰² Kramer and Maier, 100.

³⁰³ Kramer and Maier, 5.

In “The Cow of Sîn”, the elements combine to emphasize communal relationships and multiplicity of roles played. While Sîn may be the wild bull who impregnates Geme-Sîn, the vigorous and forceful actions of the wild bull contain only one line, while the descriptions of Sîn’s care of Geme-Sîn before the conception and during the birth process take up the remainder of the incantation. In addition, the male figures of the herdsmen and herd boys are also given empathetic roles to play. This focus on the relationality is a “social and discursive building of community, a community that binds, cares and teaches, that shelters and enables.”³⁰⁴ This type of community is not reflected in “I am Pregnant.” In this ritual, the birthing mother has only herself and the god Ea on whom to rely. The fact that she uses the only means at her disposal to protect her life and that of her child, indicate that she plays a heroic role. Using the allusions to a wild bull indicate that this heroic role constitutes the performance a omnigendered role, which encapsulates qualities such as strength, courage, vigor, motherliness, love and devotion that were both masculine and feminine within the ancient Near East.

Blood Red: The Moon-God’s Role in One Hittite Ritual

Unlike Mesopotamian rituals, most extant Hittite birth rituals do not include a narrative mythological component and are instead focused on the prescriptive actions to bring about a healthy birth. The following text, however, does include a mythological component, as well as instructions for care of the mother during the birth process.

[Thus says?] Pittei: When (a woman) is pregnant with child –
 [The s]ky dressed itself in black; *duwip* it dressed itself. But the Moon-god
 dressed himself in blood red.

³⁰⁴ Butler, *BTM*, 137.

[And] he cinched up his skins of blood, and he took for himself an arrow of blood, and he took for himself a bow of blood.
 He held blazing fire in his hand; in the (other) hand he held all the daggers.
 Then he entered . . . , and them, the *muttiya*, in the gate . . .
 And before his eyes he was born, the mortal . . .
 And she became afraid; she took fright. Her mouth went to the side (i.e., ceased to function).
 Likewise (her) eyes; likewise the nine parts of (her) body. And (s)he treated her, that is, (her) head, and pressed her repeatedly above.
 The mother of the male child cried out, and the Storm-god looked down from heaven (saying;) “But what is this?”
 And when there was nothing (i.e. no response), then all this afterwards likewise he . . .
 (saying) “And we are thereby taking (evil) from someone (i.e., so-and-so)! Let them go, the Mother-goddesses, and before her let the midwives take the ointment for the head! From the road the *kuwari* let them take! . . . The [du]sts? Let them take!
 The ‘ston[e] of the assembly’ let them [ta]ke! The ‘fruit of the rock’ let them take! The first? . . . let them [ta]ke!
 The ‘living rock’ let them take, and let them grind them up, and let them [mix?] them with butter,
 and let them treat (with the resulting ointment) the ear canals? Of the male child! But the mother let them w[ash?] d own!
 (saying) ‘Go away!’ The exorcised one? . . . but these?”
 And (as) these things were good, (so) let them go well (now)! And these things further [over? her? h[ead?]] she (the practitioner speaks.
 Twice she conjures.³⁰⁵

This ritual continues with lines focusing on the protection of the child after its birth. I will limit my discussion to the opening of the ritual since it most closely parallels the structure of the primary version of “The Cow of Šîn.” Just like “She Has Never Given Birth,” the incantation invoking Šamaš discussed earlier,³⁰⁶ there is a consistent pattern. Beckman notes that “In both we find: 1) the crying out of the mother in childbirth, 2) the recognition by a celestial deity of this distressed state, and 3) the dispatching by this deity

³⁰⁵ Beckman, *HBR*, 177.

³⁰⁶ “She Has Never Given Birth,” (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 170).

of divine aid.”³⁰⁷ These similarities lead Beckman to posit that that the Hittite text might have been derived from “The Cow of Sîn.”³⁰⁸ Stol quotes a Hittite myth in which “a cow plays a role in problems related to birth” but himself admits that it has “few motifs in common with the ‘Cow of Sîn.’”³⁰⁹ He does not examine this ritual, which clearly does have similar themes.

Regardless of the possibility that this text may have Mesopotamian origins, this Hittite incantation differs from the “The Cow of Sîn” in several ways. First of all, it opens with a setting of “When (a woman) is pregnant with child.” This beginning is not specifically for a difficult birth, but can be used for any birth. Also, the metaphor differs greatly; there is no mention of the idyllic cow or of the raging bull. Moreover, the ritual introduces the Moon-god prior to introducing the birthing mother. The reference to the sky dressed in black indicates that the ritual takes place at night and therefore the presence of the Moon-god is not surprising.³¹⁰ In contrast to the loving images of Sîn which are presented in “The Cow of Sîn,” blood symbolizes the Moon-god here. In addition to the references of blood red, there are repeated images of weapons, blood and fire. In this case, the Hittite god does not appear to present alterior characteristics.

Beckman notes that these frightful images are not consistent with the Hittite Moon-god.³¹¹ One can find similar images in Hittite scapegoat rituals, but these are not generally addressed to the Moon-god.³¹² While in Mesopotamian thought, the Moon-god Sîn represented fertility, the Hittite Moon-god did not. The war-like imagery for the

³⁰⁷ Beckman, *HBR*, 188.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁹ Stol, *BBB*, 68.

³¹⁰ Beckman, *HBR*, 182.

³¹¹ Beckman, *HBR*, 183.

³¹² Billie Jean Collins, “Zarpiya’s Ritual,” *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 162-63.

Moon-god in this text more commonly represents with the Storm-god, who frequently appeared in reliefs with images of bulls, as well as weapons such as maces, bows and arrows.³¹³

Due to the powers of the Storm-god, within this ritual, the strengths of the Hittite Moon-god seem to be borrowed from his Mesopotamian counterpart.³¹⁴ However, these war-like images did not usually represent the Mesopotamian Sîn.³¹⁵ In addition, Beckman offers the suggestion that this is

somehow a corruption of the mythological counterpart of the human mother. Perhaps his outfitting himself as a warrior was originally meant to stress his masculinity in this connection and was later misunderstood literally as preparation for battle.³¹⁶

Hence, if the war-like images were intended to represent masculinity, there is a chance that the raging bull in “The Cow of Sîn” was also intended to represent masculinity. However, the stress on preparation for battle illustrates a marked lack of concern for the birthing mother, in contrast to the openings lines of the “The Cow of Sîn” in which the forceful actions of the bull are tempered by Sîn’s more gentle actions in his love for Geme-Sîn. In any case, these violent and war-like images lead directly to the birth of the child.

Then the ritual shifts to the perspective of the birthing mother, who is being treated by a midwife. At the moment that birth begins, the mother is frightened, perhaps of the warlike image of the Moon-god, and ceases to function in key body parts, which is

³¹³ J. D. Hawkins, “The Storm-God Seal of Mursili III, ” in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (ed. Gary Beckman et al; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003): 169.

³¹⁴ Cem Karusu, “Why Did the Hittites Have a Thousand Deities?” in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry a. Hoffner, Jr. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*. (ed. Gary Beckman et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 229.

³¹⁵ Beckman, *HBR*, 188.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

a common theme in rituals.³¹⁷ The midwife attempts to treat her, but the mother nevertheless cries out. At this point, the Storm-god, rather than the Moon-god, hears and questions what he hears. This differs from the main version of “The Cow of Sîn” since the Storm-god is clearly not the one who has impregnated the mother in the first place, but rather this responsibility lies with the Moon-god.

Despite the fact that this has been set up for the beginning as a typical birth, the Storm-god’s notice “serves to highlight the unusualness and the importance of the events discussed. Even a god who is the course of his duties witnesses everything in heaven and on earth is moved upon glimpsing the birth to cry out.”³¹⁸ Just as Scurlock as noted that the Mesopotamian gods were not above taking part in childbirth,³¹⁹ both of these scholars express surprise at the fact that childbirth was important enough for these gods to notice and intervene. The fact that this motif is repeated across time and cultures, with different gods intervening, illustrates how crucial the act of childbirth was to communities in the ancient Near East and emphasizes the heroic role played by the birthing mother. The crying out on the part of the Storm-god creates a parallel between the birthing mother and the god, just as there was between Geme-Sîn and her herdsman. On getting no response, the Storm-god takes pity on the mother, and sends the Mother-goddesses as midwives. The treatment includes dust, ‘stone of the assembly,’ ‘fruit of the rock’, ‘living rock’ and butter and this tale consequently “served as an aetiological justification for the employment of the same procedures and materials on the human level.”³²⁰ These

³¹⁷ W. G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text,” *Iraq* 31.1 (Spring 1969), 36.

³¹⁸ Beckman, *HBR*, 186.

³¹⁹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 147.

³²⁰ Beckman, *HBR*, 186.

treatments, particularly the stones, are similar to the rituals Scurlock has discussed, through sympathetic magic.³²¹

These elements are not just for the mother, but for the child who has been born. They involved the cleaning of the child's face, as well as that of the mother. Further, it includes the attempt to banish an evil spirit. One important aspect of this ritual from a gender perspective is that it specifically mentions a male child. Nonetheless, in Hittite ritual, there are several instances in which "a wish is expressed that the mother's next pregnancy should result in the birth of a child of the sex opposite to that of the child just born. No preference for male children is evidenced here."³²² The ritual then ends much as "The Cow of Sîn" does by illustrating its purpose: "And (as) these things were good, (so) let them go well (now)!" The words of this incantation once again place the plight of the birthing mother in context and prove that this treatment has worked at least once.³²³ Therefore, the mythological images in this ritual comfort the birthing mother. The story that utilizes the divine image presents the birthing mother with an example in which these treatments have worked previously. However, the Moon-god here does not express alterior sex and therefore does not provide the mother an avenue to do so either.

In the Circle: The Place of the Bull in the Birth Ritual

In "I am Pregnant," as well as "The Cow of Sîn," and its Hittite counterpart, "When a woman is pregnant with child," masculine images do not directly symbolize

³²¹ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 138-140. Here Scurlock discusses the use of a variety of stones to seal the woman up and prevent excess bleeding during delivery.

³²² Beckman, *HBR*, 35.

³²³ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 147.

birthing mothers. However, the deities and mythological cows embody alterior characteristics. Therefore, they support viewing ancient Near Eastern material through omnigendered lens. In “I am Pregnant” the cow, like Ištar, exemplifies the characteristics of impetuosity, wildness and strength through bovine imagery. However, despite the alterior characteristics she evinces in order to give birth, she cannot achieve a safe delivery for herself and the child without intervention of the deity. The activity in each ritual focuses on an appeal to the deity. Nonetheless, the cow/birthing mother’s body drives all of the action in each ritual. Hence, the birth ritual is a speech act overlaying a bodily practice. Both the speech act and the bodily practice are “subject to the same misfiring and slippages.”³²⁴ “The Cow of Šîn” begins by focusing on the cow’s allure, moves to her being mounted by the wild bull, and to trembling and crying out. “I am Pregnant” begins with crying out and trembling. In each case, what is happening to her body is important to the deities Šîn and Ea.

The presentation of male deities in these incantations illustrates the multiplicity of roles that were available to these deities in both the Mesopotamian and the Hittite pantheons. As Veldhuis noted, the role of the deity depended on the context.³²⁵ In the ritual “I am Pregnant” and other rituals using similar imagery, the role of the deity is to take care of the woman giving birth. Amy Hollywood argues that gender is determined by one’s “encounters with other bodies in the world and by its practical or bodily citations.”³²⁶ In this case, Šîn’s gender is determined by the cow’s bodily encounters.

³²⁴ Amy Hollywood, “Performativity, Citatationality, Ritualization,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 265.

³²⁵ Niek Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature and Scholarship: The Sumerian Composition Nanše and the Birds with a Catalogue of Sumerian Bird Names* (Leiden: Brill/Styx, 2004), 11-13.

³²⁶ Hollywood, 253.

The fact that in all of these variants of the “The Cow of Sîn” the deity is male challenges the concept of birth as a female enterprise in the ancient Near East. The male deities in these incantations play roles that emphasize nurture and protection. Therefore, they highlight the notion that the deity’s role was not limited by gender. In this case, the force of the performative of “The Cow of Sîn” highlights the similarities between the cow/birthing mother, the herdsman, and Sîn, as well as the differences.³²⁷ The force of the performative of “I am Pregnant” highlights the fact that the birthing mother, Sîn, and Ea perform omnigendered roles. The care and concern between all of the actors in this ritual emphasizes relationality, not only between the human and divine actors within the ritual, but between masculine and feminine characteristics, providing a means to express characteristics, such as love, that are not defined as either. While the standard image of love in ancient Mesopotamia includes the circle formed by the mother and the calf, these rituals provide a space for the bull in that circle.

³²⁷ Hollywood, 261.

CHAPTER III

“THE BABY IS STUCK”: MAY YOUR WOMEN BECOME WARRIORS

As explored in the previous chapter, the ritual “I am Pregnant” includes parallels between the birthing mother’s actions and those of male bulls in other Mesopotamian literature. Moreover, the male gods in the incantation evince maternal behavior, showing how both deities and humans convey alterior characteristics in an omnigendered model. This chapter focuses on a Middle Assyrian ritual dated to approximately 1100 BCE,³²⁸ called here “The Baby is Stuck.” The figures in this incantation represent the birthing mother with the specific masculine simile of the warrior, as well as the similes of the chariot and the plow. Like the wild bull, these images evoke alterior traits. Describing the birthing mother through such similes conveys the mother’s omnigendered role during delivery.

In the previous chapter, bovine symbols represented strength, fertility, and sacrifice. Bulls primarily embodied strength and potency and cows maternity, although this separation did not occur in every case. The warrior figure is almost always male and, unlike the bull, does not have an obvious feminine counterpart. In literature, warriors symbolize conflict, in varying forms. However, they also represent bravery, defense, vigilance, service and devotion to a cause.³²⁹ Depictions of war could rally national

³²⁸ W. G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text,” *Iraq* 31.1 (Spring 1969): 28-39.

³²⁹ Arthur De Vries, *Elsevier’s Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (2nd edition; Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), 524.

pride.³³⁰ From another perspective, war as a symbol can also evoke “futility and horror” if the battle goes badly.³³¹ While the soldier represents service and devotion, war itself can symbolize sacrifice and be set up as a necessary element of creation and evolution, in which conflict is necessary for change to occur.³³² Wars, while resulting in death and destruction, make rebuilding and beginning again possible. In much the same way, blood also represents not only death and war, but fertility and sacrifice as well.³³³ Blood is a symbol of life force which can contain “a share of divine energy or ... the spirit of an individual creature.”³³⁴ Thus, blood and war represent the relationship between life and death that hangs in the balance during the birthing process. Therefore, warrior figures, like cattle images, can convey characteristics that are neither masculine nor feminine.

However, as seen in the previous chapter, in Mesopotamia, men symbolized strength, courage and vigor, while women represented protection, nurture and love.³³⁵ Within this symbolic system, warriors were men and thus represented masculine endeavor. In fact, metaphors comparing warriors to women impugned soldiers’ strength and courage. Curses which included the phrase “May your soldiers become women” or similar phrases were common in Assyria and in the Hebrew Bible,³³⁶ as well as in Hittite curses.³³⁷ The meaning of this metaphoric curse has been the subject of several

³³⁰ Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 513.

³³¹ Tresidder, 513.

³³² DeVries, 600.

³³³ DeVries, 70.

³³⁴ Tresidder, 73.

³³⁵ See Chapter II, 46-47.

³³⁶ Cynthia Chapman, *Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 11.

³³⁷ Billie Jean Collins, “The First Soldier’s Oath,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 166.

Billie Jean Collins, “Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh,” *The Context of Scripture, Vol I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 164.

studies.³³⁸ For example, Susan Haddox has explored the construction of masculinity in the biblical text of Hosea. She utilizes three axes in which masculinity functions: action, potency and goodness.³³⁹ Haddox argues,

These axes are correlated with what are perceived as masculine traits, which are also those commonly ascribed to kings and gods in the ANE: activity, including the ability to lead and to make decisions for oneself and one's family or people; potency, including military, sexual, political and economic; and goodness, including wisdom, honor, honesty, justice and mercy.³⁴⁰

The emphasis on potency, as well as the leadership of the gods and kings, illustrates the importance of the masculine role in military endeavors. In these examples, the associated commonplaces for women were negative: “the overlapping associated commonplaces from the domains of women and defeated soldiers include weakness in the face of battle, fear in battle, and the inability to handle a weapon.”³⁴¹ However, women and birthing mothers represented different things in the ancient Near East. In the words of this incantation, one can find another set of overlapping commonplaces between the birthing mothers and the warriors, including the alterior characteristics of strength, courage, and vigor. As such during birth, the mother plays an omnigendered role, as it was understood in the ancient Near East, because it is necessary for her to deliver the child safely. Delivering a child helps to preserve her family and community, just as participating in war does. Thus, the warrior simile in this ritual reinforces the mother's heroic alterior characteristics.

³³⁸ Chapman; Susan Haddox, “Metaphor and Masculinity in Hosea” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2007); S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, eds. *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths*. SAA 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki Univ.Press, 1988).

³³⁹ Haddox, 49.

³⁴⁰ Haddox, 204.

³⁴¹ Chapman, 13.

“Risk and Courage”: War and Warriors in the Ancient Near East

Information about warfare in the ancient Near East can be found through multiple references in historical texts and archaeological records. Examples of political propaganda indicate that successful military campaigns and significant building programs were the most important features in establishing a ruler’s prowess.³⁴² Kings found soldiers for their battles through a variety of sources, including their own citizens as well as mercenaries. Any able-bodied male could be conscripted during times of emergency.³⁴³ This type of military service was often rewarded with distribution of state land in many different times and places. The details of these arrangements varied,³⁴⁴ but the system overall would have contributed to the relationship between military service and civic responsibility. While many battles were based on regional conflict and the troops would be loyal to their particular city, military troops often included mercenaries, people who were not natives of the region. There was also variety among the citizens since there were groups who lived as part of nomadic tribes as well as more established cities.³⁴⁵ The troops were thus heterogeneous, not only through social class, but also skill level and the equipment they used.

The weapons soldiers wielded also depended on their social class and the organization of the army. While armies included chariots and mounted troops, infantry

³⁴² Marc Van De Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 135.

³⁴³ J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 241.

³⁴⁴ Postgate, 243.

³⁴⁵ Van de Mierop, *HANE*, 187; Postgate, 245.

were the backbone of the armed forces and they employed a variety of axes, adzes (made with the blade opposite the handle), and spears, which were piercing rather than slicing weapons.³⁴⁶ Other sacred weapons used included bow and maces, which were “deified and given names like people.”³⁴⁷ These types of weapons indicate both the struggle and the intimacy of warfare. Even low-ranking warriors would have required strength and courage for this extremely difficult and dangerous hand-to-hand fighting.³⁴⁸

Kings led these armies and people believed their causes were divinely sanctioned. Thus, they consulted the will of the gods, through various types of divination.³⁴⁹ Divine justification incorporated the belief that gods protected and fought for the king. While the gods were not visible, their actions determined which side won: “therefore, victory was represented as the triumph of justice.”³⁵⁰ This conviction allowed smaller and weaker forces to believe they could triumph over troops with more military or political power.³⁵¹ Hence, people believed warriors on the winning side were divinely blessed.

Despite the diversity of class, nationality, and beliefs, the qualities warriors exhibited remained consistent. They had to be physically strong to wield the weapons of war. Moreover, they represented a king and were thus bonded to their fellow soldiers. On the winning side, they enjoyed the favor of the deities. Regardless of whether they were attacking or defending, warriors contributed to the power and security of their communities as a whole. Thus, the qualities of ideal soldiers were consistent: they were brave, loyal, strong, and divinely favored.

³⁴⁶ Stephanie Dalley, “Ancient Mesopotamian Military Organization,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. II* (ed. Jack Sasson. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 418; Postgate, 249.

³⁴⁷ Dalley, 414.

³⁴⁸ Postgate, 248.

³⁴⁹ Dalley, 415.

³⁵⁰ Mario Liverani, *Prestige and Interest: International Relations in the Near East, ca. 1600-1100 BC* (Padova: Sargon srl, 1990), 152; Dalley, 416.

³⁵¹ Liverani, 155.

“Supreme in Strength”: Warriors in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The prevalence of war in everyday life led to its pervasiveness in the literature of the ancient Near East. There are far too many references to military forces to create a comprehensive study here. Therefore, I will narrow my focus to mentions of warriors, either as a descriptive term for a deity or an individual, and to warriors that represent the majority of the fighting force, rather than exalted leaders, in order to gain more insight into the associated commonplaces for the term warrior. References to warriors within these literary texts illustrate what it means to perform that role. In this case, these references create not only the ideal of the warrior, but also a masculine ideal, as pointed out by Zainab Bahrani:

“. . . political images of kings and courtiers, or narrative scenes of battle or hunt, are in themselves *gendered* representations in which ideal masculinity is embedded not only into the physical aspects of the body of the king, but also into the narrative itself.”³⁵²

Bahrani’s reference to iconography extends to the literary representations found here.

Despite the common characterization of warriors as masculine, warrior is a common epithet for deities, both male and female. Therefore, qualities of the warrior may have been alterior, rather than masculine or feminine. Deities, such as Enlil, the Sumerian god of earth, are designated as warriors in certain texts.³⁵³ In later works Marduk, as the

³⁵² Bahrani, *WoB*, 39.

³⁵³ “Atraḫasīs” (I 92) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 232).

Babylonian leader of the gods, is also described this way.³⁵⁴ These references are usually one of many descriptive terms for the deity. Thorkild Jacobsen equates this designation with “ruler” and groups it with other terms, such as “master” and “lord,” which indicates the “unbounded power of the phenomenon in which the god is experienced.”³⁵⁵ While such description is accurate as far as it goes, there are more specific references to deities as warriors that illustrate particular traits.

For example, INANNA/Ištar, as the goddess of war, is frequently designated as a warrior. In the “Agušaya Poem,” Ištar is characterized by the term several times. It begins: “Ishtar, the greatest one, the warrior among the gods.”³⁵⁶ In this case, warrior equals the appositive “greatest one.” Later, this same text, the writer expands the metaphor, referring to “The warrior Ishtar, the most capable of the gods, the all-powerful.”³⁵⁷ Therefore, the warrior epithet emphasizes both her power and her skill. In another hymn spoken in INANNA’s voice, she states “I am the heart of the battle/the arm of the warriors.”³⁵⁸ This line illustrates most vividly INANNA’s role within the battle, implying that she is present within the arm of each and every warrior fighting in the battle that day. While INANNA/Ištar’s omnigendered status has been analyzed at length, the question of why a female deity would govern war in a society which equated war and masculinity has not been addressed.

Another deity who is frequently referred to as warrior is Nergal, a prominent deity of the netherworld in Babylonia. Hymns of praise to Nergal from approximately the

³⁵⁴ “Against Marduk’s Anger” (1) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 680).

³⁵⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once...Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 80.

³⁵⁶ “The Agushaya Poem” (i.1) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 97).

³⁵⁷ “The Agushaya Poem” (ii.15), 104.

³⁵⁸ Jacobsen, *Harps*, 137.

second half of the second millennium BCE create an image of warrior that not only exhibits strength but shows no mercy:

O warrior, splendid one . . .

...

You are supreme in strength.. ..

...

Who grasps the pitiless-deluge weapon, who massacres the enemy.³⁵⁹

This description illustrates the side of the warrior that cares nothing for anyone, and praises this aspect when it helps conquer the enemies of the people. However, this merciless aspect is not the only one the warrior evinces.

Ninurta, the god of weapons married to Gula, the goddess of healing, is also designated as warrior. The “Gula-Hymn of Bulluṣsa-Rabi,” from the same time, praises Gula and her spouse, who designated not only by Ninurta but other names as well. Ninurta was equated with warriors, as well as bulls:

My spouse is the warrior, son of Enlil, the mighty

Valorous one, trampler of the foe,

Who crushes the enemy,

(but) who makes the righteous stand . . .³⁶⁰

This description of Ninurta emphasizes his strength and bravery, as well as his ability to destroy enemies and to protect his people. Later in the hymn, the term warrior is applied to Gula herself and indicates her wisdom:

I am a warrior, skilled through experience,

I am the spouse of the mighty one, light of the gods.

I make decisions, I give commands. . .³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ “Nergal the Warrior” (1, 5, 7) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 706).

³⁶⁰ “Gula Hymn of Bulluṣsa-Rabi” (ii 9-12) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 584).

³⁶¹ “Gula Hymn of Bulluṣsa-Rabi” (xi 101-103), 587.

Consequently, the term warrior not only connotes strength, but also the vigor that accompanies skill, discernment and decision-making. While these characteristics could be considered masculine in the ancient Near East, their role in describing goddesses indicates that they are, in these cases, alterior, rather than masculine. Representing Ištar, the goddess of war, with a warrior might be expected, but symbolizing Gula, the goddess of healing, is a less obvious choice. The universality of warrior as a figure implies that the role did not require masculine traits, at least in the realm of the deities.

The term also describes extraordinary humans, such as kings. In a petition to Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, also from 1851-1500 BCE, the author refers to the king as “Enlil’s warrior, shepherd of proven understanding, to him most suited for kingship, who beams forth with his radiant diadem, to the king perfect in strength.”³⁶² In “The Cow of Sîn,” the herdsmen, also known as shepherds, were masculine figures who cared for Geme-Sîn. In this case, the shepherd image relates to vigor, through the ability to analyze the situation and make appropriate decisions. Warrior is thus equated with the alterior attributes that qualify Zimri-Lim for kingship: strength and vigor. Shepherds, despite being male figures, do exhibit characteristics of maternal protection and nurture and provide a dimension to the role of warrior outside of the masculine. In a first person account from the same period purported to be written by Agum, an early Kassite king, the author describes himself similarly: “Shepherd of humankind, warrior, shepherd to makes secure his ancestral house am I!”³⁶³ In this way, the term warrior is explicitly tied to protection. Therefore, the metaphor not only exhibits the king’s own power but also

³⁶² “To Zimri-Lim, King of Mari” (25) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 222).

³⁶³ “Agum-Kakrime and the Return of Marduk” (I II) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 361).

portrays his ability to care for his people, thus reinforcing the concept of alterior characteristics.

As seen in chapter I, there were historical examples of women who adopted male dress and male weapons.³⁶⁴ However, the concept of a human woman being compared with a warrior was not reflected within literary representations of warriors. While female deities are described with this image, human women, by and large, are not. This distinction not only relates to the differences in the roles of the deities, but also may indicate that the birthing mother was perceived to be differently gendered than women generally. As this chapter will explore further, the concepts of birth and war are tied together in ways that can lead to the comparison between a birthing mother and a warrior and lends it self to the birthing mother playing an omnigendered role, such as that found in the ritual “The Baby is Stuck.”

The role of the warrior’s body also indicates that warrior could be an alterior symbol, rather than a masculine one. Praise of the warrior’s body as something beautiful permeated ancient Mesopotamian literature. In his analysis of the Gilgameš epic, Neal Walls notes, “Poetry though the ages has celebrated the athleticism of the warrior’s beautiful body, which even in death is considered an object of dignity and admiration.”³⁶⁵ Irene Winter goes further in her analysis of the importance of the warrior’s body, which she exemplifies in the representation of the Akkadian king Naram-Sîn, noting that “sexuality was inextricably linked to potency, potency to male vigor, and male vigor to

³⁶⁴ Kathleen McCaffrey, “Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?” *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001* (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379.

³⁶⁵ Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (Boston, Mass. American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001), 65.

authority and dominance.”³⁶⁶ This relationship between sexuality and the ideal warrior is important for understanding the relationship between authority and masculinity. Something as simple as a man’s beard, a secondary sex characteristic, could represent “fully developed manhood”³⁶⁷ and the removal of an enemy’s beard indicated power over him and his humiliation. Naram- Sîn’s own manhood is reflected in sculpture in which he evinces “good conformation, auspiciousness, (male) vigor, and (sexual) allure.”³⁶⁸ The idealization of the body of Naram-Sîn has implications not only for himself for the community:

By setting up active currents of positive value through seductive allure, the display also facilitates identificatory processes that elicit a series of vicarious associations and projections that have a socializing function; for women their subordination to desire and by men; for men for their fusion with authority at the same time as they are subject to it.³⁶⁹

The allure and perfection of the warrior’s body could therefore create an ideal masculine from which women are necessarily distanced. However, given the fact that scholars of the ancient Near East have argued that sexual allure was emblematic of feminine identity,³⁷⁰ the inclusion of sexual allure as part of the idealization of the male ruler indicates that allure may not have been a gendered trait in the ancient Near East.

This reverence for the warrior’s body indicates that the person being described deserves respect, even after death. Other pieces of literature are more specific about the dangers of being a warrior. A prayer to Ninurta includes the following lines:

On the one who, in the thick of battle,
seems destined to die and calls your name,

³⁶⁶ Irene J. Winter, “Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: The Alluring Body of Naram-Sîn of Agade” in *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece and Italy* (ed. Natalie Boymel Kampen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

³⁶⁷ Winter, 13.

³⁶⁸ Winter, 15.

³⁶⁹ Winter, 21.

³⁷⁰ Bahrani, *WOB*, 88.

On him you have mercy, O lord,
you rescue him from disaster.³⁷¹

This prayer paints a picture of the warrior who faces death in battle, calls upon a deity, who then saves him. This prayer emphasizes the limits of human strength, but also the care of the deity in reaching out to the endangered person. While the death is clearly a negative consequence of war, “Death on the field of battle or in heroic adventure grants honor and glory to the warrior.”³⁷² Therefore, victory in war is not necessary to achieve respect for fighting the battle.

The presence of blood in descriptions of battle can have multiple connotations. For instance, it expresses total defeat. In “Hammurabi, King of Justice” from the period between 1850-1500 BCE, Hammurabi prays to Ištar for success in battle: “May she fell his warriors, may she let the earth gorge their blood,/may she cast them down, one after another into a heap.”³⁷³ In this case, the symbol of the earth gorging on the warriors’ blood creates a vivid picture of total annihilation. However, blood could also have other meanings. For example, the blood in battle could be part of the necessary process to achieve victory, just as the spilling of blood is necessary for the birth of a child. At least one text describes the battle lines in maternal terms. In the account of Sargon’s battle, one episode begins with a speech by a commander in which he says

Yes! This is the encounter of valiant men,
Tomorrow Akkad will start the battle,
The celebration of the manly will be held,
The writhing (ranks) will writhe back and forth,
Two women giving birth, bathed in their own blood.³⁷⁴

³⁷¹ “Ninurta as Sirius” (20-21) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005]), 715).

³⁷² Walls, 65.

³⁷³ “Hammurabi, King of Justice” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 134).

³⁷⁴ “Sargon, King of Battle” (37’-42’) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 109).

This passage refers to the battle as a “celebration of the manly,” and yet describes the battle using the metaphor of two women giving birth. Hence, the birthing mother takes on a different meaning than that of woman. Thus, if the terms of war excluded women or denigrated the roles women played, they could call those assumptions into question by references to birthing mothers as a separate category. As Judith Butler notes, “The power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual expression and the way beyond that oppression.”³⁷⁵ The text that equates a woman giving birth to men fighting in battle emphasizes the “manly” nature of giving birth and thus facing the danger of being submerged in one’s own blood. While the metaphor may solely link the battle with “the last, bloody moments of childbirth,”³⁷⁶ nonetheless the effect of this passage is to equate childbirth with the “encounter of valiant men.”

Joan Goodnick Westenholz translates this passage slightly differently, lessening the comparison between the troops and the birthing women:

Here, then is the clashing of heroes
Tomorrow, Akkade will commence battle.
A festival of men at arms will be celebrated.
The women in labor are in travail,
Two women giving birth are drenched in blood³⁷⁷

Westenholz notes that the festival of the men arms connotes “battle as the test of manhood, as well as the fight to the death.”³⁷⁸ This concept also fits with Foster’s notion of the celebration of the manly. However, the battle that tests manhood is described in the

³⁷⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 148.

³⁷⁶ Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. (3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005), 109; note 1.

³⁷⁷ “Sargon, the Conquering Hero” (Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* [Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Ind., 1997], 62-63).

³⁷⁸ Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, Ind., 1997), 63; note 19.

undeniably feminine images of giving birth. Westenholz notes that “This couplet conveys the life and death struggle of women in labor as either a metaphor for battle or as a contrast to it.”³⁷⁹ Westenholz begins her examination of battle by looking at various epic and heroic poems, finding links between battle and festivals or tests of manhood.³⁸⁰ She continues, arguing that

. . . the strongest image related to battle is the shedding of blood. Typically rivers and other bodies are described as running with blood . . . Blood is spilt not only on the battle field but in the process of childbirth; the bringing forth of life and death.³⁸¹

In this way, Westenholz argues that the seemingly opposite actions of fighting in a war and giving birth are related in the amount of blood that is spilled. Foster makes this same comparison in his analysis of birth imagery within battle texts.

While it is possible to limit the similarities to the blood spilled, there are other similarities that stand out as birthing women are compared with the clashing of heroes. Westenholz does comment that the verbs in the passage indicate “a battle between two champions,”³⁸² indicating an equality between the heroes on both sides. In this example, the women are not protected or helpless but their bodies are the battlefield. As such, they are integral to the battle, bathed or drenched in their own blood. In this case, the role of woman in warfare illustrates a changing of the roles: “As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.”³⁸³ This discourse, in which the bodies of women not only provide the arena for battle, but suffer the consequences of it, illustrates the alterior nature of warfare.

³⁷⁹ Westenholz, *LKA*, 64; note 20-21.

³⁸⁰ Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “Symbolic Language in Akkadian Narrative Poetry: The Metaphorical Relationship Between Poetical Images and the Real World” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H.L.J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 185.

³⁸¹ Westenholz, “Symbolic Language,” 192-193.

³⁸² Westenholz, *LKA*, 64; note 20-21.

³⁸³ Butler, *GT*, 43.

Despite this comparison from the earlier Sargon legends and the fact that female deities have been designated as warriors, there are extant texts in which the warlike atmosphere is directly tied to the role of men and opposed to that of women. The epic poem from the latter half of the second millennium, “Erra and Ishum” includes taunts to Erra

Why have you been sitting up in the city like a feeble old man,
Why sitting at home like a helpless child?
Shall we eat woman food, like non-combatants?
Have we turned timourous and trembling, as if we can’t fight?³⁸⁴

In this way, the role of the warrior is contrasted with all others, the “feeble old man,” the “helpless child” and the “woman.” While the old man and the child are specifically described as being unable to contribute to the fight, the woman is given no such description. However, those who cannot or will not fight are described in scathing terms including “feeble,” “helpless,” “timourous,” and “trembling.” Consequently, those who do not fight are weak and terrified, in contrast to those who do. However, in this case, women are the non-combatants, in contrast to birthing mothers, who symbolically do battle. Thus, the comparison between women and soldiers covers different traits than a comparison between birthing mothers and soldiers.

From these varied accounts of the warrior, they exhibited the qualities of strength, courage, and vigor. Even in death or defeat, the warrior is worthy of respect for facing these dangers and evincing these heroic characteristics. These references to war are “performative acts . . . with the power to produce or materialize subjectivating effects.”³⁸⁵ Hence, these cultural representations serve to idealize and normalize what a warrior was.

³⁸⁴ “Erra and Ishum” (I 47-50) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 883).

³⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106.

Exhibiting strength, courage and vigor in any context could designate a person as a warrior. Thus, the role of warrior is redefined as an omnigendered role. Women in childbirth, while not taking part in an actual battle, suffered and confronted death, and thus displayed strength, courage, and vigor. In the next section, a well-attested childbirth ritual illustrates how these qualities could be alterior within ancient Mesopotamia.

In The Fray: Birthing Mother as Warrior in Birth Ritual

As discussed above, the warrior image is not common within birth rituals, but it does appear in “The Baby is Stuck,” an incantation first translated by W. G. Lambert.³⁸⁶ Lambert refers to it as “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text” and dates it to approximately 1100 BCE. In this ritual, similes describe the situation of a woman in delivery, with the goal of influencing the deity, in this case, Marduk. Marduk was the king of Babylonian gods and a lesser Assyrian god who served the will of Assur, head of the Assyrian pantheon.³⁸⁷ It is unusual to find Marduk, who was much more prominent in Babylon than in Assyria, as the deity addressed in a Middle Assyrian text. Thus, through examining the ritual, one must also interrogate why Marduk is appropriate for this particular ritual.

This text has been translated by several scholars. I will be using Benjamin Foster’s translation since it is the more complete and more recent. Where necessary, I will compare and contrast other translations. The ritual reads:

The woman in labor is having a difficult labor,

³⁸⁶ Lambert, “Middle Assyrian,” 28.

³⁸⁷ T. Abusch, “Marduk” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn et al.; 2nd ed; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 547.

Her labor is difficult, the baby is stuck,
 The baby is stuck!
 The doorbolt is locked, about to end life,
 The door is fastened against the suckling kid, . . .
 The woman giving birth is covered with death's dust,
 She is covered with the dust of battle, like a chariot,
 She is covered with the dust of tuffets, like a plow.
 She sprawls in her own blood, like a struggling warrior,
 Her eyesight is waning, she cannot see,
 Her lips are coated, she cannot open them . . . ,
 Her eyesight is dim, . . . she is alarmed, her ears cannot hear!
 Her breast is not held in, her headbands are askew,
 She is not veiled with . . . , she has no shame:
 Stand by me and keep calling out (?), O merciful Marduk,
 "Here is the confusion, I'm surrounded, get to me!"
 Bring out the one sealed up, created by the gods,
 Created by humankind, let him come out and see the light!³⁸⁸

This ritual can be divided into four sections. The first introduces the problem. The second describes the birthing mother's situation with the masculine images. The third focuses on her body and state of dress and the fourth addresses Marduk and asks for his aid.

The beginning of this ritual sets the stage for the problem at hand: the woman is having a difficult labor and her baby is stuck. The imagery of the door and the lock is repeated. The very real danger of the child's death if it cannot be delivered is addressed with the line "about to end life." The symbols utilized in this incantation can also be found in other literature of the period and thus the images of the birthing mother's gender takes place "within an established set of literary conventions."³⁸⁹

However, after the first five lines in which the description of the situation focuses on the baby and the danger to it, the incantation shifts to a focus on the birthing mother. Her situation is described in dire terms as she is "covered in death's dust." Therefore, the danger for her is equally as real as it is for the child. The repetition of the word dust

³⁸⁸ "The Baby is Stuck" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 715).

³⁸⁹ Butler, *GT*, 126.

emphasizes its importance.³⁹⁰ Since dust is the first figure in this ritual, its meaning sets the tone for interpreting the others. Within ancient Near Eastern literature, there are multiple examples of dust both symbolizing and causing death. In “The Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld,” for the denizens of the netherworld, “dust is their sustenance.”³⁹¹ Humans cannot eat dust; thus, this symbol represents the barrenness of the land and the impossibility of growth. Moreover, Erica Reiner suggests that dust indicates a lack of movement or possibility of escape.³⁹² In this way, the connection between the netherworld and dust is reinforced, as people cannot leave the netherworld. Moreover, dust could also be the direct cause of death. For instance, in one incantation against Lamaštu, a demon who preyed on women and unborn children, the practitioner addresses Lamaštu, saying “I will surely fill your mouth with sand, your face with dust.”³⁹³ The reference in the incantation to being covered in death’s dust evokes both burial and dry, barren land.

The dust is further explicated as it is compared both the dust of battle and the dust of tuffets, or of wood. In the Sumerian text, the “Ninurta Myth Lugal-e,” in describing Ninurta, the epic reads,

and before the warrior went a huge, irresistible tempest
it was tearing up the dust, depositing it (again),
evening out hill and dale,
filling in hollows³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰ M. E. Vogelzang, “Repetition as a Poetic Device in Akkadian” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 169-170.

³⁹¹ “Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld” (8) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 499).

³⁹² Erica Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut*, (Ann Arbor: Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan, 1985), 32.

³⁹³ “Anu Begot Her” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 173); Stol, *BBB*, 230.

³⁹⁴ “The Ninurta Myth Lugal-e” (83-85) (Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once...Sumerian Poetry in Translation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987], 240-241).

In this case, the dust is product of the warrior's fury and indicates that it will be impossible to resist him in battle. Consequently, being covered the dust of battle could indicate how fiercely the birthing mother has fought. Hence, the image of dust of death does not have to be a negative one. It can illustrate the strength and power of the fighting troops. In addition to "The Baby is Stuck," the specific phrase "dust of death" can also be found in the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic which predates this text. In this case, the Kassite king Kaštiliaš goes to face Tukulti-Ninurta and is described as "like one in . . . /the dust of death."³⁹⁵ This reference is ignominious since it refers to Kaštiliaš's imminent defeat. However, for the birthing mother in "The Baby is Stuck," it reinforces the danger she faces, as well as indicating how hard she fights against such danger.

The other figures in this ritual continue the themes of death and of struggle. In the next line, the risk the birthing mother faces is specifically focused on her body: "She sprawls in her own blood, like a struggling warrior." This line equates childbirth with taking part in a battle. The emphasis on "struggling" and the description of blood indicates that these lines acknowledge the threats of death the mother faces. This section has proven difficult for some scholars, perhaps because of the masculine images within it. Lambert argues that these lines "need not, in origin or inspiration, have been connected with birth pangs or incantations."³⁹⁶ He further notes that, as yet, no parallels to these lines have been found in birth incantations,³⁹⁷ but he does not comment on other texts in which battles and childbirth are equated. Westenholz has observed this comparison but

³⁹⁵ "Tukuliti-Ninurta Epic" (iii 23'-24') (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 309).

³⁹⁶ Lambert, "Middle Assyrian," 36.

³⁹⁷ Lambert, "Middle Assyrian," 32.

focuses solely on the amount of blood spilled as a basis for the comparison.³⁹⁸ Strangely, other than Westenholz, none of the other scholars who have translated or analyzed this ritual have commented specifically on the presence of the warrior image.

However, Westenholz's analysis does not take into account the ambiguous nature of the images in childbirth incantations of this period. Due to the multiple characteristics warriors exemplify, including bravery, strength, and allure, the term reflects more than simply blood. Thus, it is possible to parallel birth and battle on other levels. Since Westenholz is focusing on language and the two examples she uses, one from an Akkadian poem and another from a childbirth ritual³⁹⁹ do emphasize blood, this comparison is logical. Further, as noted above, in the curse texts which compare soldiers to women, the "associated commonplaces for 'woman' and 'defeated soldier' . . . included fear, incapacitating panic like a woman in travail, cowardice and ineffectual use of weapons."⁴⁰⁰ While one can argue that these characteristics can be found in the "The Baby is Stuck," one can also make the opposite argument. Although the incantation indicates that she struggles and fights, it does not show her defeated. Westenholz herself notes that battle can be a "festive celebration" or a "test of manhood."⁴⁰¹ While the images in this incantation contrast with celebration, the concept of war testing a person could be evoked in through childbirth.

Other translations provide some of these more positive connotations. Scurlock writes, "Like a warrior in the fray, she is cast down in her blood."⁴⁰² This shift from "like a struggling warrior" to "like a warrior in the fray" creates the impression that the mother

³⁹⁸ Westenholz, "Symbolic Language," 185.

³⁹⁹ Westenholz, "Symbolic Language," 193.

⁴⁰⁰ Chapman, 166.

⁴⁰¹ Westenholz, "Symbolic Language," 192.

⁴⁰² Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 146.

is part of a larger battle, rather than the struggle being solely her own. Lambert also translates the line “like a warrior in the fray.”⁴⁰³ While both lines illustrate that the mother has fallen in the struggle, the second places her alongside others who are fighting, rather than leaving her alone. Stol’s translation differs still more: he renders the line “like a fighting warrior.”⁴⁰⁴ In this case, she has still fallen but fights to the last. Van der Toorn’s translation is still more affirmative: “She lies in her blood like a hero who has fought.”⁴⁰⁵ In these cases, despite the presence of blood in the words of the incantation, the war symbolism does not only connote death or fear. As H. L. J. Vanstiphout argues, images are inherently ambiguous, as they stand for something they are not.⁴⁰⁶ Westenholz also argues for the “extreme flexibility [of these metaphors] and their capability to refer to several levels of perception at the same time.”⁴⁰⁷ Thus, while the connection between a warrior and a birthing mother can be found in the amount of blood spilled, or the fear felt, the birthing mother does not exhibit fear in this text. Instead, she evinces alterior traits, such as bravery, devotion, strength, loyalty and a host of other aspects of the warrior image. Therefore, rather than comparison with a woman denigrating a warrior, the connection between the two elevates them both. The difference in the relationships of warriors to women and warriors to birthing mothers supports the concept that, within ancient Mesopotamia, woman and birthing mother were two different roles.

⁴⁰³ Lambert, “Middle Assyrian,” 32.

⁴⁰⁴ Stol, *BBB*, 130.

⁴⁰⁵ Karel Van der Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman*. The Biblical Seminar 23 (trans. Sara J. Denning-Bolle; Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1994), 89.

⁴⁰⁶ H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “Ambiguity as a Generative Force in Standard Sumerian Literature,” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 157-158.

⁴⁰⁷ Westenholz, “Symbolic Language,” 193.

The changes in a mother's body dictate this difference in roles. The following lines detail the degree to which the mother's body is affected through her suffering, describing the individual body parts of the eyes, the lips and the ears as the mother gradually loses all of her senses. This description creates a very vivid image of the ways that her body is deteriorating. Lambert notes that this is a common motif in incantation and wisdom texts.⁴⁰⁸ One clear example is "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," from the second half of the second millennium BCE when the poet describes his pain:

My eyes stare, they cannot see,
My ears prick up, they cannot hear.
Numbness has spread over my whole body,
Paralysis has fallen upon my flesh.
Stiffness has seized my arms,
Debility has fallen upon my loins,
My feet forgot how to move.
[A stroke] has overcome me, I choke like one fallen,
Signs of death have shrouded my face!⁴⁰⁹

This type of description emphasizes the pain of the righteous sufferer in the poem, as well as the birthing mother within this incantation. In addition, this description also echoes sixty diseases with which Ereškigal, goddess of the Netherworld, attacks Ištar in "The Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld." This allusion reinforces the completeness of the pain and inability to act.⁴¹⁰ Therefore, the process of death is not necessarily one quick event, but a long and drawn out process. Moreover, creating alterior traits does not require repudiation of the female body, but rather experiencing it, even through extreme pain.

⁴⁰⁸ Lambert, "Middle Assyrian," 36.

⁴⁰⁹ "The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" (II 73-81) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 400).

⁴¹⁰ Reiner, 39.

In addition, Scurlock's translation adds yet another dimension. She translates the second reference to the mother's eyes as "Her eyes are clouded (with?) a deathly fate or fates."⁴¹¹ Stol renders this line "Her eyes are . . . by the mark of death,"⁴¹² which is even more ominous. Lambert offers "She cannot open (them) the destiny of death and destinies her eyes are dim."⁴¹³ There is yet another similarity with the "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" with the reference to "Signs of death have shrouded my face." In both cases, the description of the slow process of bodily failure is explicitly tied with a doomed future. In any translation of "The Baby is Stuck," it appears the mother cannot see because death is her destiny. This description implies that the gods govern her health. Regardless of the outcome, her body is irrevocably changed by this process, just as that of a warrior struggling in blood would be. Thus, the body of the birthing mother is significantly different from that of a woman who has not given birth. The birthing mother, therefore, exhibits alterior characteristics and thus performs an omnigendered role without denying her embodied self.

As the ritual continues, it moves from the mother's bodily response to a description of her disheveled clothing. The emphasis on clothes is odd, since clothes are more distant from the birthing mother than the actual body parts of which she loses control. However, clothing was an extension of the bodily presence in ancient Mesopotamia.⁴¹⁴ The lines read: "Her breast is not held in, her headbands are askew, /She is not veiled with . . ., she has no shame." The image of the breast and headbands askew once again creates a vivid description of the degree to which she is suffering.

⁴¹¹ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 146.

⁴¹² Stol, *BBB*, 130.

⁴¹³ Lambert, "Middle Assyrian," 32.

⁴¹⁴ Bahrani, *WoB*, 113.

This description of the mother not dressed as she would be normally continues the implications that she is losing control of her surroundings. This undress could be a return to a natural bodily state. The mother is not marked either by the civilized standards of dress nor by gendered customs. Bahrani cites the example of Enkidu, when she states that “At least for men, lack of clothing may thus have been seen as savage or barbarous state in particular contexts.”⁴¹⁵ One can read these lines as continuing to de-emphasize outer gender difference while instead focusing on the importance of the task the woman is undergoing and the difficulty of it.

Lambert also renders the line “She wears no veil and has no shame.”⁴¹⁶ In his translation, Stol treats these lines similarly “not being veiled, she has no dignity.”⁴¹⁷ Foster’s, Stol’s, and Lambert’s translations could be read either negatively or positively. On the negative side, the phrase “she has no shame” denigrates the mother for the state she is in, despite her suffering. Lambert removes all doubt as he writes that “It is not a woman in dire distress but a shameless woman that is described.”⁴¹⁸ He further notes that Middle Assyrian laws require “respectable women to be veiled in public.”⁴¹⁹ In contrast, Bahrani points out that

None of the visual representation of nude women from Mesopotamia display a taboo of particular bodily parts, or represent a women in that act of attempting to conceal her nudity from the viewer. If shame was in any way associated with the nude female body in Mesopotamia, it was not expressed visually.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁵ Bahrani, *WoB*, 59.

⁴¹⁶ Lambert, “Middle Assyrian,” 32.

⁴¹⁷ Stol, *BBB*, 130.

⁴¹⁸ Lambert, “Middle Assyrian,” 32.

⁴¹⁹ Lambert, “Middle Assyrian,” 32.

⁴²⁰ Bahrani, *WoB*, 86.

Consequently, there may have been a dichotomy between what was required in the law and what was actually depicted in visual and narrative representation. Moreover, Jack Sasson has argued that Genesis 2:25, sometimes translated as “The man and the woman were both naked, but they were not embarrassed”⁴²¹ does not indicate that nakedness should be the cause of shame; in fact there is shift from physical description to inner thoughts, indicating that the two concepts should not be related.⁴²² Therefore, this notion of shame resulting from nudity could be one superimposed by modern scholars rather than something intrinsic to the time period. Therefore, these lines could indicate the mother’s pride rather than her lack of shame.

More optimistically, one could interpret this line as lauding the mother for her pride by understanding that her dress is not important in the face of the task of giving birth. It could further illustrate her role as a warrior who will rise above such attempts at humiliation. Asher-Greve states, “The nude hero celebrates male physical power.”⁴²³ Male nudity was distinguished by activity, as men were depicted in acts that required nudity, such as religious ritual, being taken as prisoners of war, or swimming.⁴²⁴ Since these lines are presented in the context of comparing the birthing mother to a warrior, the lack of dress illustrates the danger the mother is in, just as warriors as in danger of being taken prisoner and being humiliated with nudity.⁴²⁵ Despite the atmosphere of defeat, this continued allusion to war could indicate that the nudity of the birthing mother illustrates

⁴²¹ This translation comes from *Good News Bible with Deuterocanonicals/Apocrypha: The Bible in Today’s English Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 1976). A more accurate translation “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” can be found in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). All subsequent biblical quotations will be taken *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible (NISB)*.

⁴²² Jack M. Sasson, “*w^elō’ yitbōšāšū* (Gen 2, 25) and its Implications” *Biblica* 66 (1985): 418.

⁴²³ Julia Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body,” *Gender and History* 9.3 (November 1997): 444.

⁴²⁴ Bahrani, *WoB*, 55.

⁴²⁵ Asher-Greve, “Essential Body,” 444.

“masculine strength and heroism.”⁴²⁶ Further, Sasson argues that within the Genesis story, at the beginning, “the pair did not have the potential to find blemishes with each other because they did not perceive anatomical, sexual or role distinctions within the species.”⁴²⁷ Therefore, the return to nakedness experienced by the birthing mother in this ritual could be interpreted as a return to a state not marked by gender distinctions.

The reference to nudity supports the concept of alterior gender, since the allure of the naked body was neither feminine nor masculine. Bahrani considers allure a feminine characteristic: “femininity, sexual allure, *kuzbu*, the ideal of the feminine, was thus expressed as nudity in both visual and verbal imagery.”⁴²⁸ However, as Winter argued, allure was part of the idealized masculine;⁴²⁹ hence, this trait is not clearly either. The reference to the birthing mother’s semi-nudity could reinforce her alterior characteristics by comparing her to a warrior. Bahrani notes that there is “overwhelming evidence that the image of female nudity was indeed one of power in ancient Mesopotamia.”⁴³⁰ Therefore, the mother would have no reason to feel shame, and references to being unashamed, rather than denigrating her, could illustrate her power. Scurlock’s translation is once again more encouraging: “Her breast is not tight(ly corseted)/ her head cloths are scattered. She is not covered with a cloak (yet) she is not ashamed.”⁴³¹ The difference in the references to shame is important, since whether or not the mother should be ashamed is an important element of the appeal to the god in this ritual.

⁴²⁶ Bahrani, *WoB*, 57.

⁴²⁷ Sasson, 420.

⁴²⁸ Bahrani, *WoB*, 47.

⁴²⁹ Winter, 11.

⁴³⁰ Bahrani, *WoB*, 47.

⁴³¹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146. Note that here the editor supplies the term “yet,” despite the fact that is not included the available text, just as translations tend to do with the Genesis passage.

The most important component of this passage does not revolve around shame, but rather imminent death. Just as her body deteriorates, so does her clothing; both of these things allude to death. A variety of texts, including Dumuzi and INANNA/Ištar's descents into the Netherworld, illustrate the fact that

the relationship between nudity and defeat in these images of war reflects Mesopotamian attitudes to undress and death as they are expressed in several literary images from Mesopotamian texts.⁴³²

Ištar's being forced to undress as she makes her way into the Netherworld makes her susceptible to the diseases Ereškigal unleashes.⁴³³ Thus, these accounts of undress emphasize the mother's vulnerability. Further examples are depictions of battles in which the winners are dressed and the defeated enemies are nude.⁴³⁴ Asher-Greve emphasizes that enemies about to be killed were depicted as naked.⁴³⁵ Thus, the images of the birthing mother as "cast down in her blood" and dying on the battle floor would require undress to reinforce her imminent death. The fact that she is not ashamed of the nudity that is the symbol of her death could be a further sign of her bravery, in that she is holding on until Marduk intervenes.

Adding complexity to the warrior simile in "The Baby is Stuck" are lines 7-8 in which similes compare the birthing mother to inanimate objects: the chariot and the plow. The connection of these two symbols is an example of the common Mesopotamian figurative device of "paired or intertwined images, where one complements or fills out the implications of another."⁴³⁶ In this case, the chariot and the plow relate to one another

⁴³² Bahrani, *WoB*, 60.

⁴³³ Reiner, 40.

⁴³⁴ Bahrani, *WoB*, 63.

⁴³⁵ Asher-Greve, "Essential Body," 444.

⁴³⁶ Jeremy Black, "The Imagery of Birds in Sumerian Poetry," in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 43.

to create an image of the birthing mother that shows nobility, wealth, struggle, life and death. The individual meanings of the chariot and the plow take on more resonance when they are viewed together.

Chariots were a significant element of the fighting forces, as portrayed in many artistic representations of battle.⁴³⁷ The chariot's use, however, was restricted to the wealthy and noble. Moreover, its design made it difficult to handle in battle.⁴³⁸ The theme of chariots being for the elite is repeated in literature, such as a divination text from Babylon in 850-1500 BCE, which predates this ritual. In this text, the enemy troops are divided into charioteers and soldiers.⁴³⁹ In addition, the chariot was the vehicle of the sun god, as seen in later references such as "(like the) sun he was hitching up his chariotry."⁴⁴⁰ Therefore, chariots as an image not only conveyed power and wealth, but also divinity. The chariot, thus, connotes the status of the woman giving birth, whether every woman for whom this ritual was recited actually held a high social position or not.

The plow provides another dimension in this ritual. The plow also connotes potency upon the land, which is an important image for this birth ritual. Thorkild Jacobsen notes the difference between the hoe and the plow in Sumerian literature, being that the hoe "symbolize[d] the small farm cultivated by the owner or tenant himself as opposed to large estates plowed by teams of oxen."⁴⁴¹ Therefore, the plow works as a symbol in much the way that the chariot does, in that it was a tool for individuals who

⁴³⁷ Postgate, 246.

⁴³⁸ Dalley, 414.

⁴³⁹ "Will Hammurabi Be Victorious?" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 138).

⁴⁴⁰ "The Hunter" (22) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 337).

⁴⁴¹ Jacobsen, *Harpis*, 15.

had wealth and status. Consequently, the birthing mother's status is reinforced through the images of both the chariot and the plow.

The plow, over against the chariot, connotes life and growth, since it is not a tool for war, but rather for planting. Nevertheless, the plow breaking the earth is an equally active image to that of the chariot within war. In "The Myth of the Plow" from the late second millennium BCE, plow is a god who marries the goddess Earth. Thus, the plow, like the chariot, represents the divine. This image also ties the chariot and the plow together in descriptions of activity and effort. In order for creation to occur, the myth states, "We shall break the soil of the land with the plow."⁴⁴² Therefore, creating new life is considered in terms of "breaking the soil," which echoes the violence of war. This breaking is necessary for creation to occur. Also, both the chariot and the plow leave marks upon the land, in the form of tracks or furrows. Consequently, the pain the birthing mother undergoes is essential to the life of the baby she will deliver. Just as the earth is marked by the passage of these two tools, so is the child marked as it passes through the mother's body. The plow image, coupled with that of the chariot, presents more optimism for the outcome of the mother's actions.

In addition, as illustrated through the bovine imagery discussed in the previous chapter, the plow has both masculine and sexual connotations. In the Sumerian "Herder Wedding Text," INANNA rejoices in her beauty but laments "my untilled plot, left so fallow in the desert," to which the elegist replies "Young lady, may the king plough them for you!"⁴⁴³ In this case, the feminine element is the earth and the masculine element can

⁴⁴² "The Myth of the Plow" (3) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 490).

⁴⁴³ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1976), 46.

plow and create fertility. Gwendolyn Leick notes several other Sumerian bridal songs that describe INANNA and Dumuzi's courtship, in which the plow represents "the consummation of the marriage and probably defloration and impregnation."⁴⁴⁴ These songs frequently include the groom speaking the phrase "Let me plough the field!" or third-person references to the groom plowing.⁴⁴⁵ Hence, the plow symbolizes fertility and life generally but the masculine element in procreation more specifically. Therefore, this ritual has its first instance of the birthing mother being equated with a specifically masculine characteristic.

The relationship between the two images of the chariot and the plow strengthens the link between the birthing mother and masculine figures within the narrative of this incantation. Since these figures are inanimate, they could depict the mother's body as merely a tool, rather than a subject with agency. However, these particular objects play active roles, such as fighting in a war, preparing the ground to be planted, and taking the active role in both sex and conception. Both the chariot and the plow also indicate high status, as they are tools that were not available to everyone. As Black suggests, the relationship between two symbols reinforces the meaning of both symbols.⁴⁴⁶ In this case, the combination of the chariot and the plow highlights the characteristics that they share. Both are tools that by necessity must be strong to bring about a constructive result, such as victory in battle or plants that result in food for the community to eat. The chariot and the plow evoke circumstances in which effort and violence are necessary, with the breaking of the earth as it is plowed and fighting in war. These images of struggle both acknowledge the mother's suffering while also invoking her strength and focusing on the

⁴⁴⁴ Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 75.

⁴⁴⁵ Leick, *SEML*, 75-77.

⁴⁴⁶ Black, "Imagery of Birds," 43.

reason for her enduring the pain. Thus, the chariot and the plow emphasize alterior characteristics for the mother and allow her to play an omnigendered role.

Despite the power exhibited in the paired image of the chariot and the plow, the images of the mother “cast down in her blood” and losing control of her body illustrate the need for divine aid. The final lines of “The Baby is Stuck” illustrate a direct plea to Marduk to intervene. After the detailed description of the mother’s suffering, the speaker importunes Marduk to stand by her:

Stand by me and keep calling out (?), O merciful Marduk,
“Here is the confusion, I’m surrounded, get to me!”
Bring out the one sealed up, created by the gods,
Created by humankind, let him come out and see the light!⁴⁴⁷

Foster’s translation implies that the line “Here is the confusion, I’m surrounded, get to me!” is spoken by the child. Lambert points out that “This latter line seems to be intended as the cry for help from the babe yet in womb, whose immaturity ill agrees with military metaphor.”⁴⁴⁸ Lambert is arguing that the military metaphors of chariot and warrior, to him, contrast sharply with what he believes is the child speaking an appeal to Marduk.

His point is well taken and the fact that the rest of the incantation, including the military metaphor, describes the state of the birthing mother rather than the child indicates that the child is not the speaker. In the last line, the speaker refers to the child in the third person, indicating that someone else, such as the practitioner or the birthing mother herself, utters these lines. While the mother has not spoken thus far, neither has the child. Given the specific and vivid descriptions of the mother’s plight, it is more likely that she recites these final lines of direct plea to Marduk. Neither Stol nor Scurlock

⁴⁴⁷ “The Baby is Stuck,” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 715).

⁴⁴⁸ Lambert, “Middle Assyrian,” 36.

makes a differentiation between the speakers of these lines in their translations.⁴⁴⁹ Van der Toorn specifically argues that the introductory comments about the baby being stuck are spoken by the practitioner, while the mother speaks the prayer to Marduk.⁴⁵⁰ Attributing the lines to the practitioner or to the mother illustrates the mother's importance. The goal of the ritual is not just to deliver the child safely, but also to preserve the mother's life.

The lines of the appeal to Marduk focus on two things: the confusion and fear of the speaker and the fact that the child is a "creation of the gods, a creation of man." Consequently, the mother's plight is a significant element designed to create sympathy in Marduk so that he will help her. In addition, the reference to the child as both a creation of the gods and creation of man emphasizes the importance of both the divine and the human elements in creating this new life. Moreover, this reference indicates that humans, like gods, can create life and thus play alterior roles.

Nonetheless, the entirety of the ritual illustrates that human power can only go so far and hence humans must rely upon a deity to bring about the desired outcome. The masculine imagery creates a focus on power and strength. Butler argues, "The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations."⁴⁵¹ In this case, the mother's body gains meaning through the power relationship between Marduk and the birthing mother. While the warrior image highlights the strength of the birthing mother, it also highlights the power of the deity over all human strength. Thus, the male body may be physically stronger, but all human bodies are subject to death and can only be delivered by the intervention of a deity. The focus of this incantation is not on the mother

⁴⁴⁹ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 146; Stol, *BBB*, 130.

⁴⁵⁰ Van der Toorn, 89.

⁴⁵¹ Butler, *GT*, 117.

relying on her own strength, but rather on Marduk's intervention. However, the emphasis on the mother shows her connection to Marduk and thus her ability, at the moment of birth, to play the alterior gender role that is the realm of the gods.

Scurlock argues that this incantation is meant to “increase [the mother's] chance of survival by convincing her that she was not doomed to die.”⁴⁵² The images of extreme danger and suffering might have the opposite effect. However, the fact that that this suffering is followed by reference to the light provides hope. Just as the moments in the fray of the battle make a warrior fear the worst, moments in the birthing process make the mother fear the worst. In addition, the words of the ritual “not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed.”⁴⁵³ Therefore, the words of the ritual imbue the mother with the qualities of a warrior and enable her to deliver the baby safely. In the cases of both the mother and the warrior, the goal of triumphing in the face of danger is ultimately worth the struggle undergone. While the incantation does not continue the image of the warrior by referencing a victory, the image of Marduk bringing the child into the light can be a victory for the mother.

Within this ritual, the similes reinforce the alterior sex characteristics of the birthing mother. While in a modern context, bodies that do not conform to rules of gender “contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex,”⁴⁵⁴ these examples within the ancient Near East illustrate that the intelligibility of sex was understood differently. Birthing mothers transcended these norms. The other examples of omnigendered roles described in the introduction illustrate that this phenomenon was not limited to birth.

⁴⁵² Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

⁴⁵³ Butler, *BTM*, 225.

⁴⁵⁴ Butler, *BTM*, 139.

Descriptions of Marduk outside of this ritual reinforce his alterior characteristics and illustrate his omnigenderd role.

Mother and Father: Marduk and Gender Fluidity

Marduk plays an important role in the understanding of gender roles in this incantation. He was the patron deity of the city of Babylon and when Hammurabi brought together the states of the Euphrates valley, Marduk rose in prominence.⁴⁵⁵ He was “originally associated with thunderstorms and brought natural abundance by means of water,”⁴⁵⁶ which developed into a focus on “storm-like (and hence war-like) features,”⁴⁵⁷ in addition to the images of nourishment and fertility that water brings. As discussed in the introductory chapter, critics have discussed the dual role that INANNA/Ištar played as the goddess of both love and war. Much has been made of the fact that “[a]ncient texts described the goddess Ishtar as being both the ultimate sexual seductress, a beautiful and alluring female, as well as dispenser of violence.”⁴⁵⁸ However, the fact that Marduk is both a dispenser of violence and a dispenser of nurture has not been given the same attention. If gender is “an ‘act’ . . . which is both intentional and performative, where “*performative*” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning”⁴⁵⁹ then both INANNA/Ištar and Marduk perform multiple genders within their

⁴⁵⁵ T. Abusch, “Marduk” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. Karel van der Toorn et al.; 2nd ed; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 544.

⁴⁵⁶ Abusch, 544.

⁴⁵⁷ Abusch, 544.

⁴⁵⁸ Bahrani, *WoB*, 142.

⁴⁵⁹ Butler, *GT*, 177.

ancient Near Eastern contexts. The alterior traits these deities exhibit are available to their followers as well.

In addition to particular texts that refer to Marduk as a warrior, there are also several in which Marduk takes part in a battle. For example, “The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,” which was discussed above in its descriptive account of suffering and imminent death, is addressed to Marduk. The poet explores Marduk’s many facets: “As heavy his hand, so compassionate his heart,/As brutal his weapons, so life-sustaining his feelings.”⁴⁶⁰ This lines reference war, as well as life and compassion. This juxtaposition is an example of “contrastive parallelism, which underlines the god’s fury by pairing it with his lenient side.”⁴⁶¹ Such a reading could be done both ways, by underlining the god’s compassion by pairing it with his brutality. Lambert notes that the message of this poem is that, although Marduk may punish, he will also heal.⁴⁶² The fact that both elements are attested repeatedly emphasizes the multifarious aspects of Marduk’s personality and allows him to play omnigendered roles.

In addition, Marduk was invoked as a protector of earthly warriors. An inscription on fortifications in Babylon reads “Wherever are battle and warfare, may you, Marduk, be my help and my trust.”⁴⁶³ Thus, Marduk was the refuge of those fighting in battle. He would help not only by slaying enemies but by caring for the petitioner. With this inscription, comparing a birthing mother to a warrior might be an ideal way to elicit Marduk’s sympathy and assistance. If Marduk is the help and trust for those fighting, he

⁴⁶⁰ “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer” (I 33-34) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 395).

⁴⁶¹ Brigitte Groneberg, “Towards a Definition of Literariness as Applied to Akkadian Literature” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H.L.J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 73.

⁴⁶² W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 27.

⁴⁶³ “To Marduk” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 845).

also serves as the help and trust for the birthing mother as she engages in the struggle that is childbirth.

In contrast to the warrior, maternal images also describe Marduk in many texts. For example, in the “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer,” the simile of the cow represents him:

His severe punishment is harsh and speedy,
He stops short and quickly becomes like a mother.
He is impetuous to cherish the one he loves (?)
Like a cow with a calf,
he keeps turning around watchfully.⁴⁶⁴

These lines come from the beginning of the poem, which focuses on the praise of Marduk. As the speaker begins to suffer, he refrains from naming Marduk explicitly but does allude to Marduk as the cause of his pain.⁴⁶⁵ If INANNA/Ištar’s violence brings her out of the boundaries of the feminine gender position, as Bahrani argues,⁴⁶⁶ then Marduk’s cherishing of his people perhaps brings him out of the masculine gender position. In Buddhism, “Mothers are commonly regarded as exemplars of love, compassion, generosity and self-sacrifice. Because the Buddha too exhibits such virtues, he is sometimes likened to a mother.”⁴⁶⁷ The same symbolic pattern exists in the ancient Near East. In this case, the comparison of Marduk with a mother emphasizes his mercy and his tender care of his people, while illustrating that he is still capable of anger and punishment of those who deserve it. Nonetheless, like a mother, he loves whole-heartedly and without reservation. Therefore, he performs an omnigendered role.

⁴⁶⁴ “Poem of the Righteous Sufferer” (I 17-20) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 395).

⁴⁶⁵ Lambert, *BWL*, 23.

⁴⁶⁶ Bahrani, *WoB*, 149.

⁴⁶⁷ Mrozik, 30.

Marduk symbolizes fatherhood, as well as motherhood. In the “Literary Prayer to Marduk” from the late second millennium, the emphasis on Marduk’s varied characteristics continues as both his fury and his pity are described as praiseworthy.⁴⁶⁸ Rather than maternal imagery for Marduk, this prayer refers to him as a father: “Gentle your pity, like a father’s your mercy.”⁴⁶⁹ In this case, mercy is one of Marduk’s most important qualities. The concept of Marduk’s mercy continues through a description of the person praying to him:

He has reviewed his ills, his is weeping to you,
His feelings are afire, he burns for you,
He is given over to tears, he rains them down like a mist,
He sobs and makes much weeping,
[like] a woman who cannot give birth.⁴⁷⁰

Unlike the birth ritual, in which the birthing mother is compared to warrior, this ritual compares the tears of a man who has sinned to a woman who cannot give birth. The cries of a difficult birth are both the standard for extreme pain and grief, as well as the type of cries that the god cannot ignore. Examples of how these cries have affected a variety of deities, such as Šamaš and Sîn, are found the previous chapter.⁴⁷¹

Paternal and maternal imagery continues to symbolize Marduk. In this prayer against illness from the later half of the second millennium BCE, Marduk is referred to as both father and mother:

Wise son of Enanki, creator of all humankind,
You are the lord,
You are like “father” and “mother” in people’s speech.
You are the one, who like the sun, illumines their darkness.

⁴⁶⁸ “Literary Prayer to Marduk” (9-10) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 611).

⁴⁶⁹ “Literary Prayer to Marduk” (10), 611.

⁴⁷⁰ “Literary Prayer to Marduk” (129-132), 613-614.

⁴⁷¹ See Chapter II, 56-57; 63-64.

Each day you give justice to the oppressed and abused.⁴⁷²

In this case, the parental imagery is evoked not only to acknowledge Marduk as the creator of all humankind, but also the aspects of bringing light and justice to the people. Mother and father provide both of these things. Yet another incantation, this time from the 1000-100 BCE, “Marduk and the Demons” repeats this trope. The speaker in this poem in this incantation is Marduk, here addressed as ASSALUḪI, one of his fifty names. In it he says: “I am Asalluḫi, who ever guides [his] peoples like father and mother.”⁴⁷³ This reference to father and mother refers not to his role as creator but to the guidance he gives them. The next lines refer to his great love for the people “[I] am ASSALUḪI, the response of whose heart, the g[reat] gods do not know.”⁴⁷⁴ This love is also characteristic of the parental role. This text reinforces the notion that the “human performer is acting in the power of divine patrons,”⁴⁷⁵ in this case, Marduk/ASSALUḪI, but the power of Marduk comes from the relationship with his people, rather than his own physical strength. These references to Marduk as mother have largely been ignored by the scholarship. They do, nonetheless, illustrate the fact that a male god could play a maternal role, as well as a paternal role and emphasizes the prevalence of omnigender within the ancient Mesopotamian pantheons.

One might argue that the reason Marduk is invoked is simply because of his role as the chief god in the pantheon. However, given that this text comes from Assyria, where Marduk was not the chief god, another explanation must be necessary. Marduk’s

⁴⁷² “Against Illness” (17-20) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 683).

⁴⁷³ “Marduk and the Demons” (15) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 956).

⁴⁷⁴ “Marduk and the Demons” (16), 956.

⁴⁷⁵ W. G. Lambert, “Marduk’s Address to the Demons” in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual Historical and Interpretive Perspectives*. (ed. Tzvi Abusch and Karel Van Der Toorn; vol. 1 of *Ancient Magic and Divination*; Groningen: Styx, 1999), 296.

relationship to both war and maternity emphasize his connection to the birthing mother in this ritual. In her discussion of INANNA/Ištar, Bahrani notes that

. . . war is traditionally the realm of the men, and in modern Western thinking . . . war may seem an obvious realm for a male deity. Its association with a goddess thus comes to be explained not by examining why death and war might be linked to femininity, or in the case of Ishtar, female sexuality at its extreme, but by recasting the female deity as a hermaphrodite.⁴⁷⁶

A similar problem arises with the expectation that birth is the obvious realm for a female deity but, in the ancient Near East, male deities also governed the act of childbirth. Just as the relationship between death, war and femininity has not been examined with INANNA/Ištar, it has also not been examined in the context of Marduk's role in both war and nurture. The war image in this ritual has been largely ignored, but the fact that both war and childbirth depict the balance between death and life make it logical. In addition, the description of the birthing mother in this ritual mirrors the pleas of warriors in other texts for deliverance by Marduk. Marduk's role as both a warrior and a protective mother make these images ideal for an appeal for his intervention. The war-like images illustrate the birthing mother's struggles and her sacrifice, to which the war-like Marduk might be able to relate. In addition, the ritual emphasizes the woman's need for a protector of the weak and therefore calls upon Marduk to play his maternal role and intervene.

“Her Mouth Went to the Side:” Comparison with Ritual from Ḫatti

The Hittite ritual from the previous chapter had some obvious similarities to the primary version of “The Cow of Šîn.” However, there are also similarities with the ritual

⁴⁷⁶ Bahrani, *WoB*, 159.

above. The Hittite ritual evokes blood and war imagery to describe the Moon-god rather than the birthing mother, but also describes the plight of the mother with a similar breakdown of her bodily functions:

[The s]ky dressed itself in black; *duwip* it dressed itself. But the Moon-god dressed himself in blood red.
[And] he cinched up his skins of blood, and he took for himself an arrow of blood, and he took for himself a bow of blood.
He held blazing fire in his hand; in the (other) hand he held all the daggers.
Then he entered . . . , and them, the *muttiya*, in the gate . . . ⁴⁷⁷

In contrast to the birthing mother who is “sprawling in her blood” or “cast down in her blood, the Moon-god here uses blood as trappings of power. Rather than connoting suffering, the blood utilized by the Moon-god evokes strength as well as life. By taking the blood, the Moon-god is able to create new life.

While Hittite literature does not include semiotic techniques to the same degree that other Mesopotamian literature does, it does include analogies which parallel equivalent words, were thought to intensify the meanings of words into action.⁴⁷⁸ In this ritual, the repetition of various weapons of blood, the skins, arrow and blood, consequently reinforce the power of the Moon-god. The blood can exemplify war and violence, but, in the context of a ritual of birth, blood can also symbolize life. Hence, as the Moon-god girds himself with blood, he can be preparing to pass this necessary fluid to the unborn child.

Nonetheless, the power he exercises is not without consequence. Just as the birthing mother in “The Baby is Stuck” gradually loses control of her senses, the birthing mother in this Hittite ritual suffers the same fate:

⁴⁷⁷ Gary Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals* (2nd ed.; Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1983), 177.

⁴⁷⁸ Ahmet Ünal, “Word Play in Hittite Literature?” in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (ed. Gary Beckman et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 377-378.

And before his eyes he was born, the mortal . . .
And she became afraid; she took fright. Her mouth went to the side (i.e.,
ceased to function).
Likewise (her) eyes; likewise the nine parts of (her) body. And (s)he
treated her, that is, (her) head, and pressed her repeatedly
above..⁴⁷⁹

In this case, the mouth stops working first, then the eyes, and nine unnamed parts of her body. This separation of the body parts can be found in other Hittite rituals and commonly denotes the places in which evil might reside in the body and from which it must be removed.⁴⁸⁰ H. Craig Melchert has pointed out that “bravery, bones, eyebrow, and eyelash of man” were essential attributes of strong men in Hittite contexts.⁴⁸¹ Without these components, then, one could not be strong. In this ritual, the mother’s physical deterioration is the direct result of her fear. In contrast, no fear is mentioned in the parallel lines in “The Baby is Stuck.” In fact, the opposite is true, since the previous lines have compared her to a warrior, which brings up images of strength, courage and vigor.

The comparison of the birthing mother to a warrior in “The Baby is Stuck” contrasts sharply with the Hittite ritual, where it is the impregnating god who exhibits these powers rather than the birthing mother. In addition, the Hittite ritual provides an immediate treatment, which must be effective, given that her mouth was not working prior to the treatment, but afterward she is able to cry out and bring the attention of the Storm-god. In the case of “The Baby is Stuck,” while there is an invocation to Marduk, there is no indication that Marduk has heard or will in fact intervene. The Hittite ritual

⁴⁷⁹ Beckman, *HBR*, 177.

⁴⁸⁰ Hripsime S. Haroutunian, “The Hittite Ritual against a Curse (CTH 429),” in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (ed Gary Beckman et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 159.

⁴⁸¹ H. Craig Melchert, “Hittite antaka-‘loins’ and an Overlooked Myth about Fire,” in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner, Jr. on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (ed. Gary Beckman et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 287.

leaves us assured that the Storm-god helped the birthing mother and that such help is possible for all birthing mothers.

The difference between these two incantations can be a difference between lyrical and narrative texts: “lyrical poems describe the feeling for an object or for a situation; narrative texts describe the object and the procedure of the situation’s story; they present a plot.”⁴⁸² “The Baby is Stuck” creates the feeling for the mother in an effort to gain Marduk’s sympathy and induce him to intervene. In the Hittite ritual, similar imagery brings the narrative to its conclusion in which the deity has intervened and the child has been born healthy. The imagery functions in different ways in each ritual. In “The Baby is Stuck,” the imagery of death, violence and suffering connotes the strength and bravery of the warrior. Thus, it bolsters the birthing mother by imbuing her with these alterior qualities and allowing her to perform an omnigendered role. In the Hittite ritual, the same imagery creates a sympathetic feeling with the birthing mother but focuses not on the mother and on her changes, but on the assurance that the terrible struggle will be worth it in the end. Both incantations include masculine imagery but the focus on the birthing mother in “The Baby is Stuck” creates the space for her perform omnigender.

“Creation of the Gods”: Birthing Mother as Omnigendered

Descriptions of Marduk’s traits that are neither feminine nor masculine, linked with similar characteristics for INANNA/Ištar, support the possibility that, although the gods were identified with one gender, it was possible for them to transcend gender. Both

⁴⁸² Groneberg, 71.

Marduk and INANNA/Ištar were compassionate, supportive, nurturing, assertive, aggressive and strong-willed. Therefore, these characteristics were not ascribed to either gender in the divine realm. Within this ritual, this transcendence is not limited to the gods, but was also available to humans. The birthing mother becomes omnigendered during the moment of birth as she exhibits the strength, courage, and vigor of a warrior. Simile, in combination with paired images, evokes these alterior attributes and accomplishes this transformation within the ritual itself.

At this time, men were the ones who fought wars. However, the birthing mother's body could represent the lines of battle, and masculine images hover in these childbirth rituals. These comparisons between birth and war indicate that neither concept was necessarily gendered, despite the fact that women performed birth and men fought wars. In addition to the presence of blood and danger, the comparison between the two can be based on the individual's ultimate goal in undergoing these trials: the preservation of the community. As Black argues for Mesopotamian literature generally, "the overall situation is illuminated by aspects of both images."⁴⁸³ The relationship between birthing mothers and warriors creates equal ground between the two within the ritual. The language enables the mother to survive the battle of giving birth by evoking her alterior characteristics and connecting her with the realm of the deities. However, the vivid description of her body indicates that while performing omnigender, she continues to be fully present in her female body. Therefore, "The Baby is Stuck" illustrates the fact that, through giving birth, women could be omnigendered warriors and thus be heroes in the ancient Near East.

⁴⁸³ Black, "Imagery of Birds," 43.

CHAPTER IV

“STEERING THE BOAT THROUGH THE WATER”: STRENGTH WITHIN AND WITHOUT

The rituals “I am Pregnant” and “The Baby is Stuck” utilize the male figures of bulls and warriors to convey alterior sex characteristics for both birthing mothers and deities. The last ritual focuses on yet another male figure, that of ship’s captain. In birth rituals, boats are often metaphors for either the birthing mother or the baby.⁴⁸⁴ In the following ritual, the images of boats are slightly altered through the metaphor of ship’s captain in order to bring about alterior sex for the mother and the child’s safe delivery. In “Steering the Boat Through the Water,” the mother is specifically equated with a ship’s captain, both before and during a dangerous voyage.⁴⁸⁵ Water represented a place of creation, but also a place of chaos and danger. Thus, the boat in the water was poised between the possibilities of life and death. The associated commonplaces for boats and both the mother and the baby are passivity and vulnerability.

Representing the mother with the symbol of the ship’s captain inverts the ways that birth rituals have traditionally included symbols of boats. As will be demonstrated, the characteristics of the ship’s captain include the alterior characteristics of strength, courage and vigor. Shifting the image in the ritual from baby as boat or mother as boat to mother as ship’s captain imbues the mother with these qualities. This resignification of the mother is reinforced by using the boat metaphor, which is also ascribed to Sîn. The

⁴⁸⁴ Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx, 2000), 63. J. A. Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Incognita* 2 (1991): 146-147.

⁴⁸⁵ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

mother embodies the alterior characteristics of the deity during birth; thus, she becomes omnigendered at this moment.

Mythology and Biology: Water in the Ancient Near East

In order to clearly understand the metaphor of the boat, it is important to examine the role of water in both the mythology and the understanding of biology in ancient Mesopotamia. The ecological regions in this area vary greatly between the extremes of desert and marshlands, with more temperate regions in between, and there is reason to believe that they would have done so in ancient times as well.⁴⁸⁶ Despite this wide variety, one consistency was a marked lack of rainfall in all areas except the high mountains.⁴⁸⁷ For the people living in this region, the availability and control of sufficient water provided by rainfall and rivers was crucial for fertilizing crops and creating adequate sustenance for the community's needs. In addition, too much water could also make the land unable to support agriculture.⁴⁸⁸ Uncontrolled water, in floods or lack of proper drainage, could be equally problematic as drought. This need to control water led to the complex systems of irrigation and drainage canals.⁴⁸⁹ Confronting the need for just the right amount of water hence would have been an essential element of everyday life for the inhabitants of ancient Mesopotamia.

⁴⁸⁶ Marc Van De Mierop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 9.

⁴⁸⁷ Van De Mierop, *HANE*, 8.

⁴⁸⁸ J. N. Postgate, *Early Mesopotamia: Society and Economy at the Dawn of History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 180.

⁴⁸⁹ Postgate, 180.

The sea, while not necessarily a part of the lives of the majority of Mesopotamians, also contributed to understandings of both the importance and danger of water. As Marc Van De Mierop notes, “[Seas] do create a border, but once crossed provide access to regions at great distances.”⁴⁹⁰ While sailing in small craft to areas on the Persian Gulf coast was prevalent, building boats that were able to travel across the sea was a challenge that continued from the third millennium to 1200 BCE.⁴⁹¹ People of the time would both understand that water was necessary for life, but they would also be aware of the danger it presented.

Water was not only a crucial element of surrounding nature, but also was a component of bodily fluids: saliva, urine, amniotic fluid, semen, blood. While the ancient Mesopotamians did not believe in the later Hippocratic notion of internal humors,⁴⁹² analysis of urine was important element of medical diagnosis.⁴⁹³ They could observe that excess or dearth of certain fluids in the body could lead to disease or death; there were negative effects from losing too much blood, or losing water through diarrhea or other intestinal problems, as well as positive results when urine or amniotic fluid flowed normally. The body, as well as the natural world, therefore contributed to beliefs about water which were reflected in myths, poetry and rituals.

⁴⁹⁰ Van De Mierop, *HANE*, 9.

⁴⁹¹ Van De Mierop, *HANE*, 9.

⁴⁹² Joanne Scurlock and Burton Anderson, eds. *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine: Ancient Sources, Translations and Modern Medical Analyses*. (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 11.

⁴⁹³ Scurlock and Anderson, 98.

“Mingling Their Waters”: Water in Creation Mythology

As a general religious symbol, water has a variety of meanings, but the primary one is that water is the “ancient and universal symbol of purity, fertility and the source of life.”⁴⁹⁴ Other meanings include that of chaos, as the first material from which life proceeds.⁴⁹⁵ Secondary meanings include transition, such as between life and death, as well as dissolution of the body and of personal characteristics.⁴⁹⁶ As discussed above, waters provide a fluid barrier between lands, and therefore symbolically indicate the transformation from one state to another. Within Christian sources, baptism is just such a transformation.

These multiple meanings permeate Mesopotamian creation mythology. Mesopotamian cosmogonies embrace the concept of a first material, rather than creation from nothing. Moreover, these accounts most often followed human concepts of sexual reproduction.⁴⁹⁷ The Babylonian *Enuma Eliš*⁴⁹⁸ begins

When on high no name was given to heaven,
Nor below was the netherworld called by name,
Primeval Apsû was their progenitor
And matrix-Tiāmat was she who bore them all,

⁴⁹⁴ Jack Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 512.

⁴⁹⁵ Arthur De Vries, *Elsevier's Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), 601.

⁴⁹⁶ De Vries, 601.

⁴⁹⁷ Gwendolyn Leick, *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature* (London: Routledge, 1994), 12.

⁴⁹⁸ *Enuma Eliš* is alternately referred to as the *Epic of Creation*, despite the fact that current scholarship generally considers the work to be attesting to the power and primacy of Marduk, rather than truly attempting to explain creation. See “Epic of Creation” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 436).

They were mingling their waters together⁴⁹⁹

This beginning is relevant to the importance of water in bodily rituals for several reasons. First, it illustrates a concept that water was the first element of creation; waters mingling together form the basis of all that exists. Apsû, who represents fresh water, and Tiāmat, who represents the sea, are equally responsible for the beginning of creation.⁵⁰⁰ Benjamin Foster's term "matrix" is his translation of the Akkadian *mummu*, meaning wisdom or skill, which, when personified, can be rendered "creator" or "craftsman."⁵⁰¹ A more accurate term that embraces both the agency and the femininity of Tiāmat's role might be "creatix." Matrix, with its etymological meaning of mother, suggests that creation arose from Tiāmat giving birth, which is not the case. Instead, the text's emphasis on the contributions of both the male Apsû and the female Tiāmat demonstrates that the function of creation was not specific to either gender. Gwendolyn Leick notes that the division between the two is artificial and the most salient characteristic of this account is that the beginning matter is undifferentiated.⁵⁰² Thus, the primary material of creation was omnigendered.

⁴⁹⁹ "Epic of Creation" (I 1-5) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 439).

⁵⁰⁰ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1976), 168.

⁵⁰¹ "Epic of Creation" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 439; footnote 1). Foster's use of matrix, instead of the neutral or masculine terms creator or craftsman, as an appositive for Tiāmat, emphasizes both Tiāmat's active role in creation as well as her feminine gender. However, the use of matrix can also have problematic connotations etymologically. Etymologically, the term matrix has its roots in the Latin *mater*, which means mother. Mother does not have the same connotations as creator or craftsman in the sense of the active agency of creation. While progenitor and matrix may seem equal terms for Apsû and Tiāmat, in fact matrix does not follow from the translating pattern Foster suggests.

⁵⁰² Leick, *SEML*, 15.

Although she plays a crucial role in the creation process, Tiāmat proves to be dangerous, warring against the younger gods.⁵⁰³ Leick notes the importance of the fact that it is Tiāmat, the female, who is greater threat.⁵⁰⁴ Despite her power, Marduk ultimately conquers her. When he does so

He split her in two, like a fish for drying;
Half of her he set up and made as a cover, heaven.
He stretched out the hide and assigned watchmen
And ordered them not to let her waters escape⁵⁰⁵

This description shows the male Marduk not only defeating but utterly destroying the female Tiāmat. Marduk, in this case, has no generative powers of his own, since he must use Tiāmat's body to create the world. However, his power does consist of controlling the uncontrollable Tiāmat. Tiāmat's ultimate end illustrates that she was necessary for all of creation to exist. While Tiāmat began as a threat to the gods, Marduk makes her body into something important for all life:

[Marduk] compacted (the foam) [of Tiāmat] into c[louds]
and made (them) billow.
To raise the wind, to cause rainfall,
...
From her eyes he undammed the Euphr[ates] and Tigris⁵⁰⁶

In this way, Tiāmat's original name as creatrix is fulfilled in an unexpected way as she serves as the raw material for the making of the world, rather than the craftsman who molds this material. In this case, she is passive as Marduk makes rain and the rivers from

⁵⁰³ Shlomo Izre'el, *Adapa and the South Wind: Language has the Power of Life and Death* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 140.

⁵⁰⁴ Leick, *SEML*, 15.

⁵⁰⁵ "Epic of Creation" (IV 137-140) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 462).

⁵⁰⁶ "Epic of Creation." (V 49-50, 55) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 464-465).

her slain body.⁵⁰⁷ Marduk shows his power by converting the waters of the sea, which represented danger and chaos, into the waters of rain and rivers, which symbolized growth and life. This exploitation of the female body mirrors ancient Near Eastern beliefs about fertility, in which the male is active and the female passive.⁵⁰⁸

The words of *Enuma Eliš* also have implications for the understanding of gender in Mesopotamia. Ea emphasizes Tiāmat's gender as he says of her: "A woman's force may be very great but it cannot match a man's."⁵⁰⁹ Very little scholarly attention has been given to this line. Rivkah Harris notes the tension between the repeated descriptions of Tiāmat's power and this statement that denigrates her strength.⁵¹⁰ Harris also argues that despite these words, only Marduk of all the gods can defeat Tiāmat,⁵¹¹ so Tiāmat's power is more than a match for all of the other gods, despite her gender and despite what they may say. According to Harris, in certain lines, Tiāmat is given a masculine suffix which illustrates her masculine actions.⁵¹² Thus, this change in gendered suffix could indicate that Tiāmat reflects alterior sex, exhibiting both nurture and aggression. This omnigendered role could be reflected in the change of gendered suffix. Tiāmat's roles as both creatrix and destructrix indicate that neither is necessarily dictated by gender in ancient Mesopotamia. Also, the statement that a woman's power cannot match a man's perpetuates the concept that masculinity was equated with superior strength. However, it

⁵⁰⁷ Tzvi Abusch, "Ghost and God: Some Observations on a Babylonian Understanding of Human Nature," in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience* (ed. A. I. Baumgarten, J. Assman, and G. G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 369.

⁵⁰⁸ R. D. Biggs. "Conception, Contraception, and Abortion in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert* (ed. A. R. George and I. L. Finkel; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 2.

⁵⁰⁹ "Epic of Creation" (II 92) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 449.

⁵¹⁰ Rivkah Harris, "Gendered Old Age in *Enuma Eliš*," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (ed. Mark Cohen et al.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993), 115.

⁵¹¹ Harris, "Gendered Old Age," 115.

⁵¹² Harris, "Gendered Old Age," 114.

does not challenge a model in which deities and humans exhibited alterior characteristics and thus performed omnigendered roles.

Spitting Upon the Clay: Water in Human Creation

Just as it is with the creation of the world, water was also an important symbol in accounts of human creation. These tales mirror understandings of the individual conception in ancient Mesopotamia. In this case, the combination of liquid and solid is most crucial as bodily fluids such as blood and spit, not water, are combined with clay in order to create human beings. As mentioned in the second chapter, *Atraḥasīs*, an ancient Babylonian narrative poem, describes the creation of humankind by NINTU/Mami,⁵¹³ the birth goddess, and ENKI/Ea.⁵¹⁴ ENKI says:

On the first, seventh, and fifteenth days of the month
I will establish a purification, a bath.
Let one god be slaughtered
Then let the gods be purified in it
Let NINTU mix clay with this flesh and blood⁵¹⁵

Julia Asher-Greve points out that within ancient Mesopotamia, “the corporeal body was representative of the totality of the individual.”⁵¹⁶ Thus, this bodily creation included

⁵¹³ NINTU, Mami and Bēlet-ilī are used interchangeably as the name for the birth goddess in this myth, due to the fact that there are four versions: Old Babylonian (from the seventeenth century BCE), Middle Babylonian (known in two versions), Late Babylonian (very similar to the Old Babylonian) and Late Assyrian (which diverges considerably from the other version). See “Atraḥasīs” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 228). My references for each version will follow Foster. Thus, references to Old Babylonian version will use standard format, references to the Assyrian version will use lower case roman numerals and primes for verses.

⁵¹⁴ Due to the multiple versions, ENKI and Ea are used interchangeably as the name for the god of wisdom and skills in this myth. See Chapter II, 30.

⁵¹⁵ “Atraḥasīs” (I 206-211) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 235).

⁵¹⁶ Julia Asher-Greve, “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body,” *Gender and History* 9.3 (November 1997): 447.

essence of the human. The fact that the contribution of the god is the liquid element rather than the solid once again illustrates the power of water and of controlling water in this culture. Blood, in this case, functions much like water as both nurturing and dangerous; the flow of blood is important to life but spilling too much blood is clearly harmful.⁵¹⁷ *Atraḫasīs* also includes references to divine saliva. After NINTU mixes the blood with the clay, she gathers the gods and

. . .The Igigi, the great gods, spat upon the clay⁵¹⁸

Saliva can symbolize water more easily than blood can, since they are both clear liquids. The repetition reinforces the theme of the combination of liquid and solid necessary for creation.⁵¹⁹ This step emphasizes water's life-giving properties since it is the last physical element that is combined before humans are created.

This creation story, like that of Apsû and Tiāmat, emphasizes the role of alterior sex, by highlighting the roles of both the male ENKI/Ea and the female NINTU/Mami. ENKI purifies the god before NINTU mixes the clay. After the mixing, in the Assyrian version,

Ea, [seated before her], was prompting her,
Bēlet-[ilī] was reciting the incantation⁵²⁰

It clearly requires both elements to make humankind. Also, when NINTU makes humans, she divides the clay into fourteen pieces and then

She summoned the wise and accomplished
Birth goddesses, seven and seven.

⁵¹⁷ Abusch, "Ghost and God," 366.

⁵¹⁸ "Atraḫasīs" (I 233-234), (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 236).

⁵¹⁹ Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "Fugal Features of Atraḫasīs: The Birth Theme" in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H.L.J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 127.

⁵²⁰ "Atraḫasīs" (iii. 15'-16') Assyrian version (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 270).

Seven produced males,
[Seven] produced females.
While the birth goddess was creating destiny . . . ⁵²¹

This type of creation story emphasizes that males and females were created at the same time and in the same way. Asher-Greve cites this story as evidence that, in ancient Mesopotamia, creation “was understood as requiring a complementary anatomy for procreation, on which social gender was imposed.”⁵²² The equal numbers, as well as the contributions of both male and female deities, do illustrate equal importance of males and females, at least at this stage. Also, there is no mention of either water or solid being more suited to one gender than to another. Thus, aspects of creation can be alterior.

“My ‘wool’ being lettuce he will water it.”: Water and Ancient Mesopotamian
Understandings of Human Biology

Individual conception echoes these creation myths. While planting seeds and plowing represented reproduction, water was also a prevalent symbol. In Sumerian, the sign for water also represented semen,⁵²³ as Stol notes.⁵²⁴ Sumerian poetry also symbolized semen with water. In these poems, female pubic hair was often referred to as wool or lettuce. There are several love poems that include the image of the woman’s “lettuce” being watered.⁵²⁵ In one love poem, a female voice states “My ‘wool’ being lettuce he will water it.”⁵²⁶ Another begins,

⁵²¹ “Atraḥasīs” (iii. 24’-27’) Assyrian version (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 270).

⁵²² Asher-Greve, 453.

⁵²³ “Water.” Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary Project. n. p. [cited 26 May 2007]. Online: <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html>.

⁵²⁴ Stol, *BBB*, 4.

⁵²⁵ Leick, *SEML*, 121.

⁵²⁶ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once...Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 93.

Vigorously he sprouted.
Vigorously he sprouted and sprouted,
watered it – it being lettuce!⁵²⁷

These poems exploit an existing trope between water and semen through their power to give life.⁵²⁸ Moreover, the images present the male as active and the female as passive in the sexual act. While the male is watering, sprouting, growing, there is no overt reference to any female response. However, Leick argues that is possible to read the lettuce as the vulva sprouting, providing a reading that gives the woman equal agency.⁵²⁹ Such a reading contrasts with images in the majority of poetry.

The ancient Mesopotamian understanding of conception parallels his concept of male activity and female passivity. R.D. Biggs notes that “[t]here are various pieces of evidence that seem to suggest that . . . the Mesopotamians perceived the male as the progenitor of the child and the female only gave birth and nurtured the child.”⁵³⁰ Stol comments that “The semen (‘water’) flows in the inside of a woman and she ‘takes’ it. Thus conceiving is expressed in a verb meaning to ‘to take’.”⁵³¹ While Stol chooses an active translation of *šu-ti* or *šu-du*, he does note that other scholars have alternatively used “insert,” “implant” or “release [into]”⁵³² for the male contribution. Biggs notes that as ancient Mesopotamians understood that conception was caused by intercourse, “It was equally obvious that an essential element was the male ‘seed,’ . . . that, when deposited in a woman’s vagina, could lead to pregnancy.”⁵³³ Biggs disagrees with Stol’s translation, choosing more passive verbs: “The woman’s womb ‘received’ or ‘accepted’ the

⁵²⁷ Jacobsen, *Harps*, 94.

⁵²⁸ Leick, *SEML*, 39.

⁵²⁹ Leick, *SEML*, 122.

⁵³⁰ Biggs, 2.

⁵³¹ Stol, *BBB*, 5.

⁵³² Stol, *BBB*, 5; footnote 29.

⁵³³ Biggs, 1.

semen.”⁵³⁴ Although either translation demonstrates the primary importance of semen to conception, Biggs’ translation is more convincing and illustrates the ancient notion of the passivity of the female component in conception. The mother’s role in conception was understood to be negligible; however, her role in the actual birth could not be. In descriptions of birth, fluids coming from the mother, such as amniotic fluid and blood, were compared to the waters of the sea.⁵³⁵ Stol writes that the flowing of amniotic water give the Babylonians their word for delivery: *ḥālu*, to flow out.⁵³⁶ These references illustrate that in ancient Mesopotamian belief, the woman did not contribute waters to the conception of the child, but she did contribute to the birth process. This system reinforces the notion that birth and nurturing the child were feminine activities.

“Ocean Waters, Fearsome, Raging”: Water Images in Birth Rituals

Figures of water in both creation mythology and understandings of human biology are echoed within birth rituals. There are a variety of rituals in which a journey through the ocean symbolizes the child’s journey from the womb, in which the sea archetype represents birth and rebirth.⁵³⁷ Veldhuis argues that one purpose of a ritual is to create a relationship between the humans performing the ritual and the deity to whom they appeal.⁵³⁸ One example is this Old Babylonian incantation, “The Child’s Arms are Bound”:

⁵³⁴ Biggs, 2.

⁵³⁵ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

⁵³⁶ Stol, *BBB*, 122; “*ḥālu*,” *CAD* 6:54-55.

⁵³⁷ Izre’el, 140.

⁵³⁸ Niek Veldhuis, “The Poetry of Magic,” in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual Historical and Interpretive Perspectives*. (ed. Tzvi Abusch and Karel Van Der Toorn; vol. 1 of *Ancient Magic and Divination*; Groningen: Styx, 1999), 40.

In the fluids of intercourse
 Bone was formed,
 In the tissue of sinews
 Baby was formed.
 In the ocean waters, fearsome, raging,
 In the distant waters of the sea,
 Where the little one's arms are bound,
 There, within, where the sun's eye can bring no brightness,
 Assaluhi, ENKI's son, saw him.
 He loose his tight-tied bonds,
 He set him on the way,
 He opened him the path.
 "The path is [op]ened to you,
 "The way is [made straight?] for you,
 "The . . . physician (?) is waiting for you,
 "She is maker of [bl]ood(?),
 "She is maker of us all."
 She has spoken to the doorbolt, it is released.
 "The lock is [fre]ed,
 "The doors thrown wide,
 "Let him strike [],
 "Bring yourself out, there's a dear!"⁵³⁹

The incantation illustrates the understanding that child begins "in the fluids of intercourse," as well as representing the amniotic fluid with the "fearsome," "raging" and "distant" waters of the ocean. This beginning accomplishes the goal of influencing the deity by implicating the deity in the child's creation and subsequent peril.⁵⁴⁰ As the child moves through the dangerous waters, the incantation focuses on the child's journey from conception to birth, illustrating the connection between the sea and both life and death present within ancient Mesopotamian symbolism.⁵⁴¹ While clearly the mother plays an important role in the birth process, neither she nor her body are found anywhere within the words of this incantation. The focus is all on the child.

⁵³⁹ "The Child's Arms Are Bound" (Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 171).

⁵⁴⁰ Veldhius, "Poetry," 400

⁵⁴¹ Izre'el, 138.

The waters are briefly helpful as they are the source of the child's life, but quickly change to reflect the danger that the child faces. The child is alone, trapped, and unable to swim with bound arms. In this way, the mother's womb becomes a frightening, rather than a comforting and nurturing, place. However, Scurlock notes that "In the context of childbirth, it was precisely the unobstructed passage of the child through the birth canal and the accompanying outflow of amniotic fluid and blood which the . . . rituals were designed to produce."⁵⁴² Consequently, while waters could be dangerous, fluids were essential to a successful birth. In this ritual, once the path is opened, the water imagery is no longer present, but rather shifts to images of doors and locks to be opened by the deity in response to cries from the birth practitioner.

In order to create the necessary flowing of water, the ritual includes simulative images.⁵⁴³ Brian Bates and Alison Newman Turner note a vast array of examples from a multitude of cultures in which birth rituals contain images of opening, flowing, and even breaking.⁵⁴⁴ These words and symbols that evoke opening and release, including the untying of knots, create "empathetic processes" which encourage physiological responses believed to ease the birth process. Bates and Turner explain, "The various rituals and practices serve to suggest images to the woman in labor, but these images are not direct representations of the objects involved, but rather constructions created by the woman."⁵⁴⁵ The woman therefore constructs her experience of trying to deliver the baby through her own memories and understandings of the images presented. As discussed in

⁵⁴² Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 144.

⁵⁴³ Brian Bates and Allison Newman Turner, "Imagery and Symbolism in Birth Practices," in *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross-Cultural Perspective*(ed. Lauren Dundes; Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2003), 89.

⁵⁴⁴ Bates and Turner, 90.

⁵⁴⁵ Bates and Turner, 91.

chapter II, images involving opening and release create an unconscious physiological response of relaxation within the birthing mother.⁵⁴⁶

In the ancient Near East, the belief in sympathetic magic leads to a belief in the efficacy of these types of images. One of the laws of sympathetic magic is the law of similarity, in which like produces like.⁵⁴⁷ Scurlock points out that, within magical rites, the practitioner might act out the desired result.⁵⁴⁸ Therefore, whether the reason for it was understood or not, in the ancient Near East, poetic descriptions of opening or flooding in conjunction with ritual objects and actions create a similar response within the body of the birthing mother. These types of images could be used to shape reality, rather than merely to reflect the situation.⁵⁴⁹ Therefore, the words of the ritual included descriptions of both the flow of water and of blood. Just as these images constructed reality, other metaphors within this ritual construct a reality for the mother's body.

“Cast Adrift”: Humans as Boats in Various Ancient Near Eastern Texts

In addition to the incantations which contain water imagery, other works of Babylonian literature involve the metaphor of the human as boat. One such case can be found in the Babylonian poem, “The Favor of Kurigalzu.”⁵⁵⁰ This text includes a section

⁵⁴⁶ Bates and Turner, 91. See Chapter II, 65-66.

⁵⁴⁷ Robert Yelle, “Rhetorics of Law and Ritual: A Semiotic Comparison of the Law of Talion and Sympathetic Magic,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* September 2001 (69.3): 633.

⁵⁴⁸ Jo Ann Scurlock, “Witchcraft and Magic in the Ancient Near East and the Bible.” *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion. Vol 2.* (ed. Serinity Young; 2 vols.; New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 1999), 1038..

⁵⁴⁹ Izre'el, 136.

⁵⁵⁰ “The Favor of Kurigalzu” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature.* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 367-368).

on the elevation of Kurigalzu to kingship and, after a long gap, concludes with a supplicant's prayer to Marduk in the name of Kurigalzu. The plea begins:

I, like a (drifting) raft, have none to put confidence in me,
Like a sunken vessel, I was not deemed useful,
The shore gave me up⁵⁵¹

The speaker in this poem employs a raft/boat to indicate feelings of lack of control and of uselessness. In this case, there is no one steering and the raft/boat has no purpose. There is no specific gender for the supplicant in this prayer, so the boat does not necessarily have a gendered component here.

“The Boat,” a Babylonian birth ritual offers another example of the human as boat:

May her taut mooring rope be slackened.
And her battened hatch be opened.
The mooring rope of the boat for the quay of well-being.
The mooring rope of the barge for the quay of health.
May the limbs be relaxed, the sinews loosen . . .⁵⁵²

In this case, the mother's body becomes the boat through metaphor.⁵⁵³ The taut mooring rope and battened hatch indicate a boat that has been prepared for a journey, so that the mother's body is open, relaxed and ready to give birth.⁵⁵⁴ The emphasis on the quays of well-being and of health illustrate that the boat has now found safe harbor, so that the child will be healthy. In this ritual the boat image does not indicate the mother's powerlessness, but symbolizes her safety. However, even this image has elements of vulnerability, with the need to slacken the taut mooring rope and open the hatch. Such

⁵⁵¹ “The Favor of Kurigalzu” (1'), 368. Use of prime follows Foster and designates lines beginning after a gap of over 100 lines.

⁵⁵² “The Boat” (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 1009).

⁵⁵³ Erica Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut* (Ann Arbor: Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan, 1985) 91.

⁵⁵⁴ Bates and Turner, 90.

vulnerability is reason the ritual must be performed. The mention of the battened hatch and the mooring rope may illustrate that the mother had done some preparation, but primarily the focus is not on the mother's actions but the physical processes her body undergoes.

These same images combine to create a much different context for the birthing mother as boat. In this Assyrian elegy for woman who died in childbirth, the same symbols illustrate what happens when the boat that is birthing mother is not safe:

Why are you cast adrift like a boat in the middle of a river?
Your thwarts in pieces, your mooring rope cut?
With your face shrouded, (as) you cross the river of Inner city?

How could I not be cast adrift, my mooring rope not be cut?
On the day I bore fruit, happy my chosen husband!
Happy was I, even I, I, happy my husband.
On the day of my labor-pains, did my face grow overcast?
On the day I gave birth, were my eyes prevented (from seeing)?
With opened fists, I prayed to Bēlet-ilī:
“You are the mother of women who give birth -- save my life!”
When Bēlet-ilī heard this, she shrouded her face (saying):
“You are [. . .] why do you keep praying to me?”
[My husband, who lov]ed me, kept uttering his complaint:
“[Why do you leave] me, the wife in whom I delight?
[. . .] in the course of the years
[Have you haunted] a terrain full of ruins?
[In the In]ner City, have you piteously declaimed a lament?”
[All] those days with my chosen husband was I!
I lived with him who was my lover,
(But) death crept stealthily into my bedroom.
It has driven me out of my house,
It separated m, even me, from the presence of my chosen husband,
It sets my feet in to my terrain-of-no-return.⁵⁵⁵

In her analysis of this elegy, Reiner notes that “. . . in Mesopotamian literature the image of a boat seeking safe harbor is often associated with a child about to be born.”⁵⁵⁶ Reiner

⁵⁵⁵ William W. Hallo, “An Assyrian Elegy,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 420-421.

⁵⁵⁶ Reiner, 91.

does not comment on the elegy's shift between the child about to be born and the mother who has died in childbirth. However, she does comment that the end of the elegy marks a return to land, but it is a trap rather than a secure place.⁵⁵⁷ Scurlock merely comments on the "heart-rending" nature of this elegy,⁵⁵⁸ while Stol notes that "[t]his is the reverse of the image of a woman and her child as a ship reaching safe haven, known from incantations."⁵⁵⁹ What these scholars do not observe is that not only is the mother a boat in this image, she is a damaged one: with a cut mooring rope and crossbars broken, there is no hope of steering the boat herself. Thus, she is tossed around by the waters. She turns to Bēlet-ilī, the mother goddess, but the goddess is either unwilling or unable to help her, covering her face to indicate that she does not hear the prayer⁵⁶⁰ and the mother dies.

The boat metaphor in this elegy expresses lack of control and danger in childbirth, as well as the brokenness of the body. In this case, the birthing mother's body does not take on alterior characteristics for two reasons. The first is that the boat image, unlike that of the ship's captain, does not reflect alterior characteristics. Another reason is that Bēlet-ilī does not choose to intervene. Thus, the ability of a birthing mother to perform an omnigendered role relies on the will of the deity. This ritual is addressed to a female birth goddess, rather than to the male gods, who are addressed in the rituals in which the mother does perform an omnigendered role. Neither the metaphor nor the deity addressed express alterior characteristics, which may account for the failure of this text to allow the mother to perform an omnigendered role and thus to survive.

⁵⁵⁷ Reiner, 92-93.

⁵⁵⁸ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 147.

⁵⁵⁹ Stol, *BBB*, 140.

⁵⁶⁰ Reiner, 92.

The associated commonplaces between humans and boats are passivity as well as vulnerability to the chaos and power of the water. As the child in “The Child’s Arms are Bound” is at risk from the raging waters, so is the supplicant in “The Favor of Kurigalzu” and the birthing mother in “The Boat.” While the mother in the boat is described as being safe, the fact that such a statement is necessary indicates the threat she faces. The mother in the elegy has fallen victim to the dangers present in the waters. In all of these cases, the child, the man, and the mothers are powerless in the face of these hazards without the intervention of deity.

Able Ones: Ship’s Captains in Ancient Near Eastern Texts

The ship’s captain has more power to navigate perilous waters than the boat itself. Historically, there is not much evidence about the life of a ship’s captain in ancient Mesopotamia. What little information exists on the gender of ship’s captains indicates that the leadership roles on boats belonged to men, although both male and female slaves served on crews.⁵⁶¹ In ancient Near Eastern literature, the image of the ship’s captain appears in several accounts of heroic figures.

The first two examples of such figures come from Babylonian creation stories. In one origin myth, “Marduk, Creator of the World,”⁵⁶² creation begins with Marduk steering a raft:

Marduk tied together a raft on the face of the waters,
He created dirt and heaped it on the raft.⁵⁶³

⁵⁶¹ George Bass, “Sea and River Craft in the Ancient Near East,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. III*. (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 1421.

⁵⁶² “Marduk, Creator of the World” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 487-489).

This image connects the ability to successfully navigate water with supernatural power. In order to create the world, Marduk conquers the forces of nature through Tiāmat's female body, which contributes to the waters, wind and weather. While by strict interpretation, this text does not involve captaining a ship, it does illustrate Marduk's strength, as well as his control over the world. Just as Marduk harnessed Tiāmat's powers to create the world in the *Enuma Eliš*,⁵⁶⁴ he does so with the powers of the waters in this tale. Since Marduk was the most powerful of the gods, this text relates the ability to lead a vessel with the power of creating the world.

In *Atraḥasīs*, the Babylonian creation story previously examined, after creation, the gods grow angry with the noise the people make. Enlil instructs Atraḥasīs to build a boat in order to escape the punishing flood that the gods send. Atraḥasīs is chosen for his faith: "Since I have always revered [ENKI], he told me this"⁵⁶⁵ Also, Atraḥasīs is known for his wisdom⁵⁶⁶ and he illustrates judgment in selecting the animals and bringing them aboard. Moreover, he takes action to protect the lives of others: at the last moment, "He cut the mooring rope, he released the boat"⁵⁶⁷ and saved his family and the animals from the flood. By doing so, Atraḥasīs exhibits care for his people. In this case, captaining the ship that saved the people is proof of Atraḥasīs's faith, as well as his compassion. These qualities make him a fitting hero of this tale.

⁵⁶³ "Marduk, Creator of the World" (16-17) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 488).

⁵⁶⁴ Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 179.

⁵⁶⁵ "Atraḥasīs" (III i 45-46) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 248).

⁵⁶⁶ Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 118.

⁵⁶⁷ "Atraḥasīs" (III ii 55) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 249).

In the Akkadian story of *Adapa and the South Wind*, which describes the relationship of the gods and humankind, Adapa pilots a sailboat:

[At] the sacred quay, the quay of “Heavenly Splendor,”
he boarded the sailboat.
[Without? a st]eering oar his boat could drift on course,
[Without?? a pu]nting pole he could pilot his boat.
[Into the . . . ocean, into the] wide sea⁵⁶⁸

This image illustrates Adapa catching fish for the temple of Ea, associating captaining the boat with service to the deity. Adapa is described as “able one, exceedingly wise . . . pure clean of hands, anointed one,”⁵⁶⁹ associating these traits with the ability to steer the ship. In fact, wisdom, authority and power are Adapa’s most salient characteristics within this epic.⁵⁷⁰ Moreover, these qualities were threatening to the gods and they feared that Adapa might achieve everlasting life.⁵⁷¹ Despite these qualities, Adapa is beset by danger⁵⁷² from the south wind and his boat capsizes. Consequently, this text illustrates both the power and the danger that accompanied captaining a sea vessel.

Yet another example can be found in the Old Babylonian composition, “INANNA and Enki.”⁵⁷³ In this text, INANNA steals the “ME, the cultural norms which are the basis for Sumerian civilization and all aspects of life”⁵⁷⁴ from ENKI, the god of wisdom, in his underwater temple. She thus loads the ME onto the “boat of heaven”⁵⁷⁵ and brings

⁵⁶⁸ “Adapa and the South Wind” (A 19-22) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 526).

⁵⁶⁹ “Adapa and the South Wind” (A 8-9) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 526).

⁵⁷⁰ Izre’el, 125.

⁵⁷¹ A. S. Kapelrud, “You Shall Surely Not Die” in *History and Traditions of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen. Vol. 50* (ed. André Lemaire and Benedikt Otzen; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 54.

⁵⁷² “Adapa and the South Wind” (B 1-2) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 527).

⁵⁷³ Gertrud Farber, “INANNA and ENKI,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 524.

⁵⁷⁴ Farber, “INANNA and ENKI,” 522.

⁵⁷⁵ Farber, “INANNA and ENKI,” 524.

it to her city of Uruk. When she arrives, she unloads the ME at the “lapis lazuli quay.”⁵⁷⁶ In this case, INANNA acts to strengthen the position of her city and herself. While one could read this poem from a perspective that paints INANNA in a negative light, she manages to triumph over ENKI by gaining the ME and serves her people as well as herself. Hence, by captaining a ship INANNA increases her own power and the powers of the community. In this way, her role as a ship’s captain reinforces her primary attributes of strength and purpose.

While ship’s captains do not play a prominent role in ancient Mesopotamian literature, these few examples are significant to characterize ship’s captains with alterior traits of strength, courage and vigor. Through the inclusion of INANNA, the characteristics are separated from the male sex within this culture. In addition, all of these characters are presented as heroic through repeated discursive practice. The tales of ship’s captains then are performative acts, which, according to Butler, through “regularized and sanctioned practice can wield the power to produce that which it declares.”⁵⁷⁷ Within Mesopotamia, the repetition of these heroic stories enables humans to take on the extraordinary characteristics described. While captaining a ship may not be the essential element their heroism, the qualities necessary to captain a ship are the alterior sex traits of strength, courage and vigor, assigned to individuals through the discursive practices of the recitation and hearing of the variety of these tales. The performative aspects of the discursive practices of the birth rituals continue this pattern. Thus, women giving birth perform omnigendered roles as they take on these alterior traits required to heroically captain a ship and to give birth.

⁵⁷⁶ Farber, “INANNA and ENKI,” 525.

⁵⁷⁷ Butler, *BTM*, 107.

“May the Boat be Loosed”: Birthing Mother as Ship’s Captain

The qualities necessary for captaining a ship appear in the literature as a component of deities or ideal humans. In the birth incantation, these qualities exist alongside a focus on portraying women and their bodies. The contrast between texts in which the child takes the primary role of boat in birth rituals, or in which the mother plays the role of the boat, allows us to observe multiple discursive practices that both reinforce and destabilize gender categories in ancient Mesopotamia. If “gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body,”⁵⁷⁸ rituals such as these are important elements of the creation of gender. In addition, these incantations are speech acts in which “Language assumed and alters its power to act upon the real through locutionary acts, which, repeated, become entrenched practices and, ultimately, institutions.”⁵⁷⁹ This ritual illustrates how language both established and questioned gender norms.

The primary ritual I will examine is written in Akkadian and appears in a compendium of Babylonian-Assyrian medical texts.⁵⁸⁰ In this case, the mother performs the role of ship’s captain:

“[The woman who is about to give birth is steering the boat through the water] . . . [From] the horizon, the woman who is about to give birth is steering the boat through the water. Upon a boat (for carrying) perfumes she has loaded perfumes. Upon a boat (for carrying) cedar she has loaded cedar. Upon a boat for (carrying) cedar fragrance she has loaded cedar fragrance. (Upon) a boat (for carrying) carnelian and lapis lazuli she has

⁵⁷⁸ Butler, *GT*, xv.

⁵⁷⁹ Butler, *GT*, 148.

⁵⁸⁰ F. Köcher, *Die babylonische-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen* (Berlin, W. De Gruyter, 1962): 248 iii, 58-62.

loaded carnelian and lapis lazuli; (yet) she knows not if it is carnelian; she knows not if it is lapis lazuli. The boat, when it has spent time at the quay, leaves the quay. The boat is detained at the quay of death; the *magurru* boat is held back at the quay of hardship. [At the command of] Sîn, lord of spells, may the boat be loosed [from the quay of death]; [may] the *magurru* boat be freed [from the quay of hardship]”⁵⁸¹

The first two lines of this incantation set the tone: the woman who is about to give birth is steering the boat through the water. This phrase presents an image of the mother as in control: she directs the boat, choosing its path and its direction.

The incantation continues to focus on the mother. As the ship’s captain prepares a ship for travel, so the mother has prepared for the journey of childbirth. In his analysis of images in Mesopotamian poetry generally, Black illustrates the importance of examining the ways that the images “are stimulated by or devised to characterize in an illuminating way.”⁵⁸² In this incantation, the images are stimulated by movement (steering, water, loading), difficulty (loading, holding back) and value (carnelian, lapis lazuli, cedar, cedar fragrance, perfume), which makes sense for the birth process: the ideal state is movement but it is a slow and arduous process.

The lines of this incantation utilize the common Mesopotamian poetic techniques of parallelism and repetition:

Parallelism occurs principally on the level of two or three adjacent lines, which may be similar in structure or meaning. Repetition is a special case of parallelism, where a line or a whole passage is repeated verbatim or with minimal variation.⁵⁸³

In this case, much of the poem consists of parallelism, in order to emphasize the processes of steering the boat, loading the boat, and launching the boat. The repetition of

⁵⁸¹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146-147.

⁵⁸² Black, 82.

⁵⁸³ Niek Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature and Scholarship: The Sumerian Composition Nanše and the Birds with a Catalogue of Sumerian Bird Names* (Leiden: Brill/Styx, 2004), 51.

steering the boat illustrates how difficult it is. The images of the precious cargo emphasize both the extensive preparation for, as well as the joyful anticipation of, giving birth, as the boats are loaded with precious and pleasant things. Also, the language could mimic contractions. The repetition of the image of loading the boat reinforces the physical strength required to give birth as it evokes a picture of several trips back and forth. In this way, this ritual focuses primarily on the positive changes in the mother's body rather than the negative. While the danger remains in the background, the parallel statements involving releasing the boat from the quays of hardship and death illustrate the urgency of the situation for the both the mother's life and the child's.

The descriptions of the birthing mother's cargo increase in value and weight. There are similarities between the image in this ritual and the image of a boat found in the Sumerian poem *Lugalbanda*. In this poem, Lugalbanda is the youngest of eight brothers who are sent to lead an army to conquer Arata. On the way, Lugalbanda becomes ill and his brothers leave him with food. Lugalbanda survives, gains the favor of the gods and the favor of the mythical Anzû bird, who offers him gifts. The only gift he accepts is the ability to run fast, which leads to his conquering Arata without the aid of his brothers. As the Anzû bird offers Lugalbanda gifts, it says to him:

Come now my Lugalbanda. Go like a boat full of precious metals, like a grain barge, like a boat going to deliver apples, like a boat piled up high with a cargo of cucumbers, casting a shade, like a boat laded lavishly at the place of harvest, go back to brick-built Kulaba with head held high!⁵⁸⁴

In his analysis of these lines, Jeremy Black notes that, in this description, "We have to assume that a gradual increase of intensity is sought,"⁵⁸⁵ so that the description of the boat becomes more and more lavish. In addition, "there is an implied quality of

⁵⁸⁴ Jeremy Black, *Reading Sumerian Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 60.

⁵⁸⁵ Black, 92.

movement . . . and a boat laden with the harvest will travel in a public, even triumphant manner.”⁵⁸⁶ Therefore, captaining a boat full of the fruits of the harvest will presumably illustrate Lugalbanda’s accomplishments. Black also notes that the boat presents an allusion to “a proud, purposeful return to a certain goal.”⁵⁸⁷ However, Lugalbanda knows that this reward and similar offers from the Anzû bird will not help him to achieve his aims and he refuses.⁵⁸⁸ In “Steering the Boat Through the Water,” the boat image does indicate the birthing mother will succeed in her objective of delivering the child safely.

As the repetition in *Lugalbanda* indicated movement of the boat, it is possible that the repetition in “Steering the Boat Through the Water” shows the movement of the child. The cargo increasing in weight and value could reflect that fact that the labor pains are growing more frequent and more painful. In addition, as the passage in which Lugalbanda is envisioned arriving home steering a ship laden with valuable cargo would illustrate his accomplishments and his contribution to the community, the heavily laden cargo boat in this incarnation could also connote the mother’s “proud, purposeful return to a certain goal.”

While the beginning of the ritual emphasizes the mother’s control and strength, at this point the fact that the mother does not know everything is introduced, given that she does not know whether there is carnelian or lapis lazuli in the boat. This lack of knowledge is not important to her overall goal: metaphorically the boat will set out and the child will be delivered regardless. In addition, several scholars have interpreted the

⁵⁸⁶ Black, 93.

⁵⁸⁷ Black, 93.

⁵⁸⁸ Bendt Alster, “Lugalbanda and the Early Epic Tradition in Mesopotamia” in *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*. (ed. Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard, Piotr Steinkeller; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 66.

distinctions between carnelian and lapis lazuli as indicating gender differentiation.⁵⁸⁹ Since there are two jewels mentioned, there is a tendency in scholarship to set them up as an oppositional pair. Stol notes that, in Akkadian, the word for carnelian is feminine and the word for lapis lazuli is masculine,⁵⁹⁰ which may also explain this trend in the scholarship. However, Scurlock equates carnelian with boys and lapis-lazuli with girls.⁵⁹¹ The fact that the mother does not know whether she has loaded carnelian or lapis lazuli lends itself to this interpretation, since in ancient Mesopotamia, one would not know the sex of the child.⁵⁹²

Nevertheless, there are multiple interpretations available for carnelian and lapis lazuli that do not contribute to this emphasis on the binary division between male and female. For instance, there is evidence of carnelian as a ritual object in cures for vaginal bleeding during pregnancy. Scurlock cites one such ritual:

A menstruating woman twines together red-colored wool, blue-colored wood, combed wool, sinews from a dead cow, sinews from a male and female gazelle, (and masculine aslu-rush (and) thread on these nine stones: haltu-stone, righthanded šubû-stone, left-handed šubû -stone, masculine and feminine su-stone, blood-red carnelian, kapasu shell, ianibu-stone (and) zibtu stone⁵⁹³

This ritual illustrates the fact medical rituals incorporated a variety of stones. While the carnelian is a precious stone, the fact that it is red in color may be the most important aspect. Scurlock observes that contrasting colors were believed to produce the stopping of blood.⁵⁹⁴ The properties they had might determine which stones were employed. For

⁵⁸⁹ Stol, *BBB*, 62; Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

⁵⁹⁰ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

⁵⁹¹ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

⁵⁹² Gertrud Farber, “Another Old Babylonian Childbirth Incantation” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 43.4 (1984): 312.

⁵⁹³ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 138.

⁵⁹⁴ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 139.

instance, magnetite was included in rituals for vaginal bleeding in order help the baby adhere to the womb.⁵⁹⁵ While lapis-lazuli is not mentioned in the ritual above, the contrasting colors of blue and red are mentioned with regard to wool. Lapis lazuli is combined with red wool in a Neo-Assyrian prayer in which one petitioner cries into a bowl of lapis lazuli and her lover wipes away her tears with a piece of red wool.⁵⁹⁶ Therefore, the contrasting colors of carnelian and lapis lazuli may be intended to create the stopping of blood, or the cessation of pain. The repetition of “she knows not” within our ritual could be indicating that she knows not whether the incantation will be effective in delivering the child safely. Since death for the mother was an extremely likely occurrence, it may be possible to read the choice between carnelian and lapis lazuli as a choice between death and life.

However, the two do not need to be juxtaposed a polar opposites. Carnelian and lapis lazuli often represented precious and valuable items. The most obvious interpretation would be that there is a “relatively common use of the name of the precious stone as a ‘prestige’ adjective even where it would be inappropriate to do so.”⁵⁹⁷ Representing the child as a cargo of precious stones in this ritual consequently illustrates how valuable the child is. Also, lapis lazuli was among the luxury items that were offered in temples by high-ranking officials.⁵⁹⁸ Both carnelian and lapis lazuli have been found in burial tombs, indicating that both jewels could be part of funerary proceedings.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁵ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 140.

⁵⁹⁶ Leick, *SEML*, 190.

⁵⁹⁷ Black, 155.

⁵⁹⁸ Leick, *SEML*, 148.

⁵⁹⁹ Zainab Bahrani, “Jewelry and Personal Arts in Ancient Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol III* (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 1636.

In addition, while carnelian is a symbol less often, lapis lazuli figures prominently in erotic poetry, but it is not specifically gendered within this poetry. There are references to comparisons of the vulva with lapis lazuli, which emphasizes the precious, valuable and beautiful nature of the jewel.⁶⁰⁰ Yet, there are also references in which lapis lazuli describes masculine attributes:

My (beloved) with a lapis lazuli beard!
My (beloved) with roped locks!
My (beloved) with a beard mottled like a slab of lapis lazuli,
My (beloved) with locks arranged ropewise!⁶⁰¹

In this case, lapis lazuli connotes male beauty, just as it also connotes female beauty in other literature. Moreover, the lapis lazuli beard can be found in prayers, as a means of praising the god Utu,⁶⁰² as well as in epics, exalting the Lord of Aratta⁶⁰³ and Gilgameš.⁶⁰⁴ Lapis lazuli can therefore also indicate an exalted position, in addition to beauty.

The language of the ritual does lend itself to distinguishing between the two types of jewelry, but that is not the only interpretation. Since repetition is a prominent feature of this ritual, the construction of “she knows not” may simply be another example, which emphasizes the mother’s limited knowledge rather than presenting a clear choice between carnelian and lapis lazuli. While Stol presents this distinction as an either/or choice,⁶⁰⁵ that is not necessary for the ritual. Both are precious jewels and there is no convincing evidence associating either with gender characteristics or any need to create a

⁶⁰⁰ Leick, *SEML*, 128, 226.

⁶⁰¹ Leick, *SEML*, 119.

⁶⁰² William W. Hallo, “Letter-Prayer to King Sin-Iddinam to Utu” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 534.

⁶⁰³ Thorkild Jacobsen, “Enmerka and the Lord of Aratta,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 548.

⁶⁰⁴ Dina Katz, “Gilgameš and Akka” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 551.

⁶⁰⁵ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

polarization between them. When examined along with the other elements of the cargo mentioned in the ritual, carnelian and lapis lazuli have multiple interpretative possibilities, including gender and value, as well as life and death.

The perfume, cedar wood, and cedar fragrance which are also part of the cargo have not been analyzed equally for what they might mean. Ariel Bloch argues that, at least in later texts, the cedar may be a symbol of the masculine, due to its “great strength and majestic height”⁶⁰⁶ Hence, it might be possible to separate the cedar and perfume into yet another binary, representing gender division. However, a choice between the two is not offered as it is with the carnelian and lapis lazuli. Also, while cedar and cedar fragrance are both made of cedar, they are distinguished as different elements, presenting three, rather than two items in this category. There are a multitude of other possibilities for the meaning of the cedar. From a literary perspective, “The Cedar (Tamarisk) and the Palm Tree” was a Babylonian fable of the type that consisted of a verbal contest between two parties.⁶⁰⁷ In this case, a king plants two trees, the cedar and the palm and the two trees debate their superiority. The reference to cedar in this ritual could therefore include references to the typology of this poem. Just as carnelian and lapis lazuli each have value and neither is superior to the other, so is the case with cedar and perfume.

In addition to the symbol of the cedar within literature, there are also historical factors that might contribute to the meaning of this ritual. Cedar was an export in Ancient Mesopotamia, known for being both “heavy and unwieldy” in overland travel,⁶⁰⁸ and

⁶⁰⁶ Ariel Bloch, “The Cedar and the Palm Tree,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical Epigraphic and Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* (eds. Ziony Zevit et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 15.

⁶⁰⁷ W. G. Lambert, “Fables or Contest Literature” in *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 150.

⁶⁰⁸ Michael Astour, “Overland Trade Routes in Ancient Western Asia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol III*. (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 1402.

perhaps reinforces the difficulty of the mother's journey. Perfumes and fragrances were often part of funeral rites,⁶⁰⁹ so that the mentions of these may connote danger. D. T. Potts notes that "exotic woods" were valuable exports⁶¹⁰ and it may be that cedar indicates value as do the carnelian and lapis lazuli. Yet another interpretation is raised by the fact that cedar had a sacred role in divination.⁶¹¹ This role, as well as the mother's lack of knowledge, may therefore refer to the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the birth.

Another option exists in the connection between lapis lazuli and cedar oil, fragrance and perfumes. Just as lapis lazuli is an item that people of status might offer to the gods, there are also instances in which cedar oil plays the same role, as an offering with prayers and petitions to the gods.⁶¹² Therefore, the repetition of these items being loaded for cargo on the boat of the birthing mother could represent the mother's offering to Sîn for the safe delivery of her child. The repetition of "she knows not" could hence indicate that she does not yet know whether her offering will be acceptable to Sîn. In the Assyrian elegy, Bēlet-ilī rejects the mother's petition, so the mother in this incantation would have reason to fear that hers would not be.

While it is easy to examine the items of cargo, as well as the quays, in this incantation to set up a binary oppositional structure, that is not only interpretive possibility. Niek Veldhuis notes that oppositional pairs are common in ancient

⁶⁰⁹ Joanne Scurlock, "Death and the Afterlife in Ancient Mesopotamian Thought," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. III* (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1884.

⁶¹⁰ D. T. Potts, "Distant Shores: Ancient Near Eastern Trade with South Asia and Northeast Africa," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. III* (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 1451.

⁶¹¹ "The Cedar" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 209).

⁶¹² Daniel Fleming, "The Installation of the Storm God's High Priestess," in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 428.; Gertrud Farber, "INANNA and ENKI," in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 522.

Mesopotamian poetry and incantations.⁶¹³ In this case, there is not a clear division of pairs because of the three elements of perfume, cedar and cedar fragrance, and within this grouping there are more commonalities than differences. Perfume, cedar and cedar fragrance are related in their pleasing scent. Carnelian and lapis-lazuli are both precious stones, and the quays of death and hardship both represent negative consequences. Black characterizes this concept as a “cluster” of images: “the combined images work together, usually sequentially to create a many-faceted effect.”⁶¹⁴ In addition to the cluster of images, each one has ambiguous significants. Vanstiphout argues that in ancient Near Eastern texts, “[A]mbiguity was recognized and consciously used as a technical tool.”⁶¹⁵ The multiplicity of meanings from the cluster of images in this incantation reflects the uncertainty of the outcome of any birth. This incantation challenges the concept of strict binary division and provides a means of reading with an eye to multiplicity of meaning and interpretation. These clusters reinforce the interpretation of omnigendered performances within the ritual.

When the boat leaves the quay, when the birth begins, the mother no longer has control. The boat cannot remain in the quay forever, just as the child cannot remain in the womb forever. Risk would be typical for any sea journey, when the boats faced the danger of weather and natural disaster, as well as the chance of coming under physical attack. In the same way, the birthing mother faces significant danger of death during childbirth. As Scurlock notes, “. . . the greatest single cause of death among women was

⁶¹³ Niek Veldhuis, “The Heart of Grass and Related Matters,” *Orientalia Lovensia Periodica* 1990 (21): 31.

⁶¹⁴ Black, 111.

⁶¹⁵ H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “Ambiguity as a Generative Force in Standard Sumerian Literature,” in *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian* (ed. M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout; Groningen: Styx, 1996), 164.

complications attending childbirth.”⁶¹⁶ The journey in this incantation is perilous, as the boat is exposed to the quays of death and of hardship. The author of this incantation does not describe in detail the scenes of hardship and death; nevertheless they are present. Scurlock presents this ritual as another which depicts the child as the boat, specifically that the placenta containing the baby is the boat that the mother is steering.⁶¹⁷ However, she does not comment on the fact that the focus of this incantation is the mother, rather than the child. Representing the birthing mother with the masculine image of the ship’s captain emphasizes the mother’s work in giving birth, as well as her level of responsibility in delivering the child safely.

This cluster of symbols, including the precious stones, pleasant fragrances, and quays of hardship and death, present a multi-faceted effect in this ritual. In the ritual, the mother moves between various states, including independence, strength, hope, expectancy, diligence, preparation, safety, ignorance, fear, hardship, dependence, and freedom. Through all of these states, she plays multiple roles as she steers the boat through both positive and negative possibilities. As it was understood in ancient Mesopotamia, masculinity was required for vigorous action,⁶¹⁸ such as metaphorically steering the boat through the water and literally giving birth. While this may be counterintuitive to a modern reader, the text of the ritual paves the way for this opposition between the female sexed body giving birth and the gendered masculine role of ship’s captain. Thus, the traits that the mother undergoes throughout this ritual are alterior, as they are neither masculine nor feminine. Viewed through an omnigendered lens, the birthing mother is understood as being differently gendered than a woman. The birth

⁶¹⁶ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 137.

⁶¹⁷ Scurlock, “Baby-Snatching Demons,” 146.

⁶¹⁸ Bahrani, *WoB*, 68.

process requires the alterior traits of a deity and birth is one place where humans can touch the divine realm.

“A Boat of Heaven”: The Moon-god Sîn

Despite the strength that the captain image provides, the control in the incantation shifts from the mother to Sîn. While Sîn plays a major role in the action of “A Cow of Sîn,” here he only appears in the appeal to guide the mother and child safely through the journey into a safe harbor again: “[At the command of] Sîn, lord of spells, may the boat be loosed [from the quay of dea]th; [may] the *magurru* boat be freed [from the quay of hardship]”. This incantation assumes that Sîn will intervene and the birthing process will go smoothly from that point forward. Despite the emphasis in this incantation on the mother as an active participant in the both the preparation and the birthing process, once again the god is ultimately in complete control of the situation.

As discussed in chapter II, Sîn was the Moon-god of Sumer and Babylonia. For the citizens of these communities, the movement of the moon represented “the natural and cultural life cycle of birth, growth, decay and death”⁶¹⁹ and therefore the Moon-god judged fates during the time the moon was not visible in the sky, and brought about increased fertility upon its return.⁶²⁰ While there are many other cultures that make the connection between the moon and menstruation, in ancient Babylon, there no evidence of such a correlation. As Biggs points out, not only has there been no term in Babylonian

⁶¹⁹ Schmidt, 586.

⁶²⁰ Schmidt, 587.

medical texts that could be identified with menses, but there is also no extant discussion of menstruation in Babylonian writings.⁶²¹

Referring to Sîn as “Lord of Spells,” as in this incantation, is unusual. One cult residing in Ḥarran referred to Sîn as “Lord/King of the Gods” or “God of Gods.”⁶²² More often these terms designated other deities, such as Marduk. Terms that highlighted the power and glory of the moon, such as “luminous one” or “splendid one” more often represented Sîn.⁶²³ The designation “Lord of Spells” illustrates reverence for Sîn and the belief that, despite all the mother’s efforts, Sîn has the ultimate power in over life and death. Although one assumes that the ritual works as it is supposed to, “[n]ot all utterances that have the form of the performative, whether illocutionary or perlocutionary, actually work.”⁶²⁴ Therefore, Sîn does have the ultimate power in this ritual. In the case of spells, or incantations, while the words are believed to have power “the effect of the words is not automatic . . . it depends at least in part on the will or inclination of those external powers.”⁶²⁵ Consequently, the designation “Lord of Spells” connotes Sîn’s power to respond or not to the incantation.

In this incantation, the fact that Sîn determined the fate of individual people would also come into play. Here, he is being asked to judge in favor of the birthing mother. The description of her preparation, as well as the dangers she is facing, are presented in a way designed to evoke sympathy from Sîn. As Sîn himself is “a boat of

⁶²¹ Biggs, 3.

⁶²² Stol, “Sîn,” 782.

⁶²³ “For Help in Haruspicy” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 758).

“Illuminator of Darkness” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 760).

⁶²⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

⁶²⁵ Shaul Shaked, “The Poetic of Spells” in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical and Interpretive Perspectives*. (ed. Tzvi Abusch and Karel van der Toorn; vol. 1 of *Ancient Magic and Divination*; Groningen: Styx, 1999), 174.

heaven that sailed the life-giving waters.”⁶²⁶ the mother is described as taking part in a similar journey. The representation of the Moon-god with boats was a popular one, in both texts and in iconography.⁶²⁷ The boat image in the ritual, hence, is designed to perhaps create some sympathy for the mother on the part of Sîn.

The boat image is not the only aspect of this that establishes alterior traits exhibited by both the male Sîn and the birthing mother. Sîn is sometimes referred to as the “father of the people”⁶²⁸ and this role as parent is alterior. While the “father of the people” designation could easily merely refer to Sîn’s powers over fertility, the fact that Sîn was believed to affect the fates of the people also illustrates his care and concern for them. Therefore, the speaker in the incantation’s concern for the mother, as well as the mother’s careful preparation and love for her child, would be elements believed to appeal to Sîn in his role as father. Therefore, Sîn performed multiple genders as he played a parental role in both giving life and caring for the people

This incantation does seek to persuade Sîn to act on the mother’s behalf. In an analysis of prescriptive rituals, Alasdair Livingstone notes that,

The individual for whom the ritual is carried out is one who is, within the social hierarchy . . . the common man[sic]. The purpose of the ritual is to place the common man in a position where he ostensibly dictates his will to those above him, in the last instance the god.⁶²⁹

In the case of narrative rituals such as the one above, it is also a means for the common person to attempt to persuade the deity to act in a certain way. Veldhius notes,

⁶²⁶ Schmidt, 587.

⁶²⁷ Dominique Collon, “Moon, Boats and Battle,” in *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations*. (ed. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Geller; Groningen: Styx, 1997), 12.

⁶²⁸ Schmidt, 587.

⁶²⁹ Alasdair Livingstone, “How the Common Man Influences the Gods of Sumer,” in *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations* (ed. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Geller; Groningen: Styx, 1997), 216.

. . . Mesopotamian magic does not rest on the power of the magical rite alone. A deity must intervene for effectuation. Narrative patterns like these might be appreciated as a rhetorical device to link up the private and the cosmic.⁶³⁰

In this case, the metaphor of the ship's captain and the cargo not only places the individual moment of birth on a more public scale and illustrates its impact on the community, it also creates a bond between the mother and Sîn, as she guides the boat of her unborn child and he guides a boat through the night sky, linking the mother's personal situation with the more cosmic situation of the god.⁶³¹ Instead of (or in addition to) following certain actions or using ritual objects, this type of incantation describes the state of the mother in an attempt to bring out the god's sympathy for her situation.

In addition, the incantation assigns the birthing mother a heroic gender role. Mesopotamian heroic narratives focus on the protagonists' "piety, their cleverness, and their moral, intellectual and military superiority over their enemies."⁶³² These incantations liken the birthing mother to such heroes of the community in piety and strength. Since "performativity is construed as the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration,"⁶³³ the ritual serves the purpose of actually creating these qualities in the mother. While being careful to indicate the mother's dependence upon Sîn's intervention, this incantation creates a bond between the mother and Sîn through the anterior heroic traits of piety, cleverness and excellence. According to Butler, the status of language

⁶³⁰ Veldhuis, "Heart of Grass," 35.

⁶³¹ Izre'el, 136.

⁶³² Veldhuis, *RLS*, 67-68.

⁶³³ Butler, *BTM*, 20.

. . .is productive constitutive, one might even argue *performative* [emphasis Butler's] inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body . . .⁶³⁴

As the birthing mother gives birth, she performs these characteristics. She must exhibit piety to address Sîn and to believe that he will bring her and the child through the birth safely, cleverness to prepare for the birth of the child, and excellence in order to convince Sîn to decide in her favor. The mother performs the alterior characteristics that the deities evince; thus, at the moment of birth, the mother plays an omnigendered heroic role.

The bond with Sîn indicates that this ritual is focused on providing a positive outcome for the child and the mother on a larger cosmic scale rather than on a specific medical scale,⁶³⁵ as Veldhuis has suggested. Other rituals focus on the specific trouble a birthing mother might be having. However, this ritual is general and addresses the fact that at each individual birth, it is necessary for Sîn to decide the fate of the mother and child, even if the birth encounters no particular problem. Consequently, this incantation focuses on Sîn's control over each person's life.⁶³⁶ Evoking the image of the ship's captain through the ritual grants the mother the heroic traits of strength, faith and perseverance necessary for her to perform the birth and to persuade Sîn to decide in her favor.

Loading the Boat: Incantations with Similar Imagery

There are other incantations that contain much of the same imagery of steering a boat and quays and harbors. Examining the differences between these incantations can

⁶³⁴ Butler, *BTM*, 30.

⁶³⁵ Veldhuis, "Heart of Grass," 35

⁶³⁶ Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons," 146.

give insight into how these incantations function in creating gender and sex. A Sumerian incantation for a woman having a difficult labor from the period between 2600 BCE and 2500 BCE, which includes the lines “Like the boat of the *en*, she deployed the linen (sail), she filled the boat of the king with goods, she filled the . . . boat with carnelian, lapis lazuli”⁶³⁷ This text also includes elements of steering the boat, since it is the mother who deploys the sails and guides the boat, as well as the emphasis on the loading of the boat. This ritual includes the fact that the boat is the king’s rather than one belonging to the mother or to someone else, which ties into the notion that the cargo on the boat is intended to be an offering to the king and subsequently to the god.

This incantation is addressed to ENKI and ASSALUḪI. In addition, ENKI/Ea played a significant role in creation, as well as taking active interest saving humankind, in the stories of *Atraḫasīs* and *Enuma Eliš*. In Mesopotamian literature, these were both gods perceived as likely to intervene on behalf of humans. Thus, in this incantation, they illustrate power and care for humankind. In the incantation, ASSALUḪI entreats ENKI, asking what he should do and reiterates that the woman has loaded the king’s boat. In this case, loading the boat illustrates not just strength but service and reverence. It reinforces the concept, therefore, that loading the king’s boat indicates faithfulness to the gods and is an important element in inducing the gods to intervene. In this case, the ritual simply indicates what she has been able to do in service of the king, and consequently that she deserves their intervention. This longer and earlier incantation also includes reference to gender difference. ENKI, after his son ASSALUḪI appeals to him on behalf of this woman, grants ASSALUḪI’s request and instructs him on how to bring about the

⁶³⁷ Stol, *BBB*, 61.

birth of the child. He then says, “If it is a male, let him take a weapon, an ax, the force of his manliness. If it is a female, let the spindle and the pin be in her hand.”⁶³⁸ This statement lays out a strict division between the roles of men and women. Gertrud Farber notes that “sexual attributes are shown or given to the unborn child.”⁶³⁹ While her statement most likely refers to the physical qualities, the statement does indicate the ways in which gender roles are imposed upon a sexed body. Weapons and force are the domain of men, while textiles and birth are the domain of women.

However, individuals did have the power to perform multiple gender roles in specific circumstances.⁶⁴⁰ Although early descriptions in this longer version discuss how the woman was impregnated and give the active role in conception to the male, the woman is also given credit for what she does. Deploying the sails and filling the boat with precious goods are activities that fit neither with the ax and “the force of manliness” nor with the spindle and pin. Taking these actions require piety, cleverness and excellence, which are the domain of neither gender. As her body goes outside the realm of the spindle and the pin, she gains favor from the gods.

A later incantation that includes much of the same imagery invokes goddesses rather than gods. The following incantation is designated for a woman in difficult labor:

The woman who was about to give birth steered the *gi-boat* through the water, pure INANNA steered the *gi-boat* through the water, Ninḫursag steered the *gi-boat* through the water. As on a boat carrying perfume, perfume has been loaded, as on a boat carrying cedar wood, cedar wood has been loaded, on the boat (for) carnelian/lapis lazuli she loaded carnelian/lapis lazuli . . .⁶⁴¹

⁶³⁸ Stol, *BBB*, 61.

⁶³⁹ Farber, “Another Old Babylonian,” 313.

⁶⁴⁰ Katarzyna Grosz, “Daughters Adopted as Sons at Nuzi and Emar,” in *La Femme Dans La Proche-Orient Antique: Compte Rendu de la XXXIII Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (Paris, 7-10 Juillet 1986)* (ed. Jean-Marie Durand; Editions Recherche sur les Civilizations: Paris, 1987), ?.

⁶⁴¹ Stol, *BBB*, 62.

This incantation dilutes the importance of the mother by shifting the language about loading the boat into the passive voice. Only the carnelian and lapis lazuli have an indication that “she” has loaded the boat. The focus then shifts from the mother’s body.

The presence of INANNA and NINĜURSAG emphasizes the role of the deities over that of the mother. INANNA governed both death and life, which were inextricably linked in ancient Mesopotamia. In the context of this ritual, INANNA’s presence emphasizes both the celebration of life and the danger inherent in childbirth. In addition, INANNA is sometimes depicted as being Sîn’s daughter and there are many texts in which their names are linked.⁶⁴² INANNA’s steering the boat illustrates the fine line between life and death that the birthing process entails.

NINĜURSAG is the Sumerian name for NINTU/Mami, the birth goddess instrumental in the creation of humankind in *Atraḫasīs*. Her original aspect comes from the “numinous power in the stony soil that rings the Mesopotamian alluvial ground,”⁶⁴³ indicating her power over the fertility of the land. NINĜURSAG does not represent the same complex symbolism that INANNA does, since there is no death or war in NINĜURSAG’s legacy. Therefore, her role as birth goddess makes her presence a more optimistic sign than INANNA’s. Since NINĜURSAG represents fertility, her role is to provide a positive outcome for the birth.⁶⁴⁴ In this version of the ritual, the one steering the boat is first the human woman, then INANNA, who has immense power but also governs the outcomes of both death and life, then NINĜURSAG, who solely governs for fertility and thus life. Consequently, the image of the one steering the boat gains power as

⁶⁴² Gudrun Colbow, “More Insights into Representation of the Moon God.” *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations*. (ed. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Geller; Groningen: Styx, 1997), 25.

⁶⁴³ Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 104.

⁶⁴⁴ Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 110.

the ritual progresses and the outcome is more likely to be life for both the baby and the mother. Another interpretation for the progression in this ritual is that NINĜURSAG was also credited with making the embryo grow and giving form to it.⁶⁴⁵ Another reading could therefore present the mother contributing to the physical life, INANNA making the choice between life and death, and NINĜURSAG providing for the growth of the child once the choice for life is made.

Different deities, both male and female, are addressed in rituals in which the birthing mother captains a boat. ENKI, ASSALUĜI, Sîn, INANNA and NINĜURSAG all have some impact on creation and fertility. These deities' governance of creation and fertility was much more crucial to their role in these rituals than their perceived gender. The roles of these deities express the prevalence of alterior characteristics within the pantheon. Neither INANNA, Ea, Sin, nor Marduk are unique in their ability to transcend gender, lending credence to a model in which all deities are omnigendered in Mesopotamia.

From the Horizon: Humans and Deities in Omnigendered Roles

Boat images were common in both the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia and in birth ritual texts. While there are many examples of birth rituals that describe the child or the mother as a boat, there are additional rituals that present the mother in the active role of ship's captain rather than the passive role of the ship itself. The primary ritual follows ancient Mesopotamian linguistic tropes of repetition, parallelism and ambiguity. The

⁶⁴⁵ Jacobsen, *Treasures*, 107.

multiple meanings presented by the cluster of symbols such as carnelian, lapis lazuli, cedar, cedar fragrance, perfume, the quay of death, and the quay of hardship create an appropriate place to situate gender and sex ambiguity present in this poem.⁶⁴⁶ This role of captain, just like the role of warrior, gives the mother the qualities of heroism, not one gender or the other, by granting her strength, faithfulness, and accomplishment.

While ultimately the power in the ritual belongs to the god Sîn, the ritual creates a link between the birthing mother and Moon-god Sîn in order to prevail upon Sîn to decide the mother's fate favorably. In this context, Sîn plays the role of judge with the potential to play the role of nurturer.⁶⁴⁷ Thus, the metaphor focuses on the alterior characteristics embodied by the birthing mother; these characteristics are most likely to induce Sîn to intercede. Just as Sîn expresses strength, courage, vigor, motherliness and love as he steers the Boat of Heaven across the sky, the birthing mother shows these characteristics as she steers the boat of her child through the waters. These characteristics are indicative of omnigendered roles and allow the mother brief contact with the divine realm as she gives birth.

⁶⁴⁶ Vanstiphout, 164.

⁶⁴⁷ Veldhuis, *RLS*, 11-13.

CHAPTER V

BEYOND JOAN OF ARC: ALTERIOR HEROISM AND OMNIGENDERED ROLES

As discussed in the introduction, a variety of scholars, such as McCaffrey, Grosz, Walls, Leick and Bahrani, have analyzed instances within the ancient Near East in which both human and divine beings play gender roles that contrast with the perceived sex of their imagined bodies. While these examples have been used to argue for the possibility of third and fourth genders in the ancient Near East,⁶⁴⁸ these genders have been limited to those that express a “neither/nor” vision of gender, in which the individual is neither masculine nor feminine.⁶⁴⁹ Such an eradication of gender is inadequate to describe the multiple gendered possibilities within the ancient Near East. In the examples these scholars offer, as well as in the birth rituals, individuals do not merely blur the distinctions between genders such that they cannot be categorized. Instead, they express characteristics that are radically other than masculine and feminine, allowing them to transcend gender.

In her refiguring of gender within Buddhism, Susanne Mrozik also found such a “neither/nor” identity insufficient. She defines this identity as indeterminate sex.⁶⁵⁰

⁶⁴⁸ Kathleen McCaffrey, “Gender Ambiguity in Mesopotamia: Is a Beard Just a Beard?” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*. (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 379.

⁶⁴⁹ Julia M. Asher-Greve, “Decisive Sex, Essential Gender” in *Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Helsinki, July 2-6, 2001*. (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2002), 21.

⁶⁵⁰ Susanne Mrozik, “Materializations of Virtue: Buddhist Discourse on Bodies,” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 18.

However, she presents an alternative definition when she offers the alterior sex of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha as wholly different from feminine and masculine characterizations.⁶⁵¹ Embodying characteristics that transcend gender characterizes these figures as “. . . omnibodied, omnisexed, and omnigendered. Embodiment is not static, but fluid.”⁶⁵² The multiple and changeable embodiment of certain characteristics destabilizes a binary gender/sex model.

The omnigendered model can be applied to ancient Near Eastern religious practices as well. Deities, including INANNA/Ištar, ENKI/Ea, NANNA/Sîn and Marduk, express characteristics of strength, courage, vigor, motherliness and love, which are not divided along binary gender lines. These characteristics are thus alterior and the Mesopotamian pantheon can be described according to the omnigendered model. Humans who follow these deities, in extraordinary circumstances, also express alterior characteristics and, at certain moments, these humans can play omnigendered roles. These moments can be found in legal texts, where daughters are adopted as sons in order to preserve their families by managing property and worshipping the family gods. Other moments are revealed through iconography as there is evidence of queens who utilize male titles and symbols as they protect the communities they rule. These roles were only open to women of certain rank, geographical region, or family situations.

However, birth rituals can be applied to all women, regardless of geographical area, social rank, class or allegiance to a particular deity, and were thus accessible to a wider range of women within the ancient Near East. Analysis of these birth rituals

⁶⁵¹ Mroziak, 31.

⁶⁵² Mroziak, 19.

suggests that while the ancient Near East had a binary concept of gender and sex,⁶⁵³ it was possible for bodies to exhibit characteristics unlimited by gender. Therefore, a binary gender/sex model cannot fully explain gender performance in ancient Mesopotamia. However, an omnigendered model describes the ways that both deities and humans transcended gender. These challenges to assumptions about gender and sex add dimension to both the study of gender performativity, which has previously focused on the modern west, by including communities far removed both chronologically and geographically, and to the study of the ancient Near East by providing a different lens through which to view this material.

Delimited and Unlimited: Does Gender Produce Sex?

In the ancient Near East, there are numerous examples of gender roles as unlimited by sex, for both deities and humans. As Judith Butler notes, “If sex does not limit gender, than perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex.”⁶⁵⁴ Birth rituals contribute to this picture of multiple gender performances resulting from the actions of one’s sexed body. However, there are differences between ancient Near Eastern understandings of the body and later duality between the mind/body. As noted in the introduction, for the ancient Mesopotamians, there was no difference between the body and soul: “. . . the organic body for the Mesopotamians was fundamentally a place of

⁶⁵³ Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (London: Routledge, 2001), 68.

⁶⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 143.

reflection or manifestation of individuality, or existential identity and even of individual destiny.”⁶⁵⁵ However, this does not mean that the body was irrelevant: “Gender was the interpretation of anatomical differences and imperfections. The inscription of gender on the body was one option to structure society.”⁶⁵⁶ Thus, the presence of multiple, fluid gender categories required dealing with the bodily difference, even if this difference did not necessarily define the societal structure.

However, the ancient Mesopotamian case, in which the role and personal characteristics of the deity transcended perceived gender, one can challenge Butler’s articulation of the relationship between gender and sex. As noted in the introduction, she writes, “. . . it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative* [emphasis Butler’s], inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification”⁶⁵⁷ However, the omigendered roles of the deities and humans in the ancient Near East apply to bodies with multiple types of limits and contours. Thus, in the ancient Near East, gender does not produce sex, but rather produces certain characteristics, such as strength, courage, vigor, motherliness and love, in the body.

These characteristics resist binary categories. Thus, the ancient Near East challenges Butler’s connections between sexuality, gender and sex. Butler argues that

The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire.⁶⁵⁸

⁶⁵⁵ Bahrani, *WoB*, 113.

⁶⁵⁶ Julia Asher-Greve “The Essential Body: Mesopotamian Conceptions of the Gendered Body” *Gender and History* 9.3 (November 1997): 453.

⁶⁵⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 30.

⁶⁵⁸ Butler, *GT*, 30.

However, while ancient Mesopotamia valorized reproduction, and thus, heterosexual activity, gender was not a binary relation, but rather reflected multiple facets. However, despite this break from the binary gender/sex system Butler describes, the ancient Near East was nonetheless a patriarchal system. Therefore, displacement of patriarchy requires more than rearticulating binary sex/gender models.

The Maternal Body: Essentializing or Powerful?

Masculine symbols within a birth ritual raise the question of the relationship between these symbols and the mother's female body. The mother's body and the changes it undergoes in order to give birth, both positive and negative, play the central role within these rituals. In the four rituals discussed in this dissertation, the mother's body has been "butting", "rooting", "whirling", "sprawling", "waning", "steering", "loading." These bodily actions contrast with assumptions about both maternal bodies and maternal characteristics. Moreover, this focus on the body and its actions illustrates that evincing alterior characteristics did not require women to renounce their female bodies.

The relationship between women's bodies and mother's bodies is complex in ancient Mesopotamia. In *Enuma Eliš*, Tiāmat, while a creatrix, is not a mother. Marduk's treatment of her body is both violent and demeaning. This treatment creates a distance between women's bodies and the divine. Beverly Clack argues that, traditionally, ". . . the female body may seem a less than obvious symbol for the divine, given the frequent

connection between female sexuality and the chaotic.”⁶⁵⁹ *Enuma Eliš* both connects the female body with chaos, as well elevating the masculine element of divinity. However, the symbol of the maternal body, represented by fertility figures that emphasize “large breasts, broad hips and rounded belly” celebrates of the female power of bringing about new life.⁶⁶⁰ Due to this ability to create life, the maternal body, in contrast to the female body, is not a limitation in ancient Mesopotamia but rather a link to the sacred.

However, scholars of ancient Near Eastern iconography have claimed that representations of the female body that emphasize motherhood essentialize the female role. Bahrani argues that fertility figures

place emphasis on fertility by exaggerating the size of hips and breasts and by abbreviating all other parts of the body, most notably the head, which is often represented as a tiny cone-shaped knob. In this way the value of a woman is reduced to its lowest common denominator: reproduction.⁶⁶¹

While this reduction of the head in favor of hips and breasts would seem to reduce a woman’s role to only reproduction, it is also important to consider the function of the symbolic. Butler comments that

According to the symbolic, then, the assumption of sex takes place through an approximation of this synecdochal reduction. This is the means by which a body assumes sexed integrity as masculine or feminine: the sexed integrity of the body is paradoxically achieved through an identification with its reduction into idealized synecdoche . . .⁶⁶²

Just as Butler goes on to discuss the ways in which these norms are contested,⁶⁶³ these norms are also contested within the ancient Near Eastern context. These symbols may

⁶⁵⁹ Beverly Clack, “Human Sexuality and the Concept of God/ess,” *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism* (ed. Lisa Isherwood; Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 2000), 116.

⁶⁶⁰ Clack, 118.

⁶⁶¹ Bahrani, *WoB*, 81.

⁶⁶² Butler, *BTM*, 139.

⁶⁶³ Butler, *BTM*, 139.

not necessarily define women through the maternal, but may be defining mothers as separate from women.

Within the ancient Near Eastern context, the symbolic maternal represented not only the ability to physically give birth but also aspects of protectiveness and love.⁶⁶⁴ Thus, an emphasis on motherhood is not necessarily one that reduces a woman to nothing but a body but elevates both men and women who show these characteristics to an extraordinary status. Moreover, motherliness is a characteristic shown by deities of both genders, reinforcing the difference between women and mothers. This difference destabilizes the binary concept of gender within ancient Mesopotamia. Julia Asher-Greve, while making an argument for multiple gender categories within the ancient Near East, correlates the deterioration in the status of women with “a rising emphasis on anatomical properties of male and female bodies (images of nude heroes and women), on motherhood and on male strength.”⁶⁶⁵ While the dichotomy between male and female bodies may have become more pronounced, the parallel between motherhood and male strength can indicate an acknowledgment of motherhood as equal to or the same as male strength in battle, thus reinforcing the alterior status of both roles.

Despite the tendency to connect the male with activity and the female with passivity in ancient Mesopotamian symbolism,⁶⁶⁶ the words “butting”, “rooting”, “whirling”, “sprawling”, “waning”, “steering”, and “loading” all describe actions of the birthing mothers within the rituals under discussion. These verbs directly contrast with the assumed binary roles of men and women. Moreover, as seen in the third chapter, the connection between women and warriors emphasized weakness and fear, while the

⁶⁶⁴ See Chapter II, 47.

⁶⁶⁵ Asher-Greve, “Essential Body,” 454.

⁶⁶⁶ Bahrani, *WoB*, 68.

connection between birthing mothers and warriors conveyed just the opposite, strength and bravery. These conflicts between the meanings of the symbol of woman and the symbol of birthing mother imply that, within the ancient Near East, the gender of woman could be separated from the gender of birthing mother. A birthing mother, like a ruling woman, or a daughter adopted as a son, showed the extraordinary characteristics of the gods. Thus, these women, like the gods, could transcend gender.

The Arrow and the Spindle: Omnigendered Roles in the Ancient Near East

As seen in chapter III, there are curse texts in Hittite material that characterize a man being turned into a woman as being the height of shame and humiliation. However, these texts do show a difference between attitudes toward women and attitudes toward birthing mothers. “The First Soldier’s Oath” simply addresses the concept of giving a man a feminine gender identity:

They bring a woman’s garment, a distaff and a spindle and they break an arrow (lit., reed). You say to them as follows: “What are these? Are they not the dresses of a woman? We are holding them for the oath-taking. He who transgresses these oaths and takes part in evil against the king, queen and princes may these oath deities make (that) man (into) a woman. May they make his troops women. Let them put a scarf on them. Let them break the bows, arrows, and weapons in their hands and let them place the distaff and spindle in their hands (instead).”⁶⁶⁷

While this oath does appear to denigrate women, the fact that it is a soldier’s oath sheds light on the symbolism at work. In this case, the punishment of being turned into a woman means being turned into someone weak and unable to fight in battle. What the oath-breaker deserves is not only to be turned into a woman, but also for his troops not to

⁶⁶⁷ Billie Jean Collins, “The First Soldier’s Oath,” in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 166.

be able to protect him. Susan Haddox notes that this type of gender inversion is common: “Becoming like women or feminized is a frequent metaphor used by men to represent loss of social prestige or power across various cultures.”⁶⁶⁸ While this loss of power is present in the concept of being turned into a woman, battle metaphors in the ancient Near East illustrate that the symbolism of man and woman in this text is multi-faceted and tied explicitly to physical and military prowess in battle.

The type of symbol inversion in these Hittite oaths and Mesopotamian epics continues within the Hebrew Bible. Examples include Nahum 3:13 (“Look at your troops: they are women in your midst!”) and Jeremiah 51:30 (“The warriors of Babylon have given up fighting, they remain in their strongholds; their strength has failed, they have become women!”).⁶⁶⁹ These statements do denigrate women and emphasize the fact that most women are not as physically strong as men and thus would be less imposing on the battlefield. However, these texts do not necessarily prove that women never exhibited strength or courage such as that exemplified by warriors, simply that it was not what the symbol “women” signified in the ancient Near East. Harold Washington notes, “The language of war in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient near Eastern literatures is acutely masculinist. Warfare is emblematically male and the discourse of violence is closely imbricated with that of masculine sexuality.”⁶⁷⁰ Thus, the language in which “man” is a symbol for both physical and military strength continued into biblical texts.

⁶⁶⁸ Susan Haddox, “Metaphor and Masculinity in Hosea” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2007), 54.

⁶⁶⁹ These references and all subsequent biblical quotations are taken from *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

⁶⁷⁰ Harold C. Washington, “Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Bible: A New Historicist Approach” *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997): 330.

Washington is primarily concerned with how the symbols of “man” and “woman” function in the context of violence:

In this discourse ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are mobile constructs, a complementary pair of signifiers reciprocally determined by their relation to violence. Here violent power is marked as masculine, subjugation and defeat as feminine.⁶⁷¹

This context of power expressed through physical and military might is inextricably intertwined with concepts of gender identity, but “man” and “woman” also signified a wider variety of characteristics. Also, while Washington considers the meaning when the term “woman” is applied to someone sexed male, he does not interrogate the possibilities for meaning when the term “man” is applied to someone sexed female.

Cynthia Chapman continues an analysis of the theme of masculinity, violence and warfare in Israelite-Assyrian battle encounters. She points out that Assyrian royal inscriptions emphasize the king’s performance of masculinity with the “strength, courage, and heroism demonstrated on the battlefield and symbolized concretely in divinely activated weapons.”⁶⁷² Thus, she provides another ancient Near Eastern example of the close symbolic relationship between masculinity and war. However, Chapman continues her analysis of these reliefs for further exploration of what masculine symbols signified within this context. She goes on to note that the royal performance of masculinity also included other elements such as

divine chosenness, legitimate succession based on birth, and enacting the role of ‘shepherd’ by protecting and providing for one’s subjects In order to assume the role of shepherd over the four corners of the universe, a king first had to win the masculine contest on the battlefield so completely as to prove he had no rival.⁶⁷³

⁶⁷¹ Washington, 331.

⁶⁷² Cynthia Chapman, *Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite Assyrian Encounter* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 32.

⁶⁷³ Chapman, 33.

Some of these alterior elements can also be found in the ancient Near Eastern birth rituals, such as a close relationship with the divine and playing the shepherd role in protecting and providing for a child. These elements indicate that heroism was not solely defined by masculinity.

It is important to note that, while there are numerous examples of soldier's oaths in which being turned into a woman is the ultimate punishment, there is at least one example in which the removal of maternity is an equal punishment. In a Hittite prayer, the text reads

Take away from the (enemy) men manhood, courage, vigor and *mal*, maces, bows, arrows (and) dagger(s), and bring them to Ḫatti. For those (i.e. the enemy) place in the hand the distaff and spindle of the woman and dress them like women. Put the scarf on them and take away from them your favor.
But from the women take away motherliness, love (and) *mūšni*- and bring it into the Ḫattiland. . . .⁶⁷⁴

This prayer gives some context to the concept in which soldiers becoming women is the ultimate defeat. While the symbol of women is still present, motherliness as a characteristic contrasts with the foolish figures of enemy men wearing women's clothing and handling women's tools. Motherhood thus carries different symbolic weight than womanhood. In this case, taking away from women motherliness, love and the undefined *mūšni* is equally devastating for the enemies of Ḫatti. Although he cites this prayer, Washington ends his analysis before the final lines, leaving the reader with the only curse as the warring soldiers becoming like women.⁶⁷⁵ With the full text, one can see that motherliness and love were valued for the well-being of the community as a whole. Thus,

⁶⁷⁴ Billie Jean Collins, "Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh" in *The Context of Scripture, Vol. I.* (ed. William W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 164.

⁶⁷⁵ Washington, 331.

for a soldier becoming a woman meant a lack of manhood, courage, and vigor which would be negatives on the battlefield. However, lacking those qualities did not make women worthless to the community as whole.

This Hittite text provides another option within the discussion about what it means for INANNA/Ištar to have the power to alter gender in the first chapter.⁶⁷⁶ As previously discussed, scholars have evinced a variety of theories as to what lines such as these mean; for example, alteration of a biological sex, alteration of sex role, alterations of dress, third or fourth gender categories.⁶⁷⁷ In this Hittite prayer, the power to destabilize gender supported by Walls,⁶⁷⁸ McCaffrey⁶⁷⁹ and Bahrani⁶⁸⁰ in their analysis of Ištar's role takes on even more meaning. In this text, Ištar's power is to remove the essential or idealized qualities of both men and women in such a way as to destroy a community. When the men of Ḫatti's enemies are de-masculinized, they can no longer protect their community. However, the community could retain some sense of identity if love and motherliness are allowed to continue. Thus, the power to remove these traits can be the power to destroy one community and to elevate another. Ištar's power to alter gender is not adequately explained by any of theories previously offered. However, an omnigendered lens does allow for the possibility for deities and humans in extraordinary circumstances to express characteristics that were distinct from the dichotomy of masculine and feminine.

⁶⁷⁶ See Chapter I, 28.

⁶⁷⁷ McCaffrey, 380.

⁶⁷⁸ Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (Boston, Mass. American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001), 47.

⁶⁷⁹ McCaffrey, 380.

⁶⁸⁰ Bahrani, *WoB*, 145.

Birthing mothers and women express different characteristics and are thus categorized differently in ancient Mesopotamia. Birthing mothers are not only feminine but rather also express alterior sex characteristics in the moment of giving birth. These alterior sex characteristics of strength, courage, vigor, and love were necessary not only in the extraordinary realm of the gods, but in the human realm. For humans, demonstrating these traits made a person a hero.

Manhood and Motherliness: Omnigendered Qualities of the Hero

While there has been no comprehensive study of the relationships between birth, heroism, and gender performance, the ability to show the alterior characteristics allowed humans to briefly experience the realm of the deities. These characteristics, by virtue of being divine, can be heroic when performed by humans. Just as Mrozik separates the characteristics of the Bodhisattva from the realm of masculine and feminine in Buddhism,⁶⁸¹ in the ancient Near East, the qualities of the hero are neither feminine nor masculine. The Mesopotamian pantheon is best characterized through an omnigendered model, in which the role of the deity superseded the deity's perceived gender. The deities discussed here all show alterior characteristics. Within Mesopotamia, the pantheon echoed the human world. Thus, humans could perform these alterior traits during brief, uncommon times and become heroes.

Analysis of the roles of iconographic heroes of epic poetry, such as Gilgameš, Enkidu, Lugalbanda, and Atrahāsīs, illustrates that heroism had a complex definition and

⁶⁸¹ Mrozik, 29.

included a variety of traits.⁶⁸² These four heroes, who possess male bodies, all exemplified alterior characteristics in their roles as heroes. By examining these cultural ideals, it is possible to place the birthing mothers depicted in these incantations in context with these heroic figures to create a picture of the ways in which birthing mothers performed heroism in the ancient Near East. The attributes that are listed as emblematic of men and women in the Hittite “Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh”⁶⁸³ were those that could be heroic in the ancient Near Eastern context: manhood, courage, vigor, motherliness and love. Moreover, characteristics of heroes included as piety, cleverness, allure and overall excellence, were also characteristics of heroes.⁶⁸⁴ These qualities transcend gender.

While it is easy to define heroism as limited to physical strength or military prowess,⁶⁸⁵ the heroes touted in the epic poetry of this period express a multitude of other qualities. Therefore, analysis of these idealized figures leads to an understanding of heroism that incorporates much more than brute strength and contributes to the concept of an omnigendered system. The figures of Gilgameš and Enkidu embody a heroic role that, while it includes, strength, courage, and vigor, also includes allure, compassion, and protectiveness. While the name Gilgameš appears in Sumerian king lists, the figure

⁶⁸² The story of Gilgameš and Enkidu’s, which include conquering the Bull of Heaven, can be found in *The Epic of Gilgameš: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, (trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003). Atraḥasīs built a boat on the advice of the god ENKI in order to preserve his community from a punishing flood sent by the gods. “Atraḥasīs” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 235.). Adapa was a servant of Ea whose boat capsized and he was challenged by the gods and offered the possibility of eternal life. “Adapa and the South Wind” (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 526). Lugalbanda is the protagonist of two epic poems in which he intervenes to save his community. The text can be found in Jeremy Black *Reading Sumerian Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

⁶⁸³ Collins, “Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh,” 64.

⁶⁸⁴ Niek Veldhuis, *Religion, Literature and Scholarship: The Sumerian Composition Nanše and the Birds with a Catalogue of Sumerian Bird Names* (Leiden: Brill/Styx, 2004), 67-68

⁶⁸⁵ Asher-Greve, “Essential Body,” 443.

became mythic as early as the late third millennium BCE in Sumerian tradition.⁶⁸⁶ *The Epic of Gilgameš* tells the story of the hero Gilgameš, his friendship with Enkidu, the journeys they made together, Enkidu's death, and Gilgameš's quest for immortality. At the beginning of the story, Gilgameš is characterized by his strength, "his relentless energy and vigor."⁶⁸⁷ In addition, Šamḥat, the woman who sexually initiates Enkidu and introduces him to civilization, describes him as "perfect in strength"⁶⁸⁸ In both cases, however, their strength is insufficient: Gilgameš's overindulgence in stereotypical masculine behavior, such as sexual license and battle, burdened the people of his community.⁶⁸⁹ This oppression had to be tempered by the presence of Enkidu and the love and protectiveness Gilgameš felt for him.⁶⁹⁰

Moreover, Enkidu, as well, exhibits strength, as he first awakens, runs with the wild animals, enters into sexual relationship with Šamḥat, and has the courage to challenge Gilgameš when he believes him to be doing wrong. However, his great deeds do not take place until he meets Gilgameš. Enkidu, too, becomes a standard for strength after he moves from his natural to his civilized state, as Šamḥat calls him "just like a god."⁶⁹¹ Moreover, Enkidu also exemplifies other alterior traits. He sacrifices his life for Gilgameš and thus gives up everything for Gilgameš's good, exhibiting motherliness and love.

⁶⁸⁶ Andrew George, "Introduction," in *The Epic of Gilgameš: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003), xxxi.

⁶⁸⁷ Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgameš and David* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2005), 40.

⁶⁸⁸ *The Epic of Gilgameš: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, (I 211) (trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003), 8.

⁶⁸⁹ Jerrold S. Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia: Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Mesopotamian Homosexuality" in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (ed. Tzvi Abusch; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 77.

⁶⁹⁰ Walls, 51.

⁶⁹¹ *Gilgameš*, (I 207), [trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003], 8.

Other aspects that make Enkidu and Gilgameš heroes include their attractiveness, their cleverness and their compassion.⁶⁹² Gilgameš's allure is equally represented as an aspect of his manliness. In his speech after defeating the Bull of Heaven, he says

Who is the finest among men?
Who is the most glorious of fellows?
Gilgameš is the finest among men!
[Gilgameš the most] glorious of fellows!⁶⁹³

In this way, Gilgameš's beauty and glory are equally appealing as his strength and vigor. Enkidu, too, is described as "handsome."⁶⁹⁴ This allure is part of their idealization. As previously discussed, the allure of both Gilgameš and Naram-Sîn were essential elements of their heroism.⁶⁹⁵ Mrozik argues, in reference to Buddhism,

For instance, virtue is commonly associated with beauty, a fair complexion, health and high caste. The close relationship Buddhists posit between body and morality means that bodies rarely appear as morally neutral in Buddhist literature.⁶⁹⁶

A similar argument can be made for ancient Near Eastern literature, in that the strong and alluring body has a close relationship with heroism.

Moreover, both heroes exhibit feminine qualities, as they were understood in the ancient Near East. Enkidu's femininity is first observed during his natural state and continues as he is civilized. Susan Ackerman notes that Enkidu is described as having hair like a woman and is clothed in Šamḥat's (a woman's) clothing, when he is first clothed.⁶⁹⁷ In addition, Enkidu interprets Gilgameš's dream, taking a role assigned to women in both the epic specifically and Mesopotamian literature generally.⁶⁹⁸ Many

⁶⁹² Walls, 33.

⁶⁹³ *Gilgameš*, (VI 171-172), [trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003], 54.

⁶⁹⁴ *Gilgameš*, (I 207), [trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003], 8.

⁶⁹⁵ See Chapter III, 94-95.

⁶⁹⁶ Mrozik., 16.

⁶⁹⁷ Ackerman, *WHL*, 119.

⁶⁹⁸ Ackerman, *WHL*, 120.

scholars have noted that symbols representing Enkidu, such as the axe and the meteor, are mentioned as being “like a wife” in relation to Gilgameš.⁶⁹⁹ In addition, Gilgameš is also described in feminine terms in his grief over Enkidu’s death: “Like a lioness deprived of her cubs, He paced to and fro, this way and that”⁷⁰⁰ Furthermore, his lamentation for Enkidu is explicitly described as like that of a “hired mourner-woman.”⁷⁰¹ This fierce protectiveness, as well as the mourning, is a maternal trait. The heroism here therefore also includes stereotypically feminine qualities such as protectiveness, loyalty, and wisdom.

These depictions of Gilgameš’s grief also illustrate the component of suffering found in the ancient Mesopotamian heroic role. This grief drives him into “isolation, despair and madness” as he sets off to the underworld to gain immortality.⁷⁰² These descriptions make Gilgameš more heroic, as they show his concern for someone other than himself. While his quest fails, within ancient Mesopotamia, Gilgameš is not less of a hero because of this failure.⁷⁰³ Thus, while he does not achieve eternal life, he does achieve love for another person and that relationship is essential to his heroism.

Despite the large amount of work done in examining the masculine and feminine characteristics of both figures in queer studies, the gender bending within this epic has not led any scholars to call into question gender role construction within in the ancient Near East. In fact, Walls notes that

both of the heroes are overtly masculine according to tradition and ancient standards of gender their courage, strength, combativeness, and sense of

⁶⁹⁹ Ackerman, *WHL*, 120.

⁷⁰⁰ *Gilgameš*, (VIII, 60-61), [trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003], 65.

⁷⁰¹ *Gilgameš*, (VIII, 44), [trans. Andrew George; Penguin: London, 2003], 64.

⁷⁰² Walls, 68.

⁷⁰³ Walls, 71.

honor. . . . Neither hero demonstrates signs of feminine gender, although some feminine images are applied to each of them.⁷⁰⁴

I would argue, however, that these feminine images challenge the concept that heroism is only tied to strength. They show that the qualities of heroism are neither feminine nor masculine but alterior. Therefore, heroism in ancient Mesopotamia required omnigendered performance.

Lugalbanda⁷⁰⁵ provides another example of an omnigendered hero. Lugalbanda does not begin the story physically strong, since he becomes ill and is abandoned by his brothers. In this way, Lugalbanda, like Gilgameš, experiences the suffering that was component of heroism.⁷⁰⁶ However, he gains physical strength when the Anzu bird gifts him with great speed. This suffering actually enables him to be hero, as it gives him the supernatural characteristics that allow him to communicate with both the human and divine worlds.⁷⁰⁷ His heroism does not consist of this physical attribute, however. It becomes obvious when he turns down all of the rich gifts offered to him by the Anzu bird. Instead, he employs his ability serve to his community as he joins his brothers and takes on the dangerous task of returning to Kulaba. These actions illustrate courage, love, and motherliness towards his brothers and his community:

Lugalbanda does not act in his own interest: on the contrary, all his exertions have as their intention the performance of a great and useful task for the community (of course, *his* community), and not the realization of personal ambition.⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁴ Walls, 56.

⁷⁰⁵ “Lugalbanda” (Jeremy Black. *Reading Sumerian Poetry*. [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998], 58-64).

⁷⁰⁶ H. L. J. Vanstiphout, “Sanctus *Lugalbanda*” in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* (ed. Tzvi Abusch; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 264.

⁷⁰⁷ Vanstiphout, 273.

⁷⁰⁸ Vanstiphout, 284.

Although Enmerkar actually leads the troops and commands INANNA's battle-strength, Lugalbanda's performance of omnigender makes him the hero of this tale.

Atraḥasīs is another hero whose salient qualities are not that of strength or military might, but rather piety and compassion. ENKI warns Atraḥasīs of the upcoming flood because of Atraḥasīs's devotion to him.⁷⁰⁹ Atraḥasīs experiences his time of suffering during the period while he pilots the boat during the flood and thus must endure pain before he can triumph. Moreover, Atraḥasīs illustrates compassion for the community by attempting to warn the elders.⁷¹⁰ Therefore, Atraḥasīs's heroic qualities are not limited to the performance of masculine or feminine gender.

The examples of Atraḥasīs, Lugalbanda, Enkidu and Gilgameš illustrate that heroism was omnigendered. Heroism further required some form of relationality, such as Gilgameš and Enkidu's love for one another and Lugalbanda's love for his brothers despite their cruel treatment of him, and concern for someone else above themselves, which are not characteristics aligned with feminine or masculine. In each of the birth incantations, the birthing mothers exhibit relationality with the gods addressed in the rituals, as well as with the child to be born, and work toward preservation of the community by the act of giving birth. Thus, "they materialize sexed bodies that defy our limited and limiting definitions of male and female."⁷¹¹ Following the model of the four male heroes discussed above, these rituals show that the qualities exhibited by the birthing mothers are alterior and heroic within ancient Mesopotamia.

⁷⁰⁹ "Atraḥasīs" (III.i 45) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 248).

⁷¹⁰ "Atraḥasīs" (III.i 40-41) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 248).

⁷¹¹ Mroziak, 35.

While the heroes in epic poetry were men, the heroes of the birth incantations are the women for whom these rituals are performed. Rituals and poetry perform different functions; however, both utilize the power of language and imagery to accomplish a goal.⁷¹² Moreover, rituals are speech acts, designed to perform an action.⁷¹³ In the case of birth rituals, the speech acts not only persuade the deity to act on behalf of the mother, but also create heroic characteristics in the mother's body.

Just as one can analyze the tales of male heroes for evidence of alterior characteristics, one can analyze the narrative portions of birth rituals for proof of similar traits. For example, through the verbs "butting", "root", and "whirl" in "I am Pregnant,"⁷¹⁴ the cow clearly fights to give birth. Her delivery is thus a kind of battle in which death is the enemy who must be slain.⁷¹⁵ Soldiers in battle must face death, and they do so in order to protect their community. By giving birth, the mother is ensuring the continued life of her community. Childbirth was extremely dangerous and carried considerable risk of death during this time period.⁷¹⁶ Thus, facing this possibility indicated her courage. The images of the ships and cargo appear at the end of "I am Pregnant." As the butting cow appeals to Ea to loose the "ship" and the "cargo" boat from the quays of death and hardship, she shows not only concern for herself but for the child as well and exhibits motherliness. Moreover, she exhibits piety by repeatedly identifying herself as a cow of Sîn, and by believing that Ea will deliver her child safely.

⁷¹² Veldhuis, *RLS*, 47.

⁷¹³ Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplment: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 14.

⁷¹⁴ Niek Veldhuis, *A Cow of Sîn* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1991), 9.

⁷¹⁵ Della Pollack, *Telling Bodies, Performing Birth* (New York: Columbia University, 1999), 6.

⁷¹⁶ J.A. Scurlock, "Baby-Snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Incognita 2* (1991): 137.

“The Baby is Stuck”⁷¹⁷ presents more specific references to the birthing mother’s strength, courage and vigor. The courage she needs is called for by the detailed descriptions of her suffering and the danger of death she encounters. The final two lines express motherliness and love: “Bring out the one sealed up, created by the gods, Created by humankind, let him come out and see the light!”⁷¹⁸ The concern for and desire to protect the child illustrate the purpose of the mother’s enduring the pain and danger, for the good of the child and to continue the human community of which she is a part. Her direct appeal to Marduk indicates her piety.

In “Steering the Boat”⁷¹⁹ the birthing mother exhibits courage by steering her boat around the quays of hardship and of death. The danger she faces is explicit in these references. Moreover, her vigor is indicated by the repeated mentions of her loading the boat with various kinds of cargo. The ritual evokes motherliness and love through the care with which she has prepared the boats for their journey. Thus, the mother shows the alterior traits of the hero through the symbol of ship’s captain.

In all of these rituals, the gods provide safe delivery of the child. The fact that Ea, Sîn, and Marduk govern childbirth is more important for their roles in these rituals than their perceived gender. As discussed, these Mesopotamian deities expressed alterior characteristics not limited by a binary concept of gender. While in this ritual, Ea does not perform any actions, in other texts he shows his concern for his people, but helping to create life, as well as advising humans in ways that both save their lives and prevent them from achieving mortality. Sîn’s behavior in a variety of circumstances illustrates both

⁷¹⁷ W. G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text” *Iraq* 31.1 (Spring 1969): 28-39.

⁷¹⁸ “The Baby is Stuck” (Benjamin R. Foster. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 715).

⁷¹⁹ Marten Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx, 2000), 62.

motherliness and love in his protectiveness of his people, both a large scale and individually. From other literature, the maternal nature of Marduk's character is obvious.⁷²⁰ The gods are the ultimate heroes of these rituals, since they are the ones with the power to determine the fate of both mother and child, but they pave the way for the omnigendered performance by the human figures of the birthing mother.

The birthing mother's bodies are essential elements of their heroism. In placing giving birth on a continuum with other heroic acts, ancient Near Eastern heroism does not require losing feminine identity. As Sara Ruddick notes, "To respect *female* bodies [emphasis Ruddick's] means respecting, even treasuring, the birthgiving vulnerabilities and procreative powers of females."⁷²¹ The birth rituals discussed illustrate the respect for these vulnerabilities and powers through vivid descriptions of the mother's actions and feelings. The vulnerabilities are embraced through acknowledging the danger and the need for divine intervention, while equating these dangers with those faced by men, while at sea or at war.

Thus, birthing mothers' bodies were valorized. While birth is not the only means of embodying the female, it is one way in which individuals who are sexed female confront their identities as women.⁷²² Within in the ancient Near East, birthing mothers are placed in a divine realm rather than a human one. As Saba Mahmood argues,

In other words, action does not issue forth from natural feelings but *creates* them. Furthermore, it is through repeated *bodily acts* that one trains one's

⁷²⁰ "Against Illness" (17-20) (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. [3rd ed. Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005], 683).

⁷²¹ Sara Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth" in *Representations of Motherhood* (ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 36.

⁷²² Ruddick, 41.

memory, desire, and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct.⁷²³

Thus, through the act of giving birth, the mother's mind is trained to evince these qualities as well. Thus, the heroism, while manifesting itself through the actions of her body, does not require her to change her body. A birthing mother's body was as strong and vigorous as any man's. Her heroism could be shown by the characteristics that arose from her body. Within an ancient Near Eastern context, possession of alterior attributes characterized a person as a hero.⁷²⁴ The act of giving birth, therefore, made birthing mothers heroes.

Before Joan of Arc: Monotheism, Heroism and Gender

Within ancient Mesopotamia, religious understanding included the presence of multiple deities who were characterized by the role they played, as well as understood as having a perceived gender. These deities exhibited a variety of characteristics that did not align with their perceived gender identities. These “[q]ualities of compassion, tenderness, gentleness, as well as bravery, violence, anger and cruelty are not inherently gender based”⁷²⁵ and were not gendered in the depictions of deities. Because of the relationship between the Mesopotamian pantheon and humanity, humans who showed these qualities also were not limited to either a feminine or a masculine gender performance.

⁷²³ Saba Mahmood, “Agency, Performativity, and the Feminist Subject” in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler* (ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 195.

⁷²⁴ Walls, 56; Mrozik, 29.

⁷²⁵ F. Klopper, “Women, Monotheism and the Gender of God,” *In Die Skriflig* 36.3 (2002): 426.

The relationship between gender identity and religious belief is a complex one. Within the ancient Near East, both men and women worshipped both male and female deities. In contrast, Christianity, with one male god, has significant implications for gender roles. For example, contemporary feminist scholars struggle against the concept that

. . . the male tradition and the official Church have placed maleness as the norm for God and humanity in a heteronomous culture where women are adjuncts even when they are considered worthy of praise.⁷²⁶

Thus, the worship of one male god could lead to a belief that women do not have the potential to be godlike: “If we see God as a man or more like a man or more properly named in male language, we tend to think of men as more like god, and women less like God.”⁷²⁷ If women are less like deities, then they are unable to take on the characteristics of deities. When taken to its logical extreme, such a notion leads to the concept that there is a “clear *imago Dei* in the male and a weaker one or even a total absence in the female.”⁷²⁸ Therefore, excluding goddesses from a belief system makes it easier to exclude women from a holy or heroic identity.

Although women have found ways to be heroic within the monotheistic system, the price has often been their identities as women. Joan of Arc was a hero but to become one she not only wore male clothing, but rejoiced in her virginity. Thus, she could not exercise power without rejecting aspects of embodied femininity. Within ancient Mesopotamia, women who sought to be devout and heroic did not have to renounce their

⁷²⁶ Killian McDonnell, “Feminist Mariologies: Heteronomy/Subordination and the Scandal of Christology.” *Theological Studies*. 66. 3 (2005): 9.

⁷²⁷ Klopper, 423.

⁷²⁸ Elisabeth Gossman, “The Image of God and the Human Being in Women’s Counter-Tradition” in *Is there a Future for Feminist Theology?* (ed. Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 32.

bodies. Among the options for showing the alterior characteristics of strength, courage, vigor, motherliness and love, they could give birth. Thus, an act that not only allowed, but required, a female body was divine.

In contrast to the monotheistic system, polytheistic practice alters perceptions of gender, according to some scholars of contemporary communities. For example, the Yoruba of West Africa organize their deities by function rather than gender: “Even though there are distinct masculine and feminine deities, their functional and cultural practices are not always gender specific.”⁷²⁹ Similarly, the roles and teachings of the multiple deities with the ancient Near Eastern system could not easily be divided along a polarity of gender. Thus, neither maleness nor femaleness was normative for deities. The destabilization paved the way human women, as well as men, to exhibit alterior characteristics.

Moreover, the questions asked of contemporary polytheistic religions can also be asked of ancient Mesopotamian religion:

In non-Western societies that revere many Gods, we can determine which Gods are associated with a particular gender and how these Gods are esteemed in the society. What are the roles and teachings of these Gods in conveying morality, codes of honor, teachings of love, thrift and respect for females and motherhood?⁷³⁰

These questions illustrate the effect deities have on the characteristics that are honored within a community. In the ancient Near East, these characteristics were neither masculine nor feminine, but alterior and thus reflected omnigender. Within the Yoruba, “The unity and complementarity of gender that is, both male and female, the ideal

⁷²⁹ Jacob Olupona. “Imagining the Goddess: Gender in Yoruba Religious Traditions and Modernity.” *Dialogue & Alliance* 18.2 (Fall/Winter 2004/2005): 74.

⁷³⁰ Olupona, 78.

Yoruba gendered life.”⁷³¹ While the unity of both male and female is not the ideal in the ancient Near East, a role outside gender existed for the gods and could be attained by humans.

During the act of giving birth, a birthing mother takes on alterior characteristics. In this way, birth rituals illustrate the multiplicity of genders made possible through discursive and bodily practices of the ancient Near East. In ancient Mesopotamia, there are multiple examples of deities, as well as human women and men, who express the alterior characteristics of strength, courage, vigor, motherliness and love. These examples can be found across geographic and chronological boundaries. Moreover, they can be found in legal texts, historical records, iconography, and birth rituals. These wide-ranging examples cannot be merely exceptional or aberrant. Therefore, a binary sex/gender model is insufficient to characterize gender roles in the ancient Near East. However, an omnigendered model not only allows a place for deities and humans who express alterior characteristics, but valorizes human performance of these characteristics. Before Joan of Arc, a woman did not have to lead an army; the act of giving birth was more than enough to be heroic.

⁷³¹ Olupona, 81.

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