

**Medicine, Comedy, Power**  
**And their Interconnections in Babylonia and Assyria**  
**Martin Worthington**

A stimulating paper of 2001 by Franco D'Agostino observed that the small extant corpus of Babylonian<sup>1</sup> 'comical' compositions contains a strikingly high concentration of healing professionals.<sup>2</sup> On the strength of his extremely interesting observation, D'Agostino posed the equally interesting questions: is this significant, and, if so, how?

The answer provided by D'Agostino was, in its essentials, that the deployment of healing professionals in comedy served a cathartic function. In other words, as they were people who trafficked with demons and the like, Babylonians and Assyrians viewed healing professionals with a degree of unease; laughing dispelled this.

A difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that, in at least one of the comic compositions (the *Poor Man of Nippur*), the audience is not invited to laugh *at* the healer, but *with* him. If this does not invalidate the hypothesis of a cathartic function here, at least it calls it into question. While catharsis may well be part of the picture, we hold it is not the full story. In particular, we believe that the Babylonian compositions can be illumined by consideration of the role of doctors in other literary traditions. Accordingly, we propose to consider the question afresh.

### 1. The comic corpus

The degree to which one perceives healers to be concentrated in 'comic' compositions depends, of course, on which compositions one classifies as comic. This paper will not be concerned with every Babylonian composition which has comic moments or aspects.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it will concern itself with the small number of compositions for which it is hard to

---

<sup>1</sup> Though, like most literature from Babylonia and Assyria, the 'comic' compositions are written in Babylonian not Assyrian, they should (again like many other works) probably be regarded as belonging to the cultural heritage of both civilisations, hence 'Babylonia and Assyria' in our title. In the body of the essay we will speak of 'Babylonian comedy' after the language of composition.

<sup>2</sup> D'Agostino, *Aula Orientalis* 19 (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Any attempt to produce such a list would in any case run into many uncertainties, as it is not always easy to detect subtle humour in an alien literature (cf. e.g. fn. 4). For example, Harris, *Gender and Aging*, 121 and 127-128 detects humour in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. There is no reason *a priori* why this should not be the case – if Evelyn Waugh's tragic *Brideshead Revisited* can, in places, be extremely funny, then why not *Gilgamesh*? (The latter's antiquity is not a good reason for scepticism). Nonetheless, it is difficult to be sure in any given passage.

escape the impression that they were *primarily* comical, and, what is more, comic in a straightforward, belly-laugh sort of way.

This restricted corpus of clearly, primarily and straight-forwardly comic compositions includes (using their modern titles) *The Poor Man of Nippur*, *Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog Bite*, *The Aluzinnu* (or: *The Jester*), and *At the Cleaner's*.<sup>4</sup> The first three feature healers.

## 2. Doctors in comedy: some cross-cultural trends

Doctors<sup>5</sup> feature in comedies of many different times and places.<sup>6</sup> Some aspects of their deployment are of course tied to very specific cultural contexts.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, there are trends which run through different cultural and temporal settings, and it seems inadequate to explain these away as stemming from a common inheritance (such as Ancient Greek comedy). Rather, they are more likely tied to certain simple cross-cultural constants (or near-constants) in how healers interact with their patients, such as their use of difficult language, their need for remuneration, and their privileged access to and control over the patient's body. In the present section we shall draw attention to some of these trends, and in the next we shall apply these observations to Babylonia and Assyria.

First, doctors can be the butt of the joke, i.e. victims of satire.<sup>8</sup> In this function they are mocked for qualities such as verbosity, empty learning, incompetence, and greed. This

---

<sup>4</sup> *The Dialogue of Pessimism* is exceptional in that it lends itself equally well to serious and comic readings (cf. e.g. Lambert, *BWL*, 139-142 vs. D'Agostino, *Testi umoristici*, 85, D'Agostino in *Fs Pettinato*, 16-17; a survey of earlier opinions is given by Foster, *JANES* 6 (1974) 82, who himself regards the composition as parody). Perhaps the scatological parody of a love song should also be added to the list (see the comments by Foster, p. 79).

<sup>5</sup> For Ancient Mesopotamia we use the more general term 'healer' over the more specific 'doctor' in deference to the many obscurities which surround the exact functions of the healing professionals. By contrast, 'doctor' is a term routinely applied the other literary traditions to which reference is made in this paper, and we use it for them since 'healer' would sound unnatural.

<sup>6</sup> Reiner, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 130/1 (1986) 1b notes that 'the comic figure of the doctor' is 'well exploited in folk literature'.

<sup>7</sup> An example are French physicians appearing in Elizabethan English comedy. Kolin, *Elizabethan Stage Doctor*, 41 notes that their popularity has a foundation in historical fact: "In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, French doctors were part of the coterie of servants waiting on the aristocracy and even [royalty]".

<sup>8</sup> Fo, *Manuale minimo*, 28 suggests they are mocked as members of high society who do not wield absolute power ('sottuti quali membri dell'alta società che non detengono potere assoluto'). If this applied to Babylonia and Assyria, the extant corpus of burlesque compositions is too small for this

happens already in Ancient Greece. Doctors do not feature as characters in Old Comedy, but in Aristophanes's *The Clouds* Socrates includes doctors among the groups of charlatan sophists,<sup>9</sup> and in the same author's *Plutos* there is a likely allusion to greed when it is said that there is not a single doctor left in Athens owing to shortage of funds for paying them.<sup>10</sup> Titles of lost plays suggest that in Middle and New Comedy the doctor became a stock character. Middle Comedy often likens cooks to doctors, one way of doing this is being to have them speak in abstruse, highly technical language.<sup>11</sup> Doctors in ancient Greek comedy often have Doric accents.<sup>12</sup>

Centuries later, their European counterparts often speak amusingly obscure pidgin Latin. Most famously employed by Molière,<sup>13</sup> this was already a feature of the *oeuvre* of Portuguese playwright Gil Vicente (1465-1537), and had precedents in the Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup> Even when speaking vernacular language, they pepper it with technical, difficult-sounding words, e.g. the surgeon in Middleton and Rowley's *A Fair Quarrel* (Act IV scene ii): spinal medul, emunctories, syncope, tumefaction, quadrangular plumation, sanguis draconis, powders incarnative, liquors mundificative.<sup>15</sup>

Avarice is another attribute well represented in European traditions, an example being the exchange with a robber in Piron's *L'Antre de Trophonius* (1722): "Your purse or your life" – "So, I take it you are a doctor".<sup>16</sup> P. Kolin comments that in English comedies

---

motivation to be detectable. (*The Poor Man of Nippur* mocks a mayor, who did wield absolute power).

<sup>9</sup> Lines 331-334. The term Socrates employs, *iatrotechnai*, probably refers to theoreticians of medicine rather than hands-on therapists, and a scholiast connects the passage with the Hippocratic treatise *On Airs, Places and Waters*. See Jouanna in *Aristophane*, 189-190 and Cordes, *Iatros*, 55-56.

<sup>10</sup> Lines 407-408. Jouanna in *Aristophane*, 189 comments that impoverishment would indeed be plausible in the wake of the Corinthian war. Cordes, *Iatros*, 53-54 argues that the passage must refer to public doctors, but this seems uncertain.

<sup>11</sup> Roselli in *La comédie*, 168-169.

<sup>12</sup> The origin of the association between doctors and Doric accents is probably that the best doctors came from outside mainland Greece from *asia minor* and *magna graecia*, where Doric was spoken. See Cordes, *Iatros*, 61.

<sup>13</sup> On Molière's doctors see Petersen, *Doctor in French Drama* and Dandrey, *Molière*.

<sup>14</sup> David-Peyre, *Littérature iberique*, 47, with ref. to Dr Witkowsky, *Les médecins au théâtre, de l'antiquité au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1905), unavailable to me.

<sup>15</sup> Yearsley, *Doctors in Elizabethan Drama*, 71 suggests that this 'remarkable ... professional chatter' may be 'intended as light relief'.

<sup>16</sup> Cited from G. Doutrepont, *La littérature et les médecins en France*. Extrait du Bulletin de l'Académie Royale de Langue et Littérature françaises de Belgique (Liège, 1933), 12-13 by Petersen, *Doctor in French Drama*, 32. Cf. also the comment by David-Peyre, *Littérature iberique*, 53 on Iberian literature of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries: 'La satire, de Gongora à Enriquez Gomez, n'a cessé de s'emparer des multiples arguments que les indécis suscitaient alors que la médecine était devenue un moyen de s'enrichir'.

from the 1580s onwards, doctors are characterised as ‘mercenary panders to the public taste, roguish charlatans, or, even when legitimate, men extremely proud and pompous ... If their noses were not fastened to urinals and their eyes were not scanning the heavens, then their hands were in a patron’s pocket’.<sup>17</sup>

A mixture of all these undesirable qualities is beautifully manifest on pp. 12-13 of *Asterix in Switzerland*, where a patient is examined by a mob of doctors, said to be “more murderous than a legion armed to the teeth” when they get together. Amid their obscure disputations and suggestions for lethal-sounding remedies, the doctors fail to detect that the patient has been poisoned, and after a short while later they allow themselves be led off to a feast of boar’s tripe fried in aurochs dripping, greed here doing service for the motif of avarice. The scene is lent added irony by the fact it is the poisoner who employs them.

Doctors’ role in comedy is not, however, confined to being the victims of satire. For there is also the category of fake doctors (though of course not all fake doctors are comic). They can simply be figures of fun, like Despina in *Così fan tutte* (1790; Act I scene iii), or they can use the disguise to wreak comic outrage on the unsuspecting. This is a particular manifestation of the widespread motif of one person dominating another person, which extends from Itchy and Scratchy in the *Simpsons* cartoons to Pulcinella’s energetic truncheon in the *commedia dell’arte*. A famous example is the disguised Sganarelle beating up Gèronte in Act II, Scene 2 of Molière’s *Le médecin malgré lui* (1666).

Third, doctors can be vehicles for the mobilisation of sexual and scatological humour. Some examples: in Fletcher’s *Monsieur Thomas* of 1639 (Act II scene v), of two physicians holding a chamber-pot one asks the other “Do you mark the faeces?”. In the same vein, a physician in Regnard’s *Le légataire universel* (1708) is called “Clistorel”. In Chettle’s *The Second Part of the Return from Parnassus* (1603) a character named Philosomus disguises himself as a French doctor. A client for whom he prescribes a suppository tells him “A great gentleman told me of good experience, it was the chief note of a magistrate, no to go to the stoole without a physition” (lines 531-533). These traditions are upheld in Alan Bennett’s *The Madness of George III* (1991), where one Dr Peyps is comically fixated with the king’s stool and urine.

All of these trends (satire; fake doctors; scatology) occur in Babylonian comedies.

---

<sup>17</sup> Kolin, *Elizabethan Stage Doctor*, 75.

### 3. Healers in Babylonian comedy

As noted above, healers appear in three Babylonian comic compositions: *Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog Bite* (also known as *Why Do You Curse Me?*), *The Poor Man of Nippur*, and *The Aluzinnu* (also known as *The Jester*).

*Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog Bite*<sup>18</sup> begins with a man from Nippur being bitten by a dog.<sup>19</sup> He makes his way to the nearby city of Isin to be healed (*ana bulluṭišu*), and a high priest (*šangû*; more literally 'chief temple administrator') of Gula there utters an incantation for him.<sup>20</sup> As payment, the patient invites the healer back to Nippur, to be clothed and fed: on arrival he should ask directions of a vegetable-seller. When the healer reaches Nippur and finds the vegetable seller, he repeatedly misunderstands her and mistakes what she says for insults, so she indignantly orders a group of apprentice scribes to chase him out of town with their *imšukkus*, which can be interpreted both as 'practice tablet' and 'chamber-pot'.

This story resonates with strikingly many of the themes discussed above. First, as observed by A. R. George,<sup>21</sup> the plot can be understood in terms of the patient successfully evading the healer's fee. Indeed, seen in these terms it is striking that the (presumably quite wealthy) high priest of Gula was willing to make his way to a different city in return for a cloak and a banquet. One suspects that the theme of medical avarice lurks in the background.

Secondly, the story involves a failure of communication. The nature of the misunderstanding between healer and vegetable seller is debated: she may have spoken Sumerian, or an obscure dialect of Babylonian.<sup>22</sup> In the latter case, there is the interesting

<sup>18</sup> Translated in Foster, *Before the Muses*, 937-938. The most recent edition is by George, *Iraq* 55 (1993).

<sup>19</sup> In some respects the composition is closely tied to the school *milieu* (cf. Cavigneaux, *BaM* 10 (1979) 113 and George, *Iraq* 55 (1993) 63-65), but this does not impinge on the present discussion.

<sup>20</sup> That the healer is termed *šangû* does not exclude his also having other titles (such as *āšipu*): we should simply suppose that *šangû* was the highest-ranking of several titles he might have had. George, *Iraq* 55 (1993) 73, argues that 'being from Isin, he is certainly an *asû*', though for this to be watertight it would be necessary to suppose there were no *āšipus* educated in Isin, which seems unlikely. As observed by Geller, *JMC* 10 (2007) 34-35 the evidence linking *āšipus* to temples is much stronger than that linking *asûs* to temples (but the Gula temple might have been an exception). For a possible occurrence of the word *āšipu* in the story see fn. 23.

<sup>21</sup> George, *Iraq* 55 (1993) 72. George notes the possible dimension of inter-city rivalry between Isin and Nippur, though this is questioned by D'Agostino, *Testi umoristici*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> On the sole extant manuscript of the story, the vegetable seller speaks what is written as Sumerian, and for some scholars the joke is that the learned doctor cannot understand this learned language (Reiner, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 130/1 (1986) 4b; D'Agostino,

possibility that the healer thought that the vegetable seller was belittling his professional standing by saying he was not an *āšipu*.<sup>23</sup> Either way, the healer's failure to understand his social inferior chimes well with the traditions of satires on medical incompetence and/or the obscurity of medical jargon:<sup>24</sup> if the vegetable seller spoke Sumerian, we may suppose that the healer is lampooned as incompetent; if she spoke Babylonian, that he is lampooned as a man of empty learning, who is not even capable of asking directions.<sup>25</sup> (It is also possible that the long personal names in the story are supposed to be redolent of medical long-windedness).

Thirdly, the ambiguity of the word *imšukku*, denoting the objects with which the apprentice scribes are to chase the healer out of town, generates scatological humour.<sup>26</sup> This is not how physicians normally mobilise it – normally it stems from patients and treatments rather than from mobs of pursuers wielding chamber pots. Nonetheless, the association is suggestive: Babylonian and Assyrian healers inspected urine for diagnostic and prognostic purposes,<sup>27</sup> so for the unfortunate healer to be driven out of town by a volley of chamber pots is ironic.

Thus *Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog Bite* partakes of several elements in the characterisation of healers which are known from other traditions of comic literature.

*The Poor Man of Nippur*<sup>28</sup> is the story of a pauper getting his revenge after being wronged by the local mayor. The revenge is taken in three episodes. Having brutalised the mayor in

---

*Aula Orientalis* 13 (1995) 72-73, D'Agostino, *Testi umoristici*, 71 n. 24). George is skeptical of this on the grounds that it would have been inconceivable for a vegetable seller to speak Sumerian in Kassite period, when the story is set. He argues instead that the written Sumerian should be understood as a representation of spoken Babylonian, the alloglottography serving to reflect the difficulty of understanding the Nippur dialect.

<sup>23</sup> If George's interpretation were followed, then when the vegetable seller excites her interlocutor's consternation by saying *bēl ul ašib* 'My lord is not here' (written en nu.tuš.me.en, line 28), one might suppose that he understood her to be saying *bēl ul āšip* 'My lord is not (i.e. you are not) an *āšipu*'.

<sup>24</sup> Sumerian medical words such as *šugidimmaku* ('hand of ghost', corresponding to Akkadian *qāt eṭemmi*) would presumably have sounded as exotic to most Babylonians or Assyrians as Greek medical words did (and do) to most Europeans. In the first millennium, when Akkadian was dying out as a spoken language, incantations in Standard Babylonian might also have sounded highfalutin'. It is, therefore, plausible to suppose that the association between medicine and linguistic obscurity which obtains in other cultures also held good for Babylonia and Assyria.

<sup>25</sup> It is true that Nippur and Isin might well have had different dialects of Babylonian, but given their proximity for a well-to-do adult this should have been no insuperable obstacle.

<sup>26</sup> This was by no means alien to Babylonian literature. See e.g. fnn. 4 and 33.

<sup>27</sup> This is implicit in e.g. many entries in the *Diagnostic Handbook* which explain the prognostic significance of different colours in urine. See Scurlock and Andersen, *Diagnoses*, 98-104.

<sup>28</sup> For a translation and references to editorial treatments see Foster, *Before the Muses*, 931-936.

the first, in the second the pauper disguises himself as an *asû* and presents himself at the mayor's house. After demonstrating his prowess by pointing to the mayor's wounds (which he himself had inflicted), he insists on treating the mayor in seclusion, and administers a second beating.<sup>29</sup> Here we have the motif of comedy through domination, the guise of doctor being adopted because it provides privileged access to the patient's body.

*The Aluzinnu* is very fragmentary, and correspondingly difficult to interpret (this difficulty being augmented by the absence of similar writings).<sup>30</sup> It is not even clear that it is a unitary composition.<sup>31</sup> Be that as it may, the best preserved portions record the utterances of an *aluzinnu*. This word probably means something like 'trickster', 'jester' or the like.<sup>32</sup> The *aluzinnu*'s position in lexical lists is suggestive of ludicre and scatological humour.<sup>33</sup>

There are two references to healers and healing. The first occurs at ii.3'-5' of what is conventionally termed the reverse. These lines include a medical prescription:

*šumma amēlu qaqqassu [...]* *šiptu 2(-)ma(-)[...]* *šārta talappat u[...]*  
'If a man's head [...] an incantation twice [...] you smear ... hair [...]'

It is unfortunately not clear whether this passage is humorous or not, so its relevance to the present discussion is impossible to determine.

The second reference to healing is much better preserved. Here the *aluzinnu* is repeatedly asked<sup>34</sup> *aluzin m ná tele''i* 'O Aluzinnu, what can you do?', and gives several replies. In one of these (r.ii.18'-25') he mentions *āšipūtu*, using a rare idiom which almost

<sup>29</sup> The motif of the fake doctor is widespread in many folktales which resemble *The Poor Man of Nippur* in plot (see Gurney, *An.St.* 22 (1972)), though it is uncertain whether all of them are as straightforwardly comical as the Babylonian composition.

<sup>30</sup> The composition is not available in an up-to-date edition, the fullest currently available being that by Ebeling, *TuL*, 9-19. Foster, *JANES* 6 (1974) 74 n. 11 mentions that "W. G. Lambert plans a new edition", but this has not yet appeared. (Cf. Lambert *apud* Römer, *Persica* 7 (1978) 53 on the scant significance of the unpublished duplicates K. 10052 and 13864).

<sup>31</sup> One column is a list associating gods with places. As it contains inaccuracies and appears on a tablet with clearly humorous portions, it has sometimes been regarded as a parody (e.g. Römer, *Persica* 7 (1978) 54), though its humorous dimension is far from certain (see the comment by Foster, *JANES* 6 (1974) 75).

<sup>32</sup> Having noted the word's general meaning, we will follow the proposal by Römer, *Persica* 7 (1978) 45-46 to leave it untranslated.

<sup>33</sup> Römer, *Persica* 7 (1978) 47-48 and Foster, *JANES* 6 (1974) 74.

<sup>34</sup> The identity of the questioner is not clear.

certainly means that he excels at it.<sup>35</sup> On being further asked *aluzin k āšipūtkā* ‘O *aluzinnu*, what is your *āšipūtu* like?’ he explains how he performs ritual against *rābišu*-demons. This, he says, involves burning down the patient’s house, but at least it jolly well gets rid of the *rābišu*-demons, snakes and scorpions!<sup>36</sup>

While in principle one could suppose that the ludicre arises purely out of doing something badly which is normally done well, it is hard to escape the suspicion that the passage satirises *āšipūtu*.<sup>37</sup> the message is that (sometimes) *āšipus* are incompetent, and that their interventions can be overwrought and do more harm than good. This picture is fully in keeping with how doctors are portrayed in many comic literatures, and there is no reason why it should not have been done in Mesopotamia. This is not, of course, to say, that Babylonians and Assyrians (or the other peoples whose literatures were discussed above) had no faith in *āšipus*; only that, from time to time, they liked to laugh at them.

#### 4. Power as a keyword in Mesopotamian medicine

In all three of the comedies we have been considering, an important place is held by the exercise of power. In both *Ninurta-pāqidāt’s Dog Bite* and *The Poor Man of Nippur* we see one person dominating another: the fake *asû* dominates the mayor, and the vegetable seller and apprentice scribes dominate the healer. In the same way that the Mayor of Nippur put his body in the care of the fake *asû*, thereby giving him control over it, so the *āšipu*’s client in *The Aluzinnu* entrusted his house to the *āšipu*. In both cases the consequences of handing power over oneself to a healer has disastrous – though, as it happens, comic – consequences.

*The Poor Man of Nippur* and *The Aluzinnu* encapsulate the idea that healers have power over their clients. Conversely, *Ninurta-pāqidāt’s Dog Bite* portrays an individual who normally would have this sort of power over others as the powerless victim of power exercised by his social inferiors (a vegetable seller and a mob of students). Comedy is generated through reversal of roles.

<sup>35</sup> *āšipūta kalāma ana qāt ya ul ušši*, literal meaning probably ‘*āšipūtu* in its entirety is unable to leave my hands’. Oppenheim, *JAOS* 61/4 (1941) 271 takes the idiom to mean ‘I myself have no knowledge of *āšipūtu*’, but the context strongly argues for the opposite meaning.

<sup>36</sup> Healing is not mentioned specifically, but *rābišu* demons could bring illness, and the *āšipu*’s function as healer is well known. Thus the ritual would have a therapeutic or prophylactic quality.

<sup>37</sup> Thus also, by implication, Foster, *JANES* 6 (1974) 77 n. 19, who rejects an interpretation in terms of ‘mere ineptitude’.



We should not be surprised to find the exercise of power by one person over another in comedy, nor is it surprising that healers are involved. For, as mentioned above, healers have privileged access to, and control over, people's bodies – and, in certain Babylonian and Assyrian rituals, over their possessions. They are, therefore, well suited to producing both straightforward comedies of domination (*Poor Man*; in some sense also *Aluzinnu*) and comedies of domination in which roles are reversed (*Ninurta-pāqidāt*).

What is especially worth commenting on is that the association between healers and power in Babylonian comedy recalls the central role which power had in Mesopotamian healing as a whole. Unlike Ancient Greek medicine from Hippocrates onwards, in which disease was attributed to inanimate natural entities, in Babylonia and Assyria curing a patient meant doing battle against animate, will-bearing agents (demons and witches) and assuaging angry gods. In other words, medical therapy in Babylonia and Assyria was essentially a matter of overcoming or circumventing hostile powers.

That power is a crucial aspect of magic is widely recognised,<sup>38</sup> and indeed self-evident in such English phrases as 'magical powers'. Sure enough, mention of power is made in discussions of Babylonian and Assyrian healing,<sup>39</sup> and the opening section of *Maqlû* has been studied in terms of empowering the patient.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, at least in the case of Mesopotamia, the concept's heuristic potential is still under-exploited. A power-based model of Babylonian and Assyrian healing, in which healers seek to empower themselves and the patient over the forces of evil, is a useful analytical filter through which to examine all Mesopotamian healing practices. In several places it can help to clarify the meaning of practices whose function or significance is not obvious.

One way in which power manifests itself is through restricted knowledge. Sure enough, there was a strong epistemic jealousy surrounding Babylonian and Assyrian healing: the initiates guarded their knowledge and its power by not sharing it with lay people. Concerns of this sort are attested to e.g. by colophons,<sup>41</sup> which sometimes explicitly term the content of the tablet a 'secret' (*niširtu*).<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Hundreds if not thousands of examples could be given. A good one is Kolenkow in *Magic and Divination*, who uses the phrase 'persons of power' for magicians and diviners. More generally, see van Binsbergen and Wiggermann in *Mesopotamian Magic*, 11-15 on the conceptualization championed by Frazer of magic as a form of control.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. in Zucconi, *JMC* 10 (2007) 20-22.

<sup>40</sup> Schwemer in *Studies Singer*. Note the comment p. 313: the opening section 'places the patient in a protracted position of power from which he can start the ritual battle against his opponents'.

<sup>41</sup> Finkel in *Studies Lambert*, 141 n. 111 and 189; Finkel in *Studies Sachs*, 149: lines 27'-28'.

<sup>42</sup> For refs. see CAD N/ii 276b-277a.

More specifically, dynamics of knowledge and power are a way to understand mumbo-jumbo incantations. It has been suggested that these should be understood as being in the language of ghosts,<sup>43</sup> and the same idea could be extended to demons. However, exactly the opposite view is tenable: that, as speakers of Babylonian and Assyrian, the demons will hear the incantation and, not understanding it, be frightened by the realisation that the healer knows (or at least can use) a secret language which they are not privy to.

N. Veldhuis has likened mumbo-jumbo incantations to exotic *materia medica*, and indeed the latter too can (without excluding other interpretations) also be understood in terms of power. Expensive substances are evidence of the resources which the healer is able to muster in defence of the patient. They are a sign to the witches and demons that far-flung forces can be summoned against them, and that the patient has the means to curry favour with the gods. This is as true of ‘pharmaceutical’ prescriptions as of ‘magical’ rituals.

Returning to the link between power and knowledge, this can sometimes help us make sense of incantations. There are many incantations which contain descriptions of the ‘enemy’s’ doings and/or origin (a sub-group of such ‘descriptive’ passages being aetiologies). Sometimes, indeed, such passages are all there is to the incantation, with no mention of opposing the ‘enemy’. Consider for example the following incantation against dog bite:<sup>44</sup>

<i>urruk birk šu</i>	It is long of knee,
<i>aruh lasāmam</i>	quick at running,
<i>š bubūtam</i>	short of sustenance,
<i>etnuš akalam</i>	poor in food.
<i>ina šinn šu</i>	From its teeth
<i>e’il n lšu</i>	hangs its semen.
<i>ašar iššuku</i>	Wherever it bit
<i>marāšu zib</i>	it left behind a child.

How is this incantation supposed to help victims, or potential victims, of dog bite? One might suppose that it should be understood as an extract from a longer incantation which contained mention of actually opposing the dog. But in this case comparison with a

<sup>43</sup> Scurlock, *Ghosts*, 23.

<sup>44</sup> After Whiting, *ZA* 75/2 (1985) 182, with minor changes to the translation, some of these being borrowed from the SEAL project ([www.seal.uni-leipzig.de](http://www.seal.uni-leipzig.de), no. 5.1.6.4).

very similar incantation shows that nothing is missing.<sup>45</sup> The same comparison suggests that the incantation above was to be recited while treating the wound, but, even so, it is not obvious what good simply stating the problem is supposed to do to the patient.<sup>46</sup> We miss a statement such as *kalbum limūt-ma aw lum libluṭ-ma* ‘May the dog die, and the man live’.<sup>47</sup>

More generally, then, what is the purpose of these ‘descriptive’ passages (and indeed entire ‘descriptive’ incantations)? How should we understand them in terms of the overall purpose of the incantation (i.e. opposing and dispelling evil)?<sup>48</sup>

Naturally such broad and important questions are unlikely to warrant simple answers. Nonetheless, without excluding other possibilities,<sup>49</sup> it seems fair to suggest that a function served in general<sup>50</sup> by ‘descriptive’ passages is for the recitant to display knowledge of the evil to be opposed, and thereby to acquire a degree of control over it. This works especially well for aetiologies, as knowledge of how an entity came into being, or of its past history, is useful in plotting its downfall.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Published by Finkel in *Mesopotamian Magic*, 215-216.

<sup>46</sup> As observed by Finkel in *Mesopotamian Magic*, 213, someone bitten by a rabid dog was usually incurable. One might, then, wonder whether the incantation’s non-therapeutic quality springs from the consciousness that not could be done for the patient. Against this idea, one can however object that a) if this were the case there would be little point in having incantations at all; b) incantations against dog bites with a more therapeutic aspect are attested, see the quotation *kalbum limūt-ma aw lum libluṭ-ma* above.

<sup>47</sup> From another Old Babylonian dog incantation, Finkel in *Mesopotamian Magic*, 215.

<sup>48</sup> For a survey of the purposes of Old Babylonian incantations and the evils they dispel see Cunningham, *Deliver Me from Evil*, 100-114.

<sup>49</sup> Another interpretation is offered by Cunningham, *Deliver Me from Evil*, 106 apropos of an aetiological introduction to an Old Babylonian incantation against worms (his Text 373): ‘an aetiological introduction which ..., as it were, gets to the root of the problem by identifying its origin’. Note also the comment by Schwemer in *Studies Singer*, 320 apropos of *Maqlû* I 39-40 (‘Whatever you have done, I know, / (but) what I am going to do, you do not know’): ‘The mirror-image structure that is so characteristic of anti-witchcraft rituals implies that knowing the ways by which the patient has been harmed is a prerequisite for adequately countering them: *scientia potentia est*. The patient has been empowered by the exorcist’s professional diagnosis, but his sorcerers will be hit unaware’.

<sup>50</sup> In specific cases, specific functions might arise. For example, as observed by Bottéro, *Mythes*, 283, the *historiola* at the start of the incantation against the toothache worm serves to remind the gods of ‘un vieux ressentiment, une antique rancune, capable de les inciter à servir contre lui’.

<sup>51</sup> Bottéro, *Mythes*, 280 suggests another general function for aetiologies (which *mutatis mutandis* might be applied to descriptive passages): they ‘prétendent aider à mieux comprendre les données en les replaçant dans l’ordre génétique universel’. Veldhuis, *OLP* 24 (1993) 60 observes that the chain-like structure of aetiologies argues ‘compelling logic of catenation’ to present ‘the alleged coherence of the world ... as a threat, so that no deity can remain uninvolved’.

## 5. Gathering the threads

The corpus of Babylonian comic compositions is so small that any quantitative assessment made from it is risky. Accordingly, the high concentration of healers in comic compositions could well be the result of accident of preservation, and we do not propose to comment on it. Nonetheless, the way in which healers are deployed within comedy can be analysed with profit.

Examined in the light of other comic literatures, the Babylonian stories are studded with features that have ample cross-cultural parallels, and indeed cross-cultural parallels can, with due caution, be used to re-assess the stories. An example of this is the possibility that the healer's journey to Nippur to get his fee in *Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog Bite* should be understood as demonstrating greed, a characteristic which comic doctors often possess.

A theme which unites the three compositions is the exercise of power, manifest in domination of one person by another. This is perfectly natural in comedy, and also for healers, who have power over the patient *ex officio*. We observed that power is absolutely central to Mesopotamian medicine, which is often (if not always) concerned with opposing and dispelling hostile forces, rendering Mesopotamian healers particularly suitable to comedies of power, in the roles of both dominator (*Poor Man of Nippur*, *Aluzinnu*) and dominee (*Ninurta-pāqidāt*).

We addressed several aspects of Mesopotamian healing whose significance a power-based model can contribute to clarifying (mumbo-jumbo, exotic *materia medica*, seemingly innocuous incantations), and suggest that power will prove “good to think with” in future studies of the field.

## Bibliography

- Bottéro, J. 1985. *Mythes et rites de Babylone* (Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études. IVe section, Sciences historiques et philologiques 328). Paris: Libr. H. Champion
- Cavigneaux, A. 1979. "Texte und Fragmente aus Warka (32. Kampagne)", *BaM* 10, 111-117
- Cordes, P. 1994. *Iatros: Das Bild des Arztes in der griechischen Literatur von Homer bis Aristoteles* (Palingenesia 39). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner
- Cunningham, G. 1997. *Deliver me from evil: Mesopotamian incantations 2500-1500 BC* (Studia Pohl. SM 17). Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico
- D'Agostino, F. 1995. "Umorismo e utilizzo del testo: a proposito de "Il medico di Isin"", *Aula Orientalis* 13, 67-74
- D'Agostino, F. 2000. *Testi umoristici babilonesi e assiri* (Testi del vicino oriente antico 4). Brescia: Paideia
- D'Agostino, F. 2001. "Il medico come figura comica presso gli assiro-babilonesi", *Aula Orientalis* 19, 207-223
- D'Agostino, F. 2004. "Alcune riflessioni su umorismo e teatralità in Mesopotamia (a proposito dell'*arad mitanguranni*)", in H. Waetzoldt (ed.), *Von Sumer nach Ebla und zurück : Festschrift, Giovanni Pettinato zum 27. September 1999 gewidmet von Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern*. Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag
- Dandrey, P. 1998. *La médecine et la maladie dans le théâtre de Molière*. Paris: Klincksieck
- David-Peyre, Y. 1970. *Le personnage du médecin et la relation médecin-malade dans la littérature ibérique, XVIe et XVIIe siècle* (PhD Thesis, Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Paris). Lille: Université Lille III
- Ebeling, E. 1931. *Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen der Babylonier*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter
- Finkel, I. L. 1988. "Adad-apla-iddina, Esagil-kin-apli, and the series SA.GIG", in E. Leichty, M. de Jong Ellis, P. Gerardi (eds.), *A scientific humanist: studies in memory of Abraham Sachs*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

- Finkel, I. L. 2000. "On Late Babylonian Medical Training", in A. R. George, I. L. Finkel (eds.), *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W. G. Lambert*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns
- Finkel, I. L. 2000. "On some Dog, Snake and Scorpion Incantations", in T. Abusch, K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical and Interpretative Perspectives*. Groningen: Styx
- Fo, D. 2009. *Manuale minimo dell'attore*. Torino: Einaudi
- Foster, B. R. 1974. "Humour in Cuneiform Literature", *JANES* 6, 69-85
- Foster, B. R. 2005. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press
- Geller, M. J. 2007. "Comment et de quelle façon les praticiens gagnaient-ils leur vie?", *JMC* 10, 34-41
- George, A. R. 1993. "Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog-Bite and Notes on Other Comic Tales", *Iraq* 55, 63-75
- Gurney, O. R. 1972. "The Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur and Its Folktale Parallels", *An.St.* 22, 149-158
- Harris, R. 2000. *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press
- Jouanna, J. 2000. "Maladies et médecine chez Aristophane", in J. Leclant, J. Jouanna (eds.), *Le théâtre grec antique: la comédie*. Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres
- Kolenkow, A. B. 2002. "Persons of Power and their Communities", in L. Ciruolo, J. Seidel (eds.), *Magic and Divination in the Ancient World*. Leiden: Brill
- Kolin, P. C. 1975. *The Elizabethan Stage Doctor as a Dramatic Convention* (Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 41). Salzburg: Institut für englische Sprache und Literatur
- Lambert, W. G. 1960. *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. Oxford: OUP
- Oppenheim, A. L. 1941. "Idiomatic Akkadian (Lexicographical Researches)", *JAOS* 61, 251-271
- Petersen, C. E. 1938. *The Doctor in French Drama 1700-1775*. New York: Morningside Heights
- Reiner, E. 1986. "Why Do You Cuss Me?", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 130, 1-6
- Römer, W. P. 1978. "Der Spassmacher im alten Zweistromland: Zum 'Sitz im Leben' altmesopotamischer Texte", *Persica* 7, 43-68

- Roselli, A. 2000. "Les cuisiniers-médecins dans la comédie moyenne", in J. Leclant, J. Jouanna (eds.), *Le théâtre grec antique: la comédie*. Paris: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres
- Schwemer, D. 2010. "Empowering the Patient: The Opening Section of the Ritual *Maqlû*", in Y. Cohen, A. Gilan, J. L. Miller (eds.), *Pax Hethitica: Studies on the Hittites and their Neighbours in Honour of Itamar Singer* (StBT 51). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz
- Scurlock, J. 2006. *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-Induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Leiden: Brill
- Scurlock, J., Andersen, B. R. 2005. *Diagnoses in Assyrian and Babylonian Medicine*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press
- van Binsbergen, W., Wiggermann, F. 2000. "Magic in History: A theoretical perspective, and its application to ancient Mesopotamia", in T. Abusch, K. van der Toorn (eds.), *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical and Interpretative Perspectives*. Groningen: Styx
- Veldhuis, N. 1993. "The Fly, the Worm and the Chain. Old Babylonian Chain Incantations", *OLP* 24, 41-64
- Whiting, R. M. 1985. "An Old Babylonian Incantation from Tell Asmar", *ZA* 75, 179-187
- Yearsley, M. 1933. *Doctors in Elizabethan Drama*. London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, Ltd.
- Zucconi, L. M. 2007. "Mesopotamian Healers as Diviners", *JMC* 10, 19-33