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GENDERED SEXUALITY IN SUMERIAN LOVE POETRY¹

Jerrold S. Cooper

Introduction

Much as the fixations and traumas of infancy and early childhood play a major role in defining our personality and behavior as adults, so the obsessions and traumas of graduate school may exercise a significant influence on the course and concerns of a scholarly career. When I did my time at the Oriental Institute, a graffito in the third-floor lounge read: 'Plow the *šuba*-stones, plow the *šuba*-stones, who will plow them for her?' The reference, of course, was to the recently published corpus of Sumerian love poetry published by S. N. Kramer,² and I am certain that the newness of the material and intense interest in it during the mid-sixties have influenced me to turn and return to Mesopotamian erotica in subsequent years. I have no intention of venturing into the thicket of the *šuba*-stone controversy,³ but I would like to consider the question of sexuality in Sumerian love poetry as part of an ongoing investigation of eros in ancient Mesopotamian civilization. In an earlier University College — British Museum symposium, Prof. Lambert told us that the Inana-Dumuzi texts are 'often difficult for us to understand because of philological problems and ideological deficiencies on our part.'⁴ I fully intend to dodge most of the philological problems, but I will endeavor, in what follows, to examine and correct some of our ideological deficiencies.⁵

Kramer's pioneering work on the Sumerian love songs was matched by the careful attention given to that same corpus by the man this symposium remembers, Thorkild Jacobsen.⁶ Significant progress in their understanding has also been made by

¹ Abbreviations of Assyriological literature follow the *Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary* and the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*. I would like to thank Julia Asher, Carol Bier, Toby Ditz, Wendy Doniger, Frances Ferguson, Eduardo González, Richard Klein, Martha Roth and Elizabeth Tolbert for bibliographical and other advice.

² *PAPS* 107 (1963), 485–527.

³ See the most recent discussions by B. Alster, *FS Hallo*, (1993) 18f. with n. 36; J. Goodnick Westenholz, *CRAI* 38 (1992), 386f.

⁴ M. Mindlin et al. (eds.), *Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East* (henceforth *Figurative Language*), (1987), 26.

⁵ The connection between 'philological problems' and 'ideological deficiencies' made by Professor Lambert is stronger than he may have suspected. The following characterization of Classical Studies should give Assyriologists pause for reflection:

The dominant mode of research in Classics is in the grip of an almost total empiricism and rooted in a form of textual study that purports to be value free, because it is based on a supposedly neutral philology . . . What is construed as the avoidance of any special interests in reality reflects one special interest group's attempt to maintain its authority and control . . . the devaluation of theory goes along with a devaluation of issues of power, race, and gender.

N.S. Rabinowitz and A. Richlin (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 3f.

⁶ See especially 'Toward the Image of Tammuz,' *History of Religions* 1 (1961), 189–213, his contribution

Jacobson's compatriot and student, Bendt Alster,⁷ and we all await the text editions of Yitschak Sefati that will provide us with, in Lambert's words, the 'adequate and reliable corpus to which one may turn.'⁸

The Texts

Most Sumerian poems about erotic love belong to the Sumerian Inana-Dumuzi cycle, a loosely related group of compositions whose subject is the relationship between the goddess Inana (Akk. Ištar), the chief goddess of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and her spouse Dumuzi (Akk. Tammuz), a hierarchically lesser deity who, according to tradition, was originally mortal. Disregarding the texts that present Dumuzi as the dying and rising god, or Inana as his treacherous, self-aggrandizing wife, I will focus on those compositions that tell of the couple's tender love and its consummation.

The texts that interest us have been divided into three overlapping groups by Bendt Alster:⁹

1. Those in which deities play the role of lovers;
2. those which deal with kings and the goddess or a queen or concubine;
3. those whose setting is daily life, with no mythological frame and no reference to the king.

The second group, in which the male protagonist is a named king (or simply called 'the king') belongs to the rite of the sacred marriage, a ritual encounter between the king, in the guise of Dumuzi, and Inana, played by a priestess according to some scholars, the queen according to others. According to some, the ritual was enacted at the New Year, but according to others, it was on the king's coronation; most probably, actual sexual intercourse was involved. The rite is attested for the period between 2100–1800 BC, but may be considerably older.¹⁰

In the texts that describe the ritual itself, the goddess is the dominant personality; the king's sexual performance is depicted as an offering to her, in return for which he receives promises of a long successful reign and prosperity for the nation. These blessings include, but are not restricted to, agricultural fertility. The other texts generally portray the two lovers as equals; sometimes the male protagonist is referred to as 'king,' and so, these other groups overlap with the texts depicting the sacred marriage proper. They overlap, too, in the images of abundance in fold, field and orchard that

pervade the love songs, the same abundance that is granted in the sacred marriage rite.

In the days when plowing *šubar*-stones could excite a generation of graduate students, the watchword at the then crumbling barriers against pornography was 'prurient interest.' A problem I confronted in studying Mesopotamian sexual art¹¹ was trying to decide if a piece was just a crude representation whose purpose was sexual arousal, or if it was trying to capture some higher emotional, esthetic or religious sentiment. The only clues lay in the obvious cultic settings of some of the representations, and in one inscribed artifact, the torso of a nude woman, which an Assyrian king claims to have mass produced and erected throughout his realm 'for titillation.'¹²

When we look at the written representations of sexuality, we feel more confident in our ability to characterize the tenor of the writing. In the Inana-Dumuzi texts, it can be called 'lyric bliss.' Even when the texts become explicit, they never lose the innocence of adolescent passion. An example as translated by Thorkild Jacobsen will suffice:

O! that you would do all the sweet things to me,
my sweet dear one, you bring that which will be honey sweet!

In the bedroom's honey-sweet corner

let us enjoy over and over your charms and sweetnesses!

Lad, o! that you would do all the sweet things to me,

my sweet dear one, you bring that which will be honey sweet!

Man who has become attracted to me,

speak to my mother, she would let you!

she has worn down my father.

She knows where you would be happy;

to sleep, man, in our house till morning,

she knows where your heart would rejoice;

to sleep, lad, in our house till morning!

When you fell in love with me,

could you but have done, lad, your sweet thing to me!

O! my lord and good genius, my lord and guardian angel,

my Shu-Suen, who does Enlil's heart good,

the place where, could you but do your sweet thing to me,

where, could you but — like honey — put in your sweetness!

O squeeze it in there for me! as (one would) flour into the measuring cup!

O pound and pound it in there for me! as (one would) flour into the old dry measuring cup!¹³

¹¹ 'Heilige Hochzeit. B. archäologisch,' *RIA* 4 (1975), 259–269.

¹² Grayson, *RIA* A.0.89.10. Grayson's 'titillation' accurately conveys the combination of esthetic and erotic delight that might be evoked by a well-executed female nude, but it has a slightly off-color ring in English that is not present in Akkadian *šūbar*.

¹³ Jacobsen *Harpis* 88f. To illustrate some of the difficulties involved in understanding these texts, or, perhaps, our 'ideological deficiencies,' let me quote from Alster's translation of the last part of this text

to H. Goedicke and J. Roberts (eds.), *Unity and Diversity* (Baltimore, 1975), 65–98, and the relevant sections of *Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976) and *The Harps that Once* (New Haven, 1987 henceforth *Harpis*), but note his interest in Mesopotamian sexuality already in 'How did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?' *AcOr* 8 (1930), 62–74.

⁷ 'Sumerian Love Songs,' *RA* 79 (1985), 127–159; 'Marriage and Love in the Sumerian Love Songs,' *FS Hallo* (1993), 15–27; 'The Manchester Tammuz,' *ASJ* 14 (1992), 1–46.

⁸ *Figurative Language*, 25.

⁹ *RA* 79 (1985), 127.

¹⁰ See J. Cooper, 'Sacred Marriage and Popular Cult in Early Mesopotamia,' 81–96 in E. Matsushima (ed.), *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East*, (Heidelberg: 1993). In the discussion at the symposium, Claus Willeke pointed out that among all of the cultic events mentioned in the Ur III administrative documents, there is none that can be identified with a sacred marriage, and he thus wondered if it ever actually was performed in the Ur III period. Although this is not the place to respond fully to his question, I believe that it was.

Women's Songs or Women's Voices?

Jacobson characterized the Inana-Dumuzi 'courtship' songs as 'lightweight stuff, popular ditties such as would be sung by women to while away the time at spinning or weaving, or perhaps as songs to dance to.'¹⁴ That is, women's songs, and (thus?) of little consequence. Alster too, would like to situate this material in the context of everyday courtship and wedding behavior (used as well in the sacred marriage rites)¹⁵ and seems to imply that these are women's songs, but doesn't say so explicitly.¹⁶ My own intuition in 1989 was that these poems were 'an expression of female sexuality': 'The tender, sensuous sexuality of the Inana-Dumuzi poetry does not lead to conception, and privileges the female organ over the male.' I contrasted it with 'Enki's sexuality ... raw, often violent, phallicentric and ... reproductive.'¹⁷ Avoiding the question of authorship, I preferred to speak only of a 'woman's voice.'

In 1992 two Old Testament scholars, A. Brenner and F. Van Dijk-Hemmes, published *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible*. Building on the work of S. D. Goitein, they devised an approach well suited to a corpus of problematic authorship and redaction like the Hebrew Bible, and even more so to an anonymous corpus like the Sumerian literary canon.¹⁸ 'What we wish to uncover,' write Brenner and Van Dijk, 'are the gender positions entrenched in a text to extent that its *authority* rather than its *authorship* can be gendered... we ... find it more interesting to abandon acts of gendering texts by referring to the gender of their (conjectured) authors. Instead, in order to define a text as a woman's text (or a men's text), we try to discern female (and later male) voices in them.'¹⁹ Without having to

(RA 79, 137f.):

Would that your sweet 'place' would be made for me.

Would that your place like honey-sweet-would be embellished.

Put (your) hand onto a garment as with an awl(?)

Spread(?) the garment with (your) hand as with a spatula(?)

My own translation of these same lines (*ASET* 1, 90:26ff.) reads:

If you would just "do" me with your sweet place!

If you would just stroke me with your sweet-as-syrup place!

Touch me like ...!

Tap me like ...!

Note the characteristic absence of question marks and ellipses in Jacobson's rendition, in contrast to Alster's or mine. Jacobson had an impressive confidence in his intuitive understanding of Sumerian literature and the civilization that produced it, and he possessed so much erudition and poetic talent that he almost made us believe things we might otherwise dismiss out of hand.

¹⁴ *FS Hallo* (1993), 18f.; *ASJ* 14 (1992) 2f.

¹⁵ He comes closest in the note in *ASJ* 14 (1992), 44.

¹⁶ J. S. Cooper, 'Enki's Member: Eros and Irrigation in Sumerian Literature,' *FS Sjöberg*, (1989), 87-89.

¹⁷ A cautionary note relevant to the interpretation there and in the present study is sounded by M. B. Skinner,

'Women and Language in Archaic Greece, or, Why is Sappho a Woman?' in Rabinowitz and Richlin, *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (see n. 5), 137.

¹⁸ The diffused eroticism that (Sappho's poetry) were shaped by far different relations of gender and power.

¹⁹ was perceived within the masculine sphere as delightfully idyllic and romantic. Consequently ...

male listeners and readers cherished Sappho's works as a socially permissible escape from the

strict constraints of masculinity.

¹⁸ It is ironic in the context of this paper to have to admit it difficult to accept as genuine the only ascribed

author of Sumerian literary texts, Enlil-eduana, Sargon's daughter and priestess of the moon god at Ur.

¹⁹ A. Brenner and F. Van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts. Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew*

build the difficult case for women's authorship, then, one can look especially for texts that could be modelled on actual women's songs or reflect women's sensibilities as they would have been expressed in real-life situations.

We have no information about Sumerian women's secular songs or poetry, nor would we expect to, given the nature of our sources. Yet a brief but intense survey of the ethnomusicological literature shows that even in cultures where women's musical activity is frowned upon, women sing at weddings.²⁰ We know that young Sumerian women sang for pleasure. When Dumuzi coaches the young Inana on what excuse she should make to her mother for staying out late, he tells her to say, in Jacobson's translation:

My girlfriend was strolling with me in the square,
to the playing of tambourine and recorder she danced with me,
our sad songs were sweet — she cooed to me —
the joyous ones were sweet — and time went by!²¹

The odds are very good that if the Sumerian love songs are in a woman's voice, there could have been an actual genre of women's love and wedding songs that served as their model.²²

Women in Love

My first task then is to demonstrate the presence of gendered sexuality in the Inana-Dumuzi poems. Gender is 'the cultural marking of biological sex,' and sexuality can be defined as 'desire and erotic pleasure.'²³ The differences between men's and women's sexuality are not solely determined by differences in their biology, but are strongly influenced by social factors as well. Can we, as late 20th century men and women, project with any confidence our own responses to Sumerian poetry on to the culture that produced it?

Like our own culture, but even more so, ancient Mesopotamia was patriarchal — the original patriarch, after all, came from Ur of the Chaldees! Mesopotamia was not as egregious in this regard as ancient Israel or Greece, or Europe in the Middle Ages. Women were not considered incomplete men or a separate species, but get equal time and treatment in creation stories when gender is mentioned at all. Women were not seen as the cause of life's travails, as in the Old Testament or Hesiod, nor was woman sent, as Pandora, as a punishment for men. But most Mesopotamian women's lives and resources were subject to the authority of their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives.

²⁰ See the contributions to Ellen Koskoff (ed.), *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana, 1989) and M. Herndon and S. Ziegler (eds.), *Music, Gender and Culture* (Wilhelmshaven, 1990).

²¹ Jacobson, *Harpis* 11. The use of Sumerian 1-1u (Jacobson's 'sad songs'), which often, if not always, means 'lamentation,' for the street songs of young women, and the verb *ad-sa4* (Jacobson's 'croon'), which often, if not always, means 'to lament,' might be explained by the fact that according to the studies cited in n. 20, the other widespread type of women's music (besides wedding songs) is the lament. See the discussion at the end of this paper.

²² Cf. Alster, *ASJ* 14 (1992), 3, who sees the Inana-Dumuzi songs as 'reflect[ing] ordinary wedding ceremonies.'

²³ Carole Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London, 1984), 9.

Patriarchy is widespread historically and geographically;²⁴ exceptions, like the matrilineal Tuareg Berbers of southern Algeria among whom the men are veiled and the women choose their own husbands are a rarity, and the discovery of a new example is a newsworthy occasion. The *New York Times* of 29/iii/94 reports on the people of Sudest Island, southeast of Papua New Guinea:

The longer Dr. Lepowsky observed the people ... the more she realized that life on Vanatimai was different from other societies in one fundamental respect. Men and women were living and working as virtual equals ... a striking example of ... a gender-egalitarian culture, and perhaps the first one to be studied in detail by any anthropologist.

Certain kinds of gendered behavior in patriarchal societies seem to cut across cultural, ethnic and geographic boundaries.²⁵ To cite the *Times* once again, from 2/iii/94,

Women are more likely to eat fruit and fruit-flavored foods, and men are more likely to eat meat ... When it comes to cravings, men tend to lust after entrees while women want sweets ... Men are supposed to be hearty eaters ... [but] if a woman wants to appear feminine, she will eat less.

Compare these results of U. S. marketing research to this ethnographic description of the Kalapalo tribe of central Brazil:

Men ... roast food, consume quantities of food prepared with hot peppers and salt, while women process food with water and tend towards blandness in their diet ... men are expected to engage in public displays that call attention to themselves ... Women ... are considered 'modest' and 'shy' ...²⁶

Gendered tastes and experience extend to the domain of sexuality as well. Briefly and perhaps too superficially, I would characterize male sexuality as ruled by a phallic teleology with implications of conquest and undertones of potential violence. In contrast, women's sexuality would be characterized by a less teleological, more diffuse *jouissance*: 'Foreplay, afterplay, and all the possible measuring distinctions of stages, amounts of arousal, and degrees of intensity blur; one can no longer say that the sex takes place at a single moment or in a single event.'²⁷ 'Women are creatures of gestalt, aroused by the full range of the senses and the heart and brain besides.'²⁸

²⁴ See, for example, B. D. Miller, 'The Anthropology of Sex and Gender Hierarchies,' 3-31 in B. D. Miller (ed.), *Sex and Gender Hierarchies*, (Cambridge, 1993): 'most scholars would agree that in the statistical sense, patriarchy or male dominance of some sort characterizes the bulk of human societies today,' *ibid.*, 9.

²⁵ But note Joan Smith's warning against lumping all patriarchal societies together in 'Feminist Analysis of Gender: A Critique,' M. Lowe and R. Hubbard (eds.), *Women's Nature. Rationalizations of Inequality* (New York, 1983), 89-109.

²⁶ Ellen Basso, 'Musical Expression and Gender Identity in the Myth and Ritual of the Kalapalo of Central Brazil,' in Koskoff (see n. 20) p. 164.

²⁷ Linda Williams, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, 1989), 261, describing pornographic films made by women for heterosexual women and couples, in contrast to male-made and oriented films whose climax is always the 'money shot,' ejaculation.

²⁸ K. McWalter's study of male and female sexual response cited by M. L. Margolis and M. Arnold, 'Turning the Tables? Male Strippers and the Gender Hierarchy,' in D. Suggs and A. Miracle (eds.), *Culture and Human Sexuality. A Reader* (Pacific Grove, 1993), 161.

These differences in sexuality have a biological basis that would also have been present in ancient Mesopotamia.²⁹ Male orgasm is followed by a refractory period during which stimulation is not possible. Women can remain stimulated after orgasm and can experience repeated orgasms in rapid succession.³⁰ Ancient Mesopotamian sexuality would have involved the 'cultural marking' of these physiological phenomena, and we can expect that both for cultural and for biological reasons, men's and women's sexuality and expressions of sexuality would have been very different. What is important is not the extent of the biological (vs. cultural) basis for these differences, but rather, if when such differences are perceived in ancient texts, these differences can be interpreted as gendered expressions of sexuality.

In comparing Sappho, for example, to male Greek lyric poets, Eva Stehle writes that

the poetic reason for the inappropriateness of the male pattern to Sappho is that the implicit metaphors of recurrent prostration, domination, and release are based on male sexual psychology, the man's sense of his action in sexual encounter ... Sappho had to find (or make use of) patterns based on metaphors of female biology and psychology. The patterns had to allow her to express romantic longings, fulfillment, and struggle with the mystery of sexuality, with truth to her emotional and bodily sense of them.³¹

Or, writing of Shahrazad's interruption of the sultan's sexual serial murders, Fedwa Malti-Douglas tells us that

it is a woman who must break this rhythm, substituting for it a new pattern of desire which, when transposed to the terrain of sexuality, can be seen as a more female approach to pleasure ...³²

How might women, as socialized participants in a patriarchal society, nevertheless construct their own sexuality in the sanctioned context of love songs? Although Bendt Alster worries 'that at the present time it is too early to proceed to such subtleties in the study of Sumerian texts, in particular if this means that the basic close-reading ... is skipped in order to make argument about something for which we are sure to find no evidence,'³³ I would insist that concern with the authenticity of voice can both accompany and even aid close reading, and that if we read with sufficient preparation and sensitivity, evidence may indeed be found.

²⁹ I am trying to argue here that we share not only patriarchy with the ancients, but a common physiology as well, and therefore we need not be unduly skeptical about notions we develop concerning their sexuality. I am in no way setting forth an essentialist model of women's sexuality, but I believe it would be foolish to ignore biology in a discussion of sexuality.

³⁰ This biological difference is certainly responsible for the widespread topos of female sexual insatiability, whose extreme expression in Mesopotamia is found in a recently published *Istar* hymn: 'Sixty and sixty satisfy themselves at her vulva ... the men were tired out, but Istar does not tire' (von Soden, *Or 60* [1991], 340). At the 1983 meeting of the American Oriental Society, Stephen Lieberman read a paper asserting that the hymn is not Old Babylonian, but rather 'a Neo-Babylonian imposture.'

³¹ Eva Stehle, 'Sappho's Private World,' in Helene P. Foley (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 1981), 49.

³² Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body. Woman's Word. Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, 1991), 22f.

³³ *ASJ* 14 (1992), 44.

Women's Love in Mesopotamia

If we can be relatively assured that there was a context for women's love songs in Mesopotamia, and if we admit that expressions of sexuality can be gendered and that these gender differences should not be beyond our grasp in an ancient culture despite our 'ideological deficiencies,' what specific evidence can we adduce to show that the love songs do indeed represent a woman's voice, that we are not dealing with male fantasies of idealized female sexuality, or that, in the end, the lyrical tenor of the love songs does not have more to do with genre than gender? Gender is a system of contrasts; if Sumerian love poetry is in a woman's voice, it should contrast markedly with expressions of male sexuality in Mesopotamia. And it does.

We know what excited men sexually in ancient Mesopotamia, because we have the ancient counterparts to modern pornography, texts whose explicit function was to stimulate erections. Akkadian remedies for male impotence used two techniques that are current in sex therapy today: manual stimulation of the penis with various oil-based solutions, and verbal arousal of the male by his female partner. Some of this 'dirty talk' has been preserved:

At the head of my bed I have tied a buck!

At the foot of my bed I have tied a ram!

The one at the head of my bed, get an erection, make love to me!

The one at the foot of my bed, get an erection, caress me!

My vagina is the vagina of a bitch! His penis is the penis of a dog!

As the vagina of a bitch holds fast the penis of a dog, (so may my vagina hold fast his penis)!

May your penis become long as a club (?).³⁴

Very different from this deliberately prurient provocation is Dumuzi's invitation to Inana, again in Jacobsen's translation:

Let me spread for you the pure sweet couch of a prince, let me loosen your combs for you,
and let me pass a sweet time with you in joy and plenty!

And Inana answers:

My lord, you are indeed worthy of the pure embrace . . .

Lord Dumuzi, you are indeed worthy of the pure embrace . . .

My lord, your riches are sweet,

your herbs in the desert are all of them sweet,

Ama-ushumgal-anna, your riches are sweet,

your herbs in the desert are all of them sweet!³⁵

Sweet herbs emanate from a different world of metaphor and simile than the rutting quadrupeds of the potency incantation. Similarly, the sensuous dalliance and foreplay of the Sumerian love songs may be contrasted with the male fantasy of sexual initiation in Gilgamesh, where the prostitute takes off her clothes, spreads her legs, and Enkidu mounts her. In Stephanie Dalley's translation,

³⁴ Robert Biggs, *Ša.zi.gar. Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations*. Texts from Cuneiform Sources 2 (Locust Valley 1967), 32f.

³⁵ Jacobsen, *Harpis*, 11f.

For six days and seven nights Enkidu was aroused and poured himself into Shamhat.

When he was sated with her charms,

He set his face towards the open country of his cattle.³⁶

The prostitute's subsequent efforts to produce a kinder, gentler Enkidu are not intended to make him a more considerate lover, but rather to prepare him for the homosocial bonding with Gilgamesh that is the motor of the first half of the epic. Male sexual fantasy occurs once more in Gilgamesh, in the negative depiction of Ištar as the femme-fatale who destroys any man foolish enough to yield to her blandishments and charms.³⁷ In Sumerian narratives, male sexuality is most elaborately expressed as rape (Enki and Ninhursag, Enlil and Ninnil, Inana and Sukaletuda), nasty, brutish and often, repeated over and over again. Enlil appears to be aroused by the pathetic plea of his victim that 'My vagina is young, and has never learned to stretch, my lips are young, and have never learned to kiss.'³⁸ Much of his pleasure seems to be derived from plotting and anticipating his violent conquest.

I have argued elsewhere that Enki's fecundating phallus is the emblem of male sexuality in Sumerian literary texts.³⁹ One of the most surprising characteristics of the Sumerian love songs is that the male sexual organ is never explicitly mentioned, while the female organ not only appears frequently but is doted upon in the elaborate praise songs that Inana sings to her own vulva.⁴⁰ I cite Thorkild Jacobsen again, changing his overly-delicate translation of Sumerian gal-la 'parts' to the more literal 'vulva,' and hastening to add that I would make other changes in his translation as well:⁴¹

My chased vulva so nailed down

As (with) linchpins attached to a big cart,

My boat of heaven so (well) belayed,

Full of loveliness like the new moon,

My unworked plot, left so fallow in the desert,

My duck-field so studded with ducks,

My highlying field so (well) watered,

My vulva, piled up with levees, (well) watered,

Who—I being a maiden—will be its ploughman?

³⁶ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1989), 55f.

³⁷ There are Akkadian love lyrics, surviving mostly in a catalogue of incipits (see J. Black, *JAOIS* 103 [1983], 25ff.), that are similar to and probably dependent on the Sumerian lyrics, but the Akkadian Faithful Lover dialogue (B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda, 1993], vol. 1, 92ff.) and the incantation-dialogues (Foster 56f., 139ff.) have more in common with the Sumerian women's dialogues, that is with the competitive nastiness of the masculine Sumerian school debates. Other erotic Akkadian dialogues connected to the sacred marriage are more similar in tenor to Sumerian erotic poetry (Foster vol. 1, 96ff.).

³⁸ *JCS* 32 (1980), 185.

³⁹ *FS Sjöberg* (1989). I unfortunately overlooked the fact that several of the poems I made there had already been better made by R. Falkowitz, 'Discrimination and Condensation of Sacred Categories: The Fable in Early Mesopotamian Literature,' in *La Fable*. Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 30 (Geneva, 1984), 11–32.

⁴⁰ See B. Alster, *FS Hallo* (1993), 16 and 20f.; *ASJ* 14 (1992) 32ff.

⁴¹ Note especially that 'nailed down' in the first line may in fact be referring to the vulva as a g.g. a 'wedge', that is a *cuneus*, just like, as Vansinphout has shown us, the cuneiform signs that so surprised the lord of Aratta ('Enmerkar's Invention of Writing Revisited,' *FS Sjöberg* 515ff.).

My vulva, (well) watered lowlands,

Who—I being a lady—will put ploughing oxen to it?⁴²

Sumerian culture clearly did not have the problem that analyst-critic Jessica Benjamin ascribes to our own culture:

we must admit that we are still unable to produce a female image or symbol that would counterbalance the monopoly of the phallus in representing desire. . . . once sexuality is cut loose from reproduction, once woman is no longer mother, we are at a loss for an image of woman's sexual agency. What is woman's desire?⁴³

In Sumerian literature, Inana's vulva, as a symbol for female sexuality and desire, is every bit as banded about as Enki's penis is as a symbol of male sexuality, and more so!

The difference is the elaborate, playful and sensuous nature of the vulva songs, whose contrast with the abrupt eruptions of Enki's or Enlil's penis could symbolize the contrast between the more durative, diffuse female *jouissance* and the punctuality of male orgasm. A particularly difficult passage in one of the love songs might actually be describing female orgasm (another Sumerian first!):

The 'brother' brought me into his house,
He lay me down on the honey-fragrant bed,
And when my dear sweet-heart had lain very close to me,
One-by-one, making tongue, one-by-one,
My fair faced 'brother' did fifty.
As if dumb struck I moved toward him,
Trembling below, I pushed quietly to him,
My 'brother,' hand placed on his thigh,
My dear sweet-heart, so did I pass the time with him there.⁴⁴
What is 'doing fifty'? What, for that matter, is 'making tongue'? Probably what we imagine; the overriding tenor of this passage is one of exquisitely drawn-out pleasure.

When Enki or Enlil have sex, pleasure is not mentioned, except, rarely, in terms of relief or brief frenzy (Enlil and Sud 149: 'Enlil had intercourse with his spouse and m u n i - i b - h i - l i - h i - l i — it felt real good!'). Usually in Sumerian texts the mere mention of intercourse and ejaculation carries with it implications of intense sexual pleasure that requires no further elaboration. Curiously, or perhaps not so, Sumerian love songs never mention the Sumerian word for intercourse that we encounter in other contexts, or the word for ejaculation.⁴⁵ In Sumerian, "to have intercourse" is a compound verb whose nominal element is the word "penis," and so avoiding it may be part of the aversion to calling that organ by name. It may also express an aversion

42. *Unity and Diversity*, 83.

43. Jessica Benjamin, 'A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space,' in: T. de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington, 1986) 83.
44. UM 29-16-8 (PAPS 107, 509 and Alster, *FS Hallo*, 22). Note the Roman medical writer Soranus on women's orgasm: "a shivering sensation and the perception that the mouth of her uterus closes upon the seed." See Ann Hanson in D. Halpern et al. (eds.), *Before Sexuality. The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World* (Princeton, 1990), 315.

45. Alster is not surprised by the absence of the word for intercourse or penis in the love songs, and asks "what else could one expect in erotic poetry?" (*FS Hallo*, 18 n. 31). But why would you expect poems that are rife with vulvas to be devoid of penises?

to the brusque male pleasure that intercourse and ejaculation connote in other texts, as well as to the violence and power relationships symbolized by the phallus. In contrast to the punctual aspect of intercourse and ejaculation expressed literally—you do it and you're done, for a while, at least—the metaphors for those same actions that abound in the Sumerian love songs—ploughing a field, digging a ditch, watering a garden—are durative and continuous.

Unlike the Egyptian love songs or the biblical Song of Songs, the context of the Sumerian love songs is courtship and marriage, but a marriage, strange to say, without issue or responsibility:

Despite many similarities between Inanna and young girls about to be brides, she is drastically different. When she marries, she never takes on the jobs of wives . . . Inanna does not turn into a maternal figure . . . She is not 'mother'; having neither maternal nor domestic economic duties, Inanna remains without any of the usual roles and functions of the ordinary married woman . . . she has nothing to tie her down . . . She is the unencumbered woman, the wife whose domestic status is so nebulous that it cannot possibly domesticate her.⁴⁶

That is, Inana has the safety of monogamous marriage, without the maternity and other burdens that are the down-side of sexuality and marriage for women in patriarchal societies. The fertility of field, garden and fold that pervades the love songs does not extend to the marriage itself. Male sexuality in Sumerian literature is mostly reproductive in and outside marriage, as it should be in a patriarchal society, but in literature as in life, reproduction never puts an end to male sexual adventure.⁴⁷ For married women, the kind of sexuality described in these songs is at best a brief interlude between girlhood and motherhood. The songs idealize sexual initiation and simply avoid any mention of the consequences.

This fantasy is not just Sumerian. Linda Williams writes about the new women's pornographic films that 'focus on dramas of female sexual awakening that offer utopian re-visions of the often furtive, hasty, and guilt-ridden ways most young women attain their sexuality.'⁴⁸ Any mention of children in the Sumerian love songs would not only suggest the unglamorous life that awaits the young bride, but would interject into the Inana-Dumuzi idyll the one certain deterrent to a young woman's premarital sexual pleasure. In the absence of any physical test for virginity in ancient Mesopotamia, pregnancy was the only evidence—short of being caught *in flagrante delicto*—that a girl had not been chaste.⁴⁹

Finally, Alster has especially noted the particulars of family life and domestic detail that pervade the love songs, which he sees as evidence for their secular use.⁵⁰ In a study of medieval poetry in northern India, John Hawley tells of 'poet after poet

46. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses. Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York, 1992), 26f.

47. But we can hardly speak of 'free love' in the sense advocated by Bottéro, *Mesopotamia. Writing, Reading, and the Gods* (Chicago, 1992), 185ff. For a free Mesopotamian man, the only sexually accessible women were his own wife, his own slaves (if he had any), and prostitutes. Other free women (the wives and daughters of other free men) were off-limits, and the penalties for transgressing these limits were severe.

48. Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 257.

49. For the question of the existence of physical tokens of virginity in the classical world, see G. Sissa, 'Maidenhood Without Maidenhead,' 339–364 in Halpern et al. (eds.), *Before Sexuality* (see n. 44).

50. *FS Hallo* (1993); ASJ 14 (1992).

writing from the point of view of one of the simple young women (*gopis*) who herd cows along the banks of the River Jumna' with whom the god Krishna would 'dance in the forest on moonlit nights, multiplying himself so that each of his rustic consorts felt the full pleasure of union with him'.⁵¹ The poets were mostly men, writing as young women in love, but some poets were women. The main difference between the men's and women's poems is not in their sexuality or attitude toward love, but rather in the bits of women's domestic life and concerns that creep into the women's poems but are absent from the men's. The same kind of domestic detail that Alster notes in the Sumerian love songs could well indicate a woman's voice there, too.

The Sumerian love songs, then, represent a romanticized erotic fantasy that internalizes patriarchal sexuality (marriage, family ties) while suppressing its most negative consequences for women (children and all they imply, sexual violence, the phallus itself). This kind of "safe" fantasy is reminiscent of the contemporary romance novels that are written for women. In a study of readers of these romances, Janice Radway found that they

will not tolerate any story in which the heroine is seriously abused by men. They find multiple rapes especially distressing and dislike books in which a woman is brutally hurt by a man only to fall desperately in love with him in the last four pages. The ... women are also offended by explicit sexual description and scrupulously avoid the work of authors ... who deal in what they call 'perversions' and 'promiscuity.' They also do not like romances that overtly perpetuate the double standard by excusing the hero's simultaneous involvement with several women ... They also seem to dislike any kind of detailed description of male genitalia, although the women enjoy suggestive descriptions of how the hero is emotionally aroused to an overpowering desire for the heroine.⁵²

Our corpus in a nutshell!

Concluding Questions

If we are convinced that we hear genuine women's voices in the Sumerian love songs, what was the context of the songs themselves? There are many indications that the texts we have were used for some cultic purpose, probably the sacred marriage. They mention Inana, Dumuzi and even the king and palace; they have cultic subscripts; there is a conjunction of fertility and childlessness that well fits a ceremony in which the king wants blessings, not children, from his 'bride.' But I think Alster is correct in insisting that the songs could have been used in both secular and sacred contexts.

⁵¹ 'Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna,' 231–256 in C. W. Bynum et al. (eds.), *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston, 1986).

⁵² 'Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context,' in M. Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* ... 128–131. Compare the male strippers' performances for women discussed by M. Margolis and M. Arnold, 'Turning the Tables? Male Strippers and the Gender Hierarchy,' in *Culture and Human Sexuality: A Reader* (Pacific Grove, 1993), 151–162: 'An aura of romance and chivalry is created ... Total nudity is not a feature of the show ... [whose] environment ... though meant to be erotic, is perfectly safe ... and, in fact, is more reminiscent of a Harlequin Romance novel than of a female strip show.'

What we probably have here are songs written or adapted for the sacred marriage that reflect and perhaps contain actual women's songs sung for celebrations and ceremonies surrounding courtship and wedding, or perhaps at more private moments with family or friends. Even the names of Dumuzi and Inana and the mention of the king may not necessarily have been added for cultic purposes. Inana and Dumuzi could well have been the paradigmatic couple of secular love literature, much as other divine or legendary lovers are used in other traditions.⁵³ And we should remember that the other large Inana-Dumuzi corpus concerns death and lamentation; the ethnographic evidence shows that the one area in which women's music figures even more prominently than in love and wedding songs is funeral lamentation.⁵⁴ Were Dumuzi and Inana the paradigmatic corpse and mourner as well as the paradigmatic loving couple? Was there then a private context for the Sumerian laments? And were these laments composed by women?

Whatever the Sumerian love songs may be, they are not deserving of Jacobsen's characterization of them as "lightweight stuff," a characterization invalidated by the deep feeling and rare beauty of his own translations. Remembering Thorkild Jacobsen's exceptional combination of great kindness with immense learning, I conclude this essay by shifting from the songs of love to a song of lament, and cite Thorkild Jacobsen one last time:

O lad, the things (numerous as) the stars of heaven, pertaining to you, things as of sounds of a hue and cry, come nearer and nearer, the things (numerous as) the stars of heaven, pertaining to you, that come to me, keep frightening me, and I with hand stretched out, bless toward yonder.⁵⁵

⁵³ Cf. Alster, *FS Hallo* 17 n. 14.

⁵⁴ See n. 21 and J. Cooper, 'Genre, Gender, and the Sumerian Lamentation,' in the forthcoming proceedings of the Third Meeting of the Groningen Mesopotamian Literature Group.

⁵⁵ Jacobsen *Harpis*, 70.