

Marduk's Penis. Queering *Enūma Eliš*

Sophus Helle

Abstract: The paper examines the depiction of gender in the Babylonian epic *Enūma Eliš*. I approach the text from the perspective of queer theory, basing my argument on the assumption that the gender binary is not a natural given but is culturally constructed, and that the process of cultural construction can be traced in the sources at our disposal. I do not argue that *Enūma Eliš* is somehow a 'queer' text in and of itself, but rather that a conscious mismatch between text and theory can reveal new aspects of the ancient epic. I focus on two aspects of the construction of gender in *Enūma Eliš*: the depiction of the female body as constantly restless, disquieting, and impossible to subdue decisively, and the creation of an all-male sphere of discourse, where men become powerfully invested in the company of other men.

Introduction

A strange Assyrian commentary text, which seeks to unpack the deeper symbolic layers of an ancient ritual, identifies the king participating in the ritual with 'the god Marduk, who defeated Tiamat with his penis' (*Marduk ša ina ušārīšu tiāmat i[kmū]*, l. 17').¹ This brief comment is baffling, particularly because any Assyrian or Babylonian reader would have been familiar with Marduk's defeat of the primordial goddess Tiamat. This is the plot of *Enūma Eliš*, the Babylonian account of how the world was created and of how Marduk became its king.²

¹ Livingstone 1986, 94, see also Cooper 2017, 115–116.

² *Enūma Eliš* is an epic written in the Standard Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, probably towards the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. It is written in an elevated literary language, full of rare words and strange forms. The story opens in the beginning of time, when the two mythical seas Tiamat and Apsu mingled their waters together, thus creating the first gods. Then follow two narrative sections: first the battle between Apsu and the god Ea, and then the battle between Tiamat and Ea's son Marduk. The two sections mirror one another, as Marduk's story parallels and expands his father's. The remainder of the text tells of Marduk's elevation to

But in *Enūma Eliš*, Marduk defeats Tiamat by thrusting his wind – not his penis – into her mouth. The commentary's remark is striking because it reinterprets this familiar story and in so doing places the theme of gender and sexuality at the very heart of *Enūma Eliš*. In other words, it makes sex central to the Babylonian account of how the universe came into being.

In this essay, I want to follow this suggestion and explore what it would mean to read *Enūma Eliš* with an eye for gender relations and violent eroticism. *Enūma Eliš* is among the best-known texts to survive from ancient Iraq. Known also as the *Epic of Creation*, it tells of how Marduk, god of Babylon, killed Tiamat, mother of all the gods, and used her body to create the universe as we know it. At the end of the story, Marduk is made king of the gods, and establishes the rules and regulations of a new world order. In the following, I delve into the gendered and

supreme kingship among the gods and his organization of the universe. Finally, Marduk is assigned fifty names, each accompanied by a role he is to play in the ongoing maintenance of world order.

sexual aspects of the ideological order that is established in the text. I examine the construction of a binary division between genders, and of a violent, anxious, self-perpetuating hierarchy between them.

I base my argument on the assumption that gender and eroticism are not biological constants, but factors shaped by the social conventions of any given society – and accordingly, that they are shaped differently in different periods and cultures. This is the fundamental assumption of the theoretical discipline known as queer theory. Queer theory criticizes the notion of a gender binary, that is, the idea that humanity is invariably divided into two categorically distinct genders. Further, queer theory criticizes the idea that human eroticism can be neatly divided into homo- and heterosexuality, and that the meaning of sexuality has remained constant across historical periods. Instead, queer theory points to the myriad different ways in which gender and sexuality have been depicted throughout history and around the globe. Our perception of sex is so thoroughly filtered by our cultural conceptions, psychological structures, and discursive conventions that we have little hope of reaching a ‘pure’, historically stable idea of what sexuality, femininity, or masculinity are truly like. Accordingly, we cannot project our modern notions of what ‘gender’, ‘sex’, ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘homosexual’, and ‘heterosexual’ all mean onto pre-modern periods, instead, we must examine how these categories were constructed in the cultures that we study.

However, the constructedness of gender and sexuality is in itself a distinctly post-modern notion, and the discipline of queer theory has only existed for some three decades. Does it then make sense to apply its conclusion to texts that were composed some three millennia ago? Is it not inappropriate to export modern theories of gender onto Babylonian epics? These kinds

of questions are often raised by philologists who are wary of the application of explicit theories onto ancient texts. In the following, I argue that the application of queer theory to *Enūma Eliš* is indeed inappropriate, but that this kind of impropriety is also fundamentally necessary to uncover the deeper ideological structures of the text.

In defence of an inappropriate theory

A common approach to literary works from the ancient Near East is to read them as the expressions, conscious or otherwise, of a broader ideological program.³ Scholars seek to discover in these works an underlying normative message addressed to ancient readers. Take *Enūma Eliš*: the story it tells, of the god Marduk’s elevation to divine kingship, is generally taken as a way of conveying in narrative form the earthly hegemony of his city, Babylon.⁴ Assyriologists thus often read ancient epics as an attempt to impose a specific narrative order on the society that produced them. We must assume that ancient societies comprised any number of contradictory narratives about the world, of which our texts will often enshrine one in particular. Other cities had other stories, but *Enūma Eliš* cements the supremacy of Marduk specifically, over and above competing deities like Enlil or Ninurta. However, this narrative order, which scholars regularly expect to find in the texts that they study, also represents a methodological challenge. If the texts necessarily – and such is the general assumption – present us with a limited perspective on ancient reality, how can we move beyond this limited perspective to gain a more comprehensive view of that reality? How can we resist the ideological restrictions that the texts impose on their readers? How can we ex-

³ See e.g. the methodological reflections in Michalowski 1983.

⁴ See e.g. Foster 2005, 436, who writes that *Enūma Eliš* ‘can be read as a document of Babylonian nationalism.’

amine those phenomena that are repressed by the texts' ideological order?

In *Theory and the Premodern Text*, Paul Strohm argues that modern theory has the potential to help us with this dilemma.⁵ While philologists often resist the application of modern theoretical perspectives on ancient evidence, arguing that those perspectives will inevitably prove anachronistic, this anachronism is actually to be celebrated. Strohm argues that the outside perspective provided by modern theory can disclose elements that have been repressed, both by the conceptual order of the ancient text itself and by traditional assumptions in the modern discipline – assumptions that have become so naturalized as to be taken for granted, thereby becoming invisible to us. Theory can help us to step out of our 'orbit of assumptions', and out of the text's own assumptions about the world, so that we can view our evidence anew.⁶ What we must not do, of course, is to subsume ancient texts under the explanatory power of modern theories. Theories can give us new ways of approaching the texts, they can give us the language we need to describe what we find, but they cannot be used as rigid explanations of what is 'really' going on. What we can do is to use modern theories to challenge the texts' account of the world.

In other words, there is something inevitably queer, something odd and ill-fitting, about the application of modern theory to ancient texts, but in that queerness lies a crucial promise: that it will move us towards a new and more comprehensive view of the ancient world. But how can we possibly hope to uncover what a text hides from its readers? Strohm's point of departure is that, while texts may impose an ideological order on their cultural world, they will nec-

essarily fail in doing so.⁷ Texts are so enmeshed in the logic of their time, with all its internal contradictions and multiplicity of perspectives, that they can never finally reduce them to a single, coherent message. Instead, texts will always preserve a trace of that which they repress. *Enūma Eliš*, for example, excludes the god Enlil from the Babylonian pantheon, replacing him with Marduk, but Enlil keeps returning to the text. Implicit intertextual references recall older stories about Enlil as a foil for Marduk's elevation;⁸ the creation of the heavens includes the establishment of Enlil's 'heavenly station' (*manzāz enlil*, V 8), in accordance with the astrological model that was in use at the time; and most significantly, the fifty names that are assigned to Marduk at the end of the epic are an echo of Enlil's divine number, fifty.⁹ Even when it seems to pass him over in silence, the epic registers the echoes of Enlil in all sorts of ways. The theoretically informed study of ancient literature thus requires an eye for detail, for the small things that do not seem to fit with the overall program of the text, and which may therefore reveal hidden aspects that the text suppresses or leaves unstated. These kinds of textual suppression need not be consciously willed or programmatic efforts on behalf of their composers, since any text will necessarily leave out a wealth of elements and details in order for the composition to hang together and in order to get the story told. But whether conscious or not, such suppressions can reveal key aspects of the structure and ideological message of the text – and can often be detected in the echoes and traces that they leave behind.

In this essay, I am interested not in the political ideology of *Enūma Eliš*, but in its gendered ideology, and here the ritual commentary's

⁵ Strohm 2000. For a previous application of Strohm's theories to the study of ancient Near Eastern gender, see Guinan 2018.

⁶ Strohm 2000, xiv.

⁷ Strohm 2000, 155.

⁸ See Wisnom 2014, 90–207.

⁹ See e.g. Seri 2006, 517, who refers to Enlil as 'the great absent figure' in *Enūma Eliš*.

statement that Marduk defeated Tiamat with his penis is a striking example. In *Enūma Eliš*, Marduk defeats Tiamat, not with his member, but with his wind. If I were to claim that Marduk's wind carries a phallic connotation – on the basis of, say, a Freudian reading – philologists would most likely dismiss my claim as an outrageous application of modern theory on the ancient text. But as the Assyrian commentary shows, the association makes good sense according to the logic of cuneiform cultures as well. The word 'penis' (*ušāru*) contains the word for 'wind' (*šāru*), and to cuneiform scholars of the 1st millennium BCE, an association at the level of sound would have indicated an association at the level of meaning as well.¹⁰ What does this example tell us? First of all, that we must be more open to interpretations that our most immediate reactions would lead us to dismiss as inappropriate. When we encounter something seemingly inappropriate in our texts, we need to ask where that sense of incongruity stems from. Have the conventions of our discipline, embedded as it is in the world-view and morality of modern society, made associations that would have been straightforward for ancient readers seem strange to us? Or is it rather that this particular ancient text displays an exceptional opposition to an ideology that was dominant at the time? Either way, we have a lot to learn from the inappropriate.¹¹

I am therefore forced to disagree with those who would gauge whether a theoretical approach can be employed to study an ancient text

on the basis of whether they 'fit' one another. Jeremy Black, for example, argues that

*[i]t seems legitimate in these circumstances for those wishing to deal with a dead, alien, fragmentary, undateable and authorless literature to pursue a pragmatic approach led by elements of any theory which seem pregnant and responsive to that literature's special character and special circumstances, and to set aside those which appear inappropriate.*¹²

I have no problem with Black's pragmatic approach as such, nor with his wish to pick and choose the theoretical insights that seem particularly fruitful. My concern is rather that, if we engage only with theories that seem 'appropriate' to the evidence at hand, the use of theory risks becoming a rather tautological affair. Using a given theory only because it 'fits' the text in question is just a way of confirming one's own pre-existing assumptions about that text. Apart from anything else, the notion that we must employ only theories that are appropriate to the text we set out to study presupposes that we know in advance what we will find there.

Neal Walls, for example, argues that a queer approach is especially apt for the study of *Gilgameš*, in that 'queer theory provides an appropriate method to analyze the poetics of desire in this ancient Akkadian text because both the theory and the text effectively deconstruct the modern Western dichotomies of sexual/platonic love and hetero-/homo-eroticism.'¹³ Walls' queer reading of *Gilgameš* was certainly a path-breaking contribution that clarified much of the complexity in the epic's portrayal of male desire. However, his reasoning in this passage is flawed. Surely, a theory is not appropriate for the study of a text merely because it agrees with its outlook – or rather, with Walls' assumption

¹⁰ See e.g. Michalowski 1990. For other associations between wind and sexuality in cuneiform cultures, see Zisa 2018, 196–199.

¹¹ I would further argue that it is not necessary for ancient texts to be explicit about such connections for a critical reading to be valid. The example merely demonstrates that we should not take for granted that we can know in advance which connections are meaningful and 'appropriate', and which are spurious.

¹² Black 1998, 43.

¹³ Walls 2001, 17.

about what that outlook will turn out to be. A theory should challenge assumptions, both ours and the text's, not merely confirm them. After all, if a theory does not move us towards a new understanding of the texts, but merely restates a pre-existing premise in new words, then what is the use of it? We need to gauge the value of theoretical engagements by the insights they yield, not by whether they appear fitting at first sight. This is especially important when it comes to queer theory. Queer theory is based on the assumption that the gender binary (the rigid division of the human species into two and only two genders) and the social predominance of heterosexuality (including specific assumptions about what sexuality entails in terms of identity, power, and erotic practices) are not biological constants, but vary across cultures. The meaning and nature of gender and sexuality thus cannot be taken for granted when we turn to ancient periods. Instead, we must examine how they are constructed in that specific context.

However, in the study of the ancient Near East, queer theory is most often marshalled to account for those contexts where it seems 'appropriate', that is, for texts and phenomena that appear to deviate from the dominant gendered and sexual ideology of the ancient world, like the *Epic of Gilgameš* and its depiction of eroticized intimacy between men, or what appear to be third gender individuals such as *assinnu*'s and *kurgarrû*'s.¹⁴ In practice, we thereby end up using a theory that argues for a fundamental fluidity and constructedness of gender and sexuality to account for situations where gender and sexuality appear to be fluid and undetermined by biology.¹⁵ But surely, the premise of

queer theory is that *all* forms of gender and sexuality are constructed, not only those that seem strange to us today or that deviated from ancient conventions.¹⁶ However, this premise is obscured by the one-sided application of constructivist theories to ancient sexuality. For example, in an article entitled 'Are There Homosexuals in Mesopotamian Literature?', Martti Nissinen explains why this question is nonsensical according to a constructivist notion of sexuality.¹⁷ It essentially asks whether a modern invention (a fixed homosexual identity) existed in the ancient world. Even attestations of sex between men cannot be taken as evidence for the existence of 'homosexuals' as a fixed category of identity. This is undoubtedly true, but had Nissinen asked, 'Are there *heterosexuals* in Mesopotamian literature?', the answer would surely have been the same. If the binary division between homo- and heterosexuality is a modern construction, then one side of that binary is not 'more constructed' than the other.¹⁸

Queer theory highlights the hidden repressions, the naturalized violence, and the discursive structures that shape our perception of sex and gender – not only at the margins, but at the very heart of normality itself. In the following, I intend to take a queer approach to *Enūma Eliš*.¹⁹ In contrast to *Gilgameš*, *Enūma Eliš* is a staunchly heteronormative text, insisting on the division between male and female and on the subjugation of the latter. As Rivkah Harris puts it, '*Enuma Elish* is a male myth, exalting male order, male rule, male relationships, male power and creativity.'²⁰ A queer approach to the text thus cannot be justified by any similarity be-

¹⁴ See, respectively, Walls 2001 and Guinan – Morris 2017; Helle 2018, Nissinen and Svärd 2018, 396, and Peled.

¹⁵ One exception is Agnès Garcia-Ventura, who has examined the construction of gender in the management of workforces, especially during the Ur III period, considering also how queer theory can help us to ana-

lyze normalized categories of gender – see e.g. Garcia-Ventura 2016, 182–183.

¹⁶ See Helle 2018.

¹⁷ Nissinen 2010.

¹⁸ Helle 2016, 24.

¹⁹ For previous approaches to gender in *Enūma Eliš*, see especially Cooper 2017 and Metzler 2002.

²⁰ Harris 1993, 115.

tween text and theory, but this mismatch may in itself be illuminating. It brings out aspects of the text that are obscured by the limited perspective that it imposes, and by the conventions of an academic field that even today takes the binary between genders for granted.

The monstrous female body

Enūma Eliš opens with a scene of primordial sexuality. Before names and destinies had been created, only the two primeval beings Tiamat and Apsu existed. Both are bodies of water: Tiamat is the salt water of the ocean, Apsu the fresh subterranean groundwater. In the beginning, the two bodies mingle into one mass, creating the first gods.

*apsû-ma rēštû zārûšun
mummu tiāmat muallidat gimrīšun
mêšunu ištēniš iḥiqqū-ma
gipāra lā kišsurū šuṣâ lā šē'û*

*Primordial Apsû was their seed,
and it was Tiamat, the matrix,²¹
who gave birth to them all.
They mingled their waters together,
unbound by meadows, unstuffed with
reed.²² (I 3–6)*

The landscape of southern Iraq was a checkerboard of canals and islets of pasture land, and on the banks between land and water stood clusters of reed.²³ The text thus imagines a time before meadows separated the waters from each other, and before reedbeds marked that distinction. Unbound by meadows, the waters were free to mix and mingle, and the first gods were born from that eroticized encounter: ‘Within them, the gods were created, / Lahmu and Lahamu came forth’ (*ibbanû-ma ilī qerebšun laḥmu laḥāmu uštāpû*, I 9–10).

²¹ For this translation, see Jacobsen 1976, 168, and Foster 2005, 439, fn. 1.

²² Here and below, the text is quoted from the edition in Lambert 2003, but the translations are my own.

²³ See Buccellati 1990, 125.

The sexuality that we find at the beginning of the epic is thus a shapeless, chaotic, and mutual affair. There is no hierarchy or order in this scene. Though they represent different gendered principles – grammar tells us that the ocean is female and the groundwater male – the two waters cannot be distinguished from one another at this point in time. They have mingled together completely, literally ‘into one’ (*ištāniš*). By the end of the epic, however, a very different ideology will come to prevail. No longer allowed to mix freely, male and female will instead be treated as fundamentally separate categories, the relation between them will become rigidly hierarchical, and the female body will become a site of continuous male anxiety. In the following pages, I track how that reversal unfolds in the text.

As I noted in the previous section, the theory of Paul Strohm suggest that texts will always preserve a trace of what they repress. The textual program to subdue and silence a given ideological element involves a necessary failure. The repressed element keeps returning under new guises, becoming a source of constant irritation.²⁴ In fact, the more a text wishes to transfix and control an unwanted aspect of its ideological world, the more discursive space will that aspect take up. This structure may help to explain the amount of time that *Enūma Eliš* devotes to the female body. The presence, power, and necessity of a female body within a patriarchal logic acts as an irritant that the text continuously tries and fails to subdue.

Having at first been portrayed as a good and caring mother, Tiamat eventually becomes the main antagonist of the story. She gives birth to an army of monsters and plots to destroy the gods she created. The figure of the cosmic mother is thus turned into a monstrous enemy for the gods to kill. Though their ranks also

²⁴ See Strohm 2000, 155–156.

include goddesses, such as Damkina, mother of the main character Marduk, these female characters speak no lines and play at best subservient roles in the plot. As Jerrold Cooper puts it, except for Damkina and Tiamat 'Enūma Elish is entirely bereft of identifiable females.'²⁵ The main conflict in the story thus plays out between a community of male gods and their single, monstrous, ancestral mother. But while the focus of the narrative is on the male characters' desire to subdue the dangerous female body, the text also depicts the internal contradiction of that desire. The gods send first Ea and then Anu to defeat Tiamat, but they return without success, being too terrified to confront her. They both urge their forefather Anshar to try again and send someone else: 'My father, don't despair, send another against her! / A woman's strength may be great indeed, but not as much as a man's' (*abī ē tuštāniḥ tūr šupurši / emūqu sinništi lū dunnuna ul mala ša zikri*, II 91–92 = 115–16). Ea and Anu argue that, though they themselves have failed, men are bound to eventually prevail over the inherent weakness of women. There is thus an inevitable self-contradiction in the misogyny of the text. The female body is weak and 'naturally' inferior to its male counterpart, and so ought to be easy to suppress, but at the same time it is frightening and difficult to subdue decisively.²⁶

The true danger posed by Tiamat is not the strength of her body in itself, but its monstrously generative potential. She gives birth to an army of monsters, demons, scorpion-men, fish-men, bull-men, all of them sharp-toothed and with poison for blood. Crucially, these monsters spring from her body alone, and not from the sexual union that created the gods in the first place: Tiamat conceives without having been inseminated by a male penis. The female body is thus enthused with its own procreative power,

which becomes monstrous when it is separated from male influence. The text's concern with the possibility of penis-less procreation is underscored by the four-fold repetition of the passage. Again and again we are told how Tiamat creates and weaponizes eleven kinds of monsters. The insistent reiteration and listing of the creatures evokes an image of the female body as constantly generative, breeding monsters without end. The female body thus becomes a site of constant concern, as the fertile female body has become unquiet and disquieting. It cannot be subdued, it will not lie still, and it incessantly brings forth new threats against the male order.

This sense of disquiet surrounding the female body persists even after Marduk has managed to subdue Tiamat. He thrusts his wind into her mouth, binds her, kills her, and dismembers her.²⁷ In a fragmentary passage (V 45–62), we read of how Marduk manipulates her limbs to create the geographical features of our world: he splits her body in two, her breasts become mountains, her crotch is wedged into the horizon, he bores holes into her body to create wells, and the rivers Euphrates and the Tigris flow like tears from her eyes. One would think that the restless female body would then be finally tamed, definitively fixed in place by Marduk's cosmic violence. But the text suggests otherwise. At the end of the epic, Marduk is assigned 50 names, and with each name, a role that he will play in the maintenance of world order.²⁸ The 49th is *Neberu*, the Babylonian name for the planet Jupiter, Marduk's sign in the heavens. This name is associated with the following role:

*mā ša qerbiš tiāmat ītebbiru lā nāḥiš
šumšu lū nēberu āḥizu qerbīšu
ša kakkabī šamāmi alkāssunu likīn-ma*

²⁵ Cooper 2017, 116.

²⁶ See also Metzler 2002, 398.

²⁷ On the relation between femininity, death, and the shaping of form in *Enūma Eliš*, see Metzler 2002.

²⁸ For the relation between the 50 names and the accompanying role, see Bottéro 1977.

kīma šēnī lir'â ilī gimrāšun
likmi tiāmat napištašu lišiq u likri
aḥrātaš niši labāri šūme
lissē-ma lā uktalla līriqa našāta

The one who travels (ebēru) tirelessly
back and forth inside (qerbiš) Tiamat:
let his name be Neberu, who seizes
(āḥizu) her waist (qerbīšu)!
Let him maintain the movements of the
heavenly stars,
let him lead all the gods like sheep.
Let him bind Tiamat, let her breath be
kept short and shallow:
for generations to come, in future days,
may he travel unrestrained into the dis-
tance, may he roam into eternity.
 (VII 128–34)

According to this passage, Jupiter's movement through the night-sky coordinates those of the stars and of the other planets, each of which corresponds to a god, so that Jupiter herds the gods like sheep. In so doing, the planet moves round and round inside the body of Tiamat, which Marduk has split into two and used to create the heavenly spheres. Jupiter's progression through the heavens is imagined as a continuous process of binding, with the planetary orbit as a sort of astral rope keeping Tiamat's body bound in place. This need for continuous control carries a distinct erotic connotation. Marduk is referred to as 'he who seizes her waist', which is perhaps to be understood as the planet's movement through the middle section of the heavens. One way or another, the epithet is clearly sexualized. The word *aḥāzu*, 'to grasp', also means 'to marry', and *qerbu*, 'middle' or 'inside', also means 'womb'. With Tiamat's womb having previously been represented a site of restless, monstrous fertility, this violent control of her waist seems to be a way of keeping the unruly female body under control.

As such, even when Marduk has killed and bound Tiamat, mutilated her body, and torn it

limb from limb, the female body remains unquiet. It continues to disturb the male characters. It is not enough for Tiamat to have been murdered and dismembered – she must be constantly bound, wrapped in Jupiter's orbit again and again, for all of eternity. As noted, the more a text represses an unwanted element of its ideological world, the more that element keeps returning under new guises. Here the monstrously fertile female body returns in the form of Tiamat's waist, and the threat of that return is enough to require an eternal renewal of bondage. In the anxious logic of misogyny, the female body can never fully be subdued once and for all, but must be tirelessly seized and restrained.

The world order that is established in *Enūma Eliš* thus rests on a foundation of gendered violence and sexualized subjugation. According to this story, the world we see around us was created through the murder, mutilation, bondage, and, according to the Assyrian ritual commentary, oral rape of a divine motherly body. I noted above that *Enūma Eliš* opens with a sexualized cosmogony, as Apsu, the primordial seed, and Tiamat, the primordial womb, mix their waters together. The epic also ends with a scene of sexualized cosmogony, as Marduk manipulates Tiamat's limbs – breast, crotch, eyes, and mouth. But whereas the eroticism of the first scene was mutual, chaotic, and free from constraints, the second scene is insistently hierarchical, ordered, violent, and constantly constraining. In this section, I have described how the separation of gendered bodies yields a depiction of the female body as monstrously generative and constantly disquieting; in the following, I turn to the way in which this division between genders also serves to create an exclusively masculine social sphere.

The stories of men

In an older Akkadian epic, *Atra-ḫasis*, the creation of humanity is depicted as a cooperation between two deities, Mami and Enki (the Sumerian name for Ea). The gods first charge the mother goddess Mami with the task of creating humanity, but she responds: 'It is not for me to create, that task belongs to Enki' (*ittīyā-ma lā naṭû ana epēši / itti enkī-ma ibašši šipru*, I 200–201). What she will do instead is to take the clay that Enki has enthused with life and shape it into human form. In other words, the creation of matter belongs to the male god while the creation of form belongs to the female goddess. Not so in *Enūma Eliš*, which also includes an account of the creation of humanity, closely following the text of *Atra-ḫasis* and occasionally reproducing it *verbatim*.²⁹ But in *Enūma Eliš*, Mami has been removed from the plot, and humanity is instead created through a collaboration between Marduk, who conceives the plan, and his father Ea, who carries it out. In the transition from *Atra-ḫasis* to *Enūma Eliš*, the female deity has thus been denied an active role in the scene of creation.³⁰ Instead, the female body can participate in creation only as a passive material to be moulded, as Marduk reshapes Tiamat's body to suit his plan for the universe.³¹ The creation of form thus no longer belongs to the mother goddess, but has been appropriated by the male deities. In a complete reversal of the gendered logic of creation in *Atra-ḫasis*, now it is men who provide the form and the woman who provides the malleable material, namely her own body, while the relation between them has turned from mutual cooperation to violent imposition.

One outcome of this displacement of gender is that creation becomes a fully homosocial affair. It no longer involves an interaction between two

deities of different genders, as it did in *Atra-ḫasis* or in the opening scene of *Enūma Eliš*. Instead, it is something men do together, *to* women and not with them. In *Enūma Eliš*, the creation of humanity is portrayed almost like a father-son bonding activity. Creation is here something that takes place entirely between men, with women relegated to the mute and passive role of malleable matter (though the female body paradoxically also remains forever unquiet and disquieting, as shown in the previous section). Crucially, this shift is reflected in how the text portrays social relations, not only between gods, but also between humans. In the epilogue, the text describes how it would like to be read and received. The gods have finished assigning Marduk his 50 names, and the narrator invites the audience to reflect on them:

*enqu mūdû mithāriš limtalkū
lišannī-ma abu māri lišāḫiz
ša rē'î nāqidi lipattâ uznāšun*

*The clever and the wise should discuss
them together (mithāriš), the father
should repeat them and make the son
understand (lišāḫiz) – let them broaden
the minds of shepherds and herdsmen!
(VII 146–48)*

The epic of *Atra-ḫasis* likewise ends by addressing its audience and inviting them to reflect on the text they have just heard: 'I have sung of the Flood to all people – listen!' (*abūba ana kullat niši / uzammer šimea*, III viii 18'–19'). Though it was probably enjoyed by a primarily male audience, *Atra-ḫasis* clearly depicts itself as addressed to everybody, and the imperative 'listen!' (*šimea*) is cast in a collective plural that is unmarked for gender. By contrast, the ending of *Enūma Eliš* restricts its ideal audience to an exclusively male social sphere. It imagines that it will be discussed widely and wisely, by people both clever and common – but only ever by men. The text is to be repeated forever, passed on from father to son, but crucially, this

²⁹ Seri 2014.

³⁰ Frymer-Kensky 1992, 74–76.

³¹ Metzler 2002.

miniature genealogical model of textual transmission entirely omits women. It is as if families consist only of fathers and sons, and no mothers. This omission would not in itself have been significant, given the patriarchal nature of cuneiform cultures, were it not for the contrast with the story that these fathers and sons are to discuss together. The entire plot of *Enūma Eliš* revolves around Tiamat's motherly body – its dangers, restless fertility, and necessary subjugation. The epic narrates how this divine mother was killed and subdued, leaving, it would seem, an imaginary family consisting only of men. *Enūma Eliš* thus involves not just one, but two sets of non-heterosexual reproductions. Tiamat gives birth to monsters without having been inseminated by a penis, while gods and men alike procreate without the need of women: Ea and Marduk create humanity without the cooperation of a mother goddess, and the epilogue proposes that the text will be transmitted into eternity by an all-male genealogy.

One of the foundational insights of queer theory is the pervasiveness of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick termed 'homosocial desire'.³² Sedgwick argues that the dividing line between sexual and non-sexual relations is more historically variable than we usually assume, simply because the category that we term 'sex' is a culturally relative construction. What qualifies as sexual behaviour in one period may not do so in the next.³³ Accordingly, the binary divide between homosexual and non-sexual forms of homosociality is a bad point of departure for studying historical relations between men. Instead, Sedgwick proposes a 'homosocial continuum', a spectrum of interactions between persons of the same gender, where the division between sexual and non-sexual behaviour is not given beforehand. This allows for a historical sensitivity to the different ways in which this

continuum may be structured in the cultures that we study. This further allows for the recognition of the role that desire plays in the shaping of male homosociality, even when that desire does not take the form of eroticism. Sedgwick shows that in the periods she examines, even purportedly heterosexual men are powerfully invested in relations with other men. Men desire the company of men and spend their time maintaining a sanitized, exclusively male space, where a number of intense emotional relations may unfold, including close affection, rivalry, aggression, bodily intimacy, and satisfaction. Women may be included in this primarily male space, but only as passive (and often erotic) tokens in a set of exchanges that ultimately link men to men. Male homosociality is thus a social space that fuses power and desire: a hierarchical control over women with a libidinal investment in other men.

When one does not assume a strict division between the sexual and the non-sexual, the homosocial space thus often seems to be structured by an intense mutual desire between men, a desire that may take on a variety of different forms. The same is true of the gendered world of *Enūma Eliš*. I am not claiming that the all-male space imagined in the epilogue of the epic is to be understood as erotic. I merely wish to note how heavily the men of this ideological world are invested in the company of other men, and only men. The violent repudiation of the female body allows for the celebration of a male society where men create together, grow wise together, and raise sons together. In the opening scene of the epic, the male and female seas mixed their waters *together*, literally 'into one' (*ištēniš*), in a scene of heterosexual creation. At the end of the epic, the clever men and the wise men discuss the text *together*, literally 'equally' (*mithāriš*), in a scene of homosocial procreation. The 'togetherness' that is celebrated by the epic has thus shifted over the course

³² Sedgwick 1985.

³³ See also Walls 2001, 13.

of the story towards the exclusive importance of male-male sociality.

Crucially, this male 'togetherness' is created through the telling of stories, namely *Enūma Eliš* itself, which the clever and the wise are to discuss together. As an example of how women figure in the construction of male homosocial spaces, Sedgwick cites three canonical works of English literature – Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, and William Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* – all of which depict 'a transaction of honor between men over the dead, discredited, or disempowered body of a woman.'³⁴ In *The Princess* especially, this transaction takes the form of story-telling, as seven men take turns reciting a poem about a princess' loss of power: 'the telling of the story, like a woman, is passed from hand to hand among the young men.'³⁵ The parallel to *Enūma Eliš* could hardly be more exact. The epic ends with the dead, dismembered body of a woman passed, in the form of a story about her demise, from man to man. The men thereby create a shared discursive space, where they cement their power over women and their investment in each other's company.

Tellingly, the word employed to describe how the fathers are to teach the names of Marduk to their sons is once more the word *ahāzu*, which had earlier been used to describe Marduk's continuous seizing of Tiamat's waist. Here, the father is to make his son 'grasp' the text in the metaphorical sense, that is, to understand it. The son is to fix it in his mind just like Marduk fixed the limbs of Tiamat in place. This is a curious echo, with the two words being only twenty lines apart. There is perhaps a sense here that, in telling each other the story of how Marduk subdued Tiamat, the human men are somehow re-enacting it. In their safely all-male dis-

ursive space, they repeat Marduk's violation and domination of the anxiety-provoking, almost-but-never-quite passive female body.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above follows from that assumption that gender and sexuality are not trans-historically stable, but are culturally relative, dependent on the social conventions of a given society. Only if we assume that the gender binary is not a natural and necessary feature of society, but is constructed by, among other things, the discourse of literary texts, does it become possible to examine how that construction unfolds. But this requires us to step out of the textual 'orbit of assumptions', to break with the ideology that texts impose on their readers, and to peer into the illogical assumptions they hide. This means that a theoretical perspective on the construction of gender will necessarily seem 'inappropriate', it will be a bad fit with the world view of the text. But in that impropriety lies a crucial potential. The application of a queer perspective on the text proves fruitful, not because *Enūma Eliš* is in itself somehow 'queer' – far from it! – but precisely because the conscious mismatch between text and theory can illuminate the text in a new way.

The story told in *Enūma Eliš* takes the reader from a mutual, unbounded, and shapeless mixing of male and female waters 'into one' at the beginning of the text, to a violent separation and hierarchization of genders at the end of the text. I would like to highlight three aspects of this process: the creation of a binary divide between genders, the disquieting force that cleaves to the female body, and the establishment of an all-male discursive space.

The strange logic behind a binary divide between genders – the idea that male and female are categorically, fundamentally different – becomes apparent in Ea's and Anu's comment, after they have turned back in fear from

³⁴ Sedgwick 1985, 137.

³⁵ Sedgwick 1985, 127.

Tiamat's advance, that 'a woman's strength may be great indeed, but not as much as a man's' (*emūqu sinništi lū dunnuna ul mala ša zikri*, II 992 = 116). There is a distinct irony here. Ea and Anu argue that men are stronger than women at the exact moment when they themselves, as men, have proven to be weaker than a woman. This reflects a view of gender as an essential, inherent feature. The division between men and women, and the characteristics associated with each, transcends any specific evidence to the contrary. There is an overarching, ideal category of 'men', who are strong, and of 'women', who are weak, and these ideal categories are ontologically prior to any actual instance of weak men or strong women.³⁶

This misogynist illogic works to create a paradoxical image of the female body. On the one hand, it is weak, yielding, and easily subdued, and on the other hand, it is frightening, restless, and monstrously generative. Accordingly, Marduk, as the primary representative of male order, is tasked with the constant repression and constriction of the female body, in an attempt to keep its disquieting restlessness in place once and for all. This attempt fails, and so must be undertaken anew in an ongoing cycle that reaches into eternity. I have suggested that this structure – repression, failure, return under new guises, renewed repression, and so on – is in fact a more general feature of all textual efforts to establish a coherent order that is free from unwanted ideological elements.

Finally, through the separation of genders, men become emotionally invested in the company of other men. So as to create a purely homosocial space, women are reduced (as nearly as possible, given the impossibility of full repression) to a passive material, which can be moulded, controlled, and passed around within an exclusively

male community. Men thus become invested in the continuous repudiation and control of women's bodies, and thereby, in the creation of a self-perpetuating, all-male discursive space.

Appendix

The Assyrian commentary's equation between wind and penis finds a curious cross-cultural parallel in an Anglo-Saxon riddle, Bede's *Joco-Seria* 10, which may be paraphrased as follows: 'How do you make an anus see?' The answer is to add an 'o', turning Latin *culus*, 'anus', into *oculus*, 'eye'.³⁷ As with Marduk's penis, the double entendre turns on the indecent absence of an initial vowel (*šāru* vs. *ušāru*), but the Anglo-Saxon riddle actually takes this a step further, as the appended 'o' has the same circular shape as the two body parts it is used to link: it resembles both sphincter and socket. The supplemented letter that ostensibly points to a difference in content thus also reveals a sameness in form.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to the spirited encouragement of Gioele Zisa, as well as to Paul Strohm, Ann Guinan, Omar N'Shea, and the anonymous reviewers.

³⁶ See Metzler 2002, 399–400, and Cooper 2017, 115–116 for a dissenting view.

³⁷ Orchard 2005, 287.

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