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MĪNU ATTĀ MALṬARĪ? PARODY, GENETTE, AND THE *POOR MAN OF NIPPUR* AS MOCK-HEROIC PASTICHE *

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Abstract

This article aims to provide a workable methodology for the classification, analysis, and discussion of "parodic" texts in the ancient Near East. Since the publication of the *Poor Man of Nippur* by O. Gurney (1956, 145–164), scholars have recognised the humorous nature of various additional cuneiform texts, several of which have been termed "parodies" or similar. However, in choice of terminology, the lack of a strict, structural approach has led to an obfuscation of the relationship these texts exhibit with their respective "parodied predecessor(s)". The following advocates for using the trans-textual theory of Gerard Genette's *Palimpsests* (1997) to approach the topic of Parody in the cuneiform literature. After outlining Genette's theory, a survey of texts often termed "parodies" follows, to better clarify their textual relationships. Thereafter, a full application of the methodology is demonstrated with the *Poor Man of Nippur* to argue that the text is a Mock-Heroic Pastiche that both reinforces previous readings and has bearings on literary history.

1. Introduction

Joan Goodnick Westenholz wrote, in response to scholars who had termed the OA *Sargon Legend* a "parody", that "the term 'parody' has been particularly abused in the process of categorizing legendary texts as parodies … What is the prior text which is mocked in this Old Assyrian literary composition?".[1] It is not just the OA *Sargon Legend*, however, which has been debated to be "parodic". Several cuneiform texts have been the object of

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1. Westenholz 2007, 21f., against Van De Mieroop 2000, 155, fn. 6 (owed to Liverani) and Foster 2005, 71f. For further arguments against the parodic definition of this text, see Dercksen 2005, 108, and Alster & Oshima 2007, 8.

scholarly back-and-forth over whether they are "parodic" or not, often without a consensus emerging.[2] This is not surprising: even specialists outside of cuneiform literature have had occasion to decry the "onerous confusion"[3] associated with the term parody.

But parody is not the only term that has been abused in cuneiform research. The discussion of (supposed) humorous texts seems especially susceptible to confusion. Texts fluctuate between a constellation of labels — parody, pastiche, caricature, and satire — at times in articles from different scholars, at times in the same paper.[4] The *Poor Man of Nippur* (hereafter PMN) is a case in point, termed a pastiche by A. Finet (1992, 102), a parody by E. Jiménez (2017, 101 with fn. 271–272) and J. Finn (2019, 20–22), and both "pastiche-like" and a "parody" by G. P. Campi (2024, 102; 107).[5] Far from being purely semantic, each of these terms carry significantly different connotations regarding the text's structural makeup: if the PMN is a parody, it implies, *per* Westenholz above, that a prior text serves as its inspiration; if it is a pastiche, there is the suggestion that the PMN is rather imitating the style of another composition; if both terms are to be used interchangeably, why do we not employ one or the other? All this suggests that a new approach ought to be sought.

In 1982, the French literary theorist and structuralist Gérard Genette, who grappled with these same problems of definition, proffered a solution in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*.[6] Having surveyed the use of the term parody from Aristotle (παρῳδία; *Poetics*, 1448a) through to the 20th century, he came to the conlusion that "Today this term is the site of a perhaps inevitable confusion". The problem, he suggested, lay in the use of the term "parody" when applied to texts of distinct transtextual relationships, because "it is called upon to designate at times playful distortion, at times the burlesque transposition of a text, and on other occasions the satirical imitation of a style".[7] He thus developed a system of categorisation to allow those using the term "parody" "to check and focus with greater swiftness and accuracy what it is they are (probably) thinking about when they (haphazardly) utter the word *parody*".[8] The following pages advocate for the use of said system in the study of cuneiform parody, using the PMN to demonstrate the fruitfulness of its results.

Imprecision of the use of parody (and related terms) in Assyriology has led to lengthy debates, based largely on content, on whether a text is "parody" or not. While content must always be considered (and is done so in this paper), the core insight of a Genettean

2. For examples of debates on whether certain cuneiform texts are parodic, see discussion in Jiménez 2017, 100f., including LKA 62: as "parody" see Edzard 2004a, 81–87; *contra* "parody" Hurowitz & Westenholz 1990, 46. For the *Rulers of Lagaš*: as "parody" see Sollberger 1967, 279–291; Glassner 2005, 74f.; *contra* "parody" Cooper 2010, 331 fn. 36; on its difficulties Foster 1974, 82.
3. Genette 1997, 24.
4. E.g., Rumor 2017, 199–202, on the *Aluzinnu* text as both parody and caricature; see further under section 2.3.
5. It is also termed a satire, though only regarding its content and not its genre, by Cooper 1975, 167.
6. Original French: *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré*. I quote and cite from the 1997 English translation of Newman and Doubinsky.
7. Genette 1997, 24.
8. Genette 1997, 27.

approach is that shifting the focus of investigation to structural procedures allows for more precise statements about the nature of a text to be made. This aids not only in determining whether a text is "parody" but also provides a stronger platform to support contentual remarks. Further, using a Genettean and structural approach better elucidates the intertextual relationship(s) at the heart of all "parodic" genres.

To this end, the basics of Genette's system (or "conceptual tool" in his words)[9] are fully explained in the first section and compared to previous applications of parodic theory (or lack thereof) in Assyriology. Thereafter, a survey of cuneiform literary texts that have been called parodies ensues. It will be shown that the indiscriminate use of the term parody applied to these texts has often obfuscated their structural differences; these are better ascertained via Genette's system, and their perception allows for some new interpretations of the texts to boot. Lastly, a specific case is examined by way of the PMN. It will be demonstrated that the text is not a "parody", but rather a pastiche, and specifically an example of the "mock-heroic" genre. This classification will complement previous, contentual interpretations of the text, but also elucidate some new points of interest and better clarify some of the subtleties of the text's humour. It will also have bearing on the history of the mock-heroic genre, which has hitherto been thought to be first attested only in the Hellenistic period with the *Batrachomyomachia* ("Battle of the Frogs and Mice").

1.1 Genette's Structural Parody[10]

Parody appears to encompass many different genres (e.g. pastiche, caricature, burlesque-travesty), whose texts exhibit different relationships with their "parodied" predecessor, a relationship termed by Genette as "hypertextuality": "any relationship uniting a text B ['hypertext'] … to an earlier text A [hypotext] … upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary".[11] These textual relationships differ at a structural level: a hypertext either *transforms* its hypotext or it *imitates* its hypotext.[12] The processes are quite distinct, and, above all, it is in their confusion that the problematic usage of "parody" in Assyriology lies. Transformation can be as simple as changing a single letter or word, or as complex as transposing or altering a style (e.g., burlesque travesty) or subject (parody proper). Crucially, transformative cases concretely depend upon *one or several hypotext*(*s*).[13] Imitation is still more complex. According to Genette, it depends upon "rewrit[ing] directly in the style of [a] model". By "style", Genette meant in the "broadest sense: '[style] is a *manner*, on both the thematic and formal level' ". Such a "style" is generated

9. Genette 1997, 26.
10. For more concise recapitulations of Genette's theory (with minor modifications) in Assyriology see Bach 2021, 26f. (later and in more depth 2024, 213–234) and Tadmor 2023, 44f.
11. Genette 1997, 5.
12. For Genette (see esp. 1997, 6), both textual relationships (*transformation* and *imitation*) are considered to be "transformation", *i.e.* the same, but *transformation proper* is "simple", while *imitation* is "indirect". To explicate the difference, Genette wrote: "Joyce tells the story of Ulysses in a manner other than Homer's [*transformation*], and Virgil tells the story of Aeneas in the manner of Homer [*imitation*] — a pair of symmetrical and inverse transformations" (*ibid.*).
13. Genette 1997, 84.

within a "matrix of imitation", by which Genette meant "to imitate a particular text in its particularity first means that one should establish the text's idiolect — *i.e.*, identify its specific stylistic and thematic features — and then *generalize* them".[14] In contradistinction to transformations, imitations depend not on one or several texts, but rather on a genre or genres. Here is the crux of the issue: in Assyriology, one often finds the description "parody of genre x". The *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*) (discussed in further detail below), is a good example, since it incorporates numerous genres in a humorous way to create a new composition, which scholars have subsequently labelled a "parody" of those genres.[15] This is a misnomer that obscures the structural and textual practices at play, for to parody a text and to "parody a genre" are very distinct. The latter involves generalisation and purposeful misapplication of an idiolect, which is then strictly imitation. Hence Genette considered the notion of a "parody of genre" a "pure chimera": parody (or travesty) "always takes on one (or several) individual text(s)".[16] This principle even applies to texts which imitate only one text: "one can imitate only a genre (a corpus, no matter how narrow, that is treated as a genre) — for the simple reason … that *to imitate is to generalize*".[17] To imitate a particular text means generalising its particular features, in a sense making a genre out of that text, whence derives terms like Proustism, Ovidism, etc.[18]

Transformations and imitations are further qualified by the "mood" or "tone" their hypertext takes towards its hypotext. These are most often "playful", "satirical", or "serious". The difference between a "playful" or "satirical" mood lies in a hypertext of the latter being mocking or aggressive vis-à-vis its hypotext. The "playful" mood is of "pure amusement" or "entertainment". A "serious" mood is one that involves no mocking or humour.[19] As can be seen from Table 1, below (from Genette 1997, 28), parody is the confluence of transformation and a playful mood. Here Genette's methodology becomes problematic. Moods are inherently subjective and require us to know what was considered humorous by the ancient scribe. This is a difficult undertaking itself in Assyriology, as succinctly stated by D'Agostino (1998, 272): "we cannot know, on the basis of the documentation we possess now, the psychological aspect of their humour … did they feel the tragedy which often finds itself behind a laugh?".[20] Regardless, it will become clear that

14. Genette 1997, 81–83.
15. E.g. Jiménez 2017, 103, who termed the text an "omnibus parody". See further fn. 85.
16. Genette 1997, 83–85.
17. Genette 1997, 85.
18. See further Genette 1997, 73–81.
19. See esp. Genette 1997, 24–28.
20. To accurately determine humour and thus mood in Mesopotamia, the implementation of humour theory would be necessary, for two recent examples of which see Milstein 2022, 257f., and Zaia 2025, 131–157 (esp. 131–135). Most approaches to the subject of humour in cuneiform literature rely on the basic notion of humour as, *per* already Foster 1974, 69, "revel[ling] in the inevitable gap between what is and what is supposed to be". Thus D'Agostino 2000, 24, understood humour by "il fatto cioè che ad essa è sempre inscindibilmente legata l'idea dello stravolgimento, dello iato logico". The aforementioned article of Milstein (2022, 263–266) advocated for discussing texts in humoristic terms, despite a lack of native designation comparable to the Greco-Roman tradition. Her, and Zaia's (above) examples demonstrate how fruitful and correct it is to allow discussion of humour in cuneiform texts (cf. Campi 2024, 81f.). See also Milstein 2020, 353, with thoughtful comment on the difference between "comedy" and

the cuneiform texts typically termed parody are misclassified due to a misunderstanding of their hypertextual relationship, not mood. In the survey below, texts have been tentatively grouped by mood when it is more readily ascertainable and for the convenience of the reader. The crucial difference of transformation and imitation remains.

Mood / **Relation**	*Playful*	*Satirical*	*Serious*
Transformation	Parody	Travesty	Transposition
Imitation	Pastiche	Caricature	Forgery

Table 1. Text categories after structure and mood (reproduced from Genette 1997, 28).

1.2 Previous Approaches to "Parody" in Assyriology

The majority of texts described as "parody" in Assyriology are, from a structuralist perspective, really varieties of imitation — *i.e.*, pastiches, caricatures, and forgeries — because their hypertextual relationship does not depend on one or several hypotexts, but rather on a genre or genres.[21] In fact, there is an almost total dearth of one-to-one text transformations in cuneiform literature outside of singular allusions.[22] This will be demonstrated in the survey below.

While the term parody has often been invoked in Assyriological studies, only Jiménez has specifically engaged with parodic theory to aid in its identification.[23] For defining parodies, in his case the *Disputation Poems*, Jiménez employed the "maximalist definition of Glei", that required: "(1) a form of 'explicit intertextuality' (*i.e.*, the hypertext clearly depends on its hypotext); (2) the parodied text is changed in form, but still recognizable; and (3) transformed for comic or satiric purposes".[24]

This definition can detect singular parodic instances but cannot lead to the classification of a whole text as a parody. This was the concern of C. Mittermayer when reviewing Jiménez's work, who pointed out that that in "parodies" such as the *Aluzinnu*

"humour" (fn. 21, citing Lowe 2008, 1–20). A forthcoming article of the writer will offer a fuller overview of humour theory from an Assyriological perspective.

21. E.g., Foster 2007, 38: "Throughout the history of Akkadian literature, parodies were composed on various genres of writing, such as letters, royal inscriptions, magic spells, and legal documents". See also Bach 2021, 27; 31.

22. See esp. Wisnom 2020, 75–78 (with further literature) on the famous allusion of *Enūma Eliš* IV 31–32 to SB *Anzû* II 17–18. While Wisnom showed concrete examples of one-to-one text transformations (e.g., *ibid.*, 216–244 for *Erra and Išum* and the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur*), these texts also contain numerous other hypotexts, so that they might better be understood as *generic chimeras* / *contaminations* — see further under section 2.8 below.

23. Jiménez 2017, 69–108; 2018, 124–133; 2020, 91–104. Sansone 2023, 264, also approached the subject, drawing an important distinction between metapoetics (*i.e.*, comment aimed at readership) and parody (*i.e.*, comment aimed at text).

24. Glei 2000, 346 *apud* Jiménez 2017, 98. See also *ibid.*, 99: Jiménez cited the distinction between "specific" and "general" "parody": "whereas the former is directed against a specific precursor, the latter parodies a group of texts or a discursive mode". He noted that the *Disputations* fall in to both categories. "Specific" and "general parody" are akin to Genette's transformation and imitation.

Text(s) or *Batrachomyomachia*, "the whole setting of the text reflects the parodied original, not only sections of two words (as is often the case with the intertextual references given for the disputation poems)".[25] To demonstrate that a text transforms one (or several) hypotext(s), numerous instances of explicit intertextuality are required. It must be admitted that our patchwork knowledge of Akkadian literature means that we surely miss some potential allusions, and hence risk failing to detect instances of parody.[26] However, we also risk placing undue weight on specific phrases that might actually be stock-literary language.[27] Only one of these eventualities can be controlled, since we cannot guess what we do not know. But we can exercise due caution in ascribing shared language to parody, when stock-literary language, and hence generic imitation is, as the text survey will demonstrate, more likely. This is one benefit of Genette's approach when compared to that of Glei.

Another advantage of Genette's system over that of Glei's definition is the lesser need to depend on a text being "transformed for comic or satiric purposes". As stated above, this is challenging to detect in cuneiform literature. But with Genette's system, less of an emphasis is placed on mood (*i.e.*, comic or satiric tones). This is the reason for the dashed lines between moods as indicated in the diagram above. Moods are not mutually exclusive: all could be identified within one text, and Genette even envisaged there being more than three, representing them in a "rose-window" diagram, where "ironic" is placed between "playful" and "satirical", "humorous" between the "serious" and "playful", "polemical" between the "satirical" and "serious", and so on.[28] This has been cited as a criticism against Genette's work. For example, L. Hutcheon disagreed with Genette's rejection of the hermeneutic reader:

> … the reality of the art forms with which I want to deal demands that a pragmatic context be opened up: the author's (or text's) intent, the effect upon the reader, the competence involved in the encoding, and the decoding of parody, the contextual elements that mediate or determine the comprehension of parodic modes — all these cannot be ignored.[29]

25. Mittermayer 2018, 340f. The two examples cited are strictly imitations (see section 2.3 for *Aluzinnu* and 3.3 for mock-heroic pastiche below).
26. Jiménez 2017, 80.
27. *Ibid.*, 89. Jiménez admitted that some proposed allusions might fall under this category. Cf. however, Wisnom 2020, 12f.: "even if the language used is formulaic or generic, this cannot discount an allusion". In the end, whether a line is an allusion or generic language will inevitably depend on the type of text. For those discussed in this paper the latter seems more likely.
28. Genette 1997, 29.
29. Hutcheon 2000, 18f.; 21f.. Hutcheon also disagreed with Genette's restriction of parody to shorter texts (e.g., puns, poems), though cf. Genette 1997, 31: *Chapelain décoiffé* is a notable longer parody, and Genette only noted that "parody gravitates to short texts" — implying it could also apply to longer ones. S. Dentith (2002, 11–14) also offered two criticisms. First, "[Genette's approach] suffers from the difficulty of attempting to reform or reconstitute a whole vocabulary by an act of scholarly force majeure, as though habitual usage could be single-handedly transformed in the name of greater precision". This criticism was foreseen by Genette (1997, 26): "In proposing this taxonomic and terminological reform, I hold no real hopes for its future … I am therefore claiming not to censure the abuse of the word parody

Though a fair critique, Genette's methodology is still best when approaching, particularly, cuneiform literature, whose chronological distance makes hermeneutic procedures ever more challenging.

2. Text Survey: Transformation or Imitation?

The following presents a survey of some well-known texts of Akkadian literature corresponding to Genette's table above (Table 1),[30] texts which, by and large, have been termed "parodies". Problematic cases are discussed at the end. Some texts, notably those under forgery and transposition, are included not so much to show where scholars have gone wrong, but to demonstrate the effectiveness of Genette's framework. Others are mentioned because they deserve due attention when approaching cuneiform parody. The survey reveals that parody and transformation are largely restricted to singular instances and, in the case of whole texts, are exceedingly rare. Imitation is by far the more common extant textual practice. Reasons for this are suggested in the conclusion.

2.1 Serious Imitation: Forgery

Strictly serious imitations are termed forgery in Genette. The title is not intended to be negative, but rather struck Genette as "more neutral" than the near-synonymous ancient term *apocrypha*.[31] In contrast to the *pasticheur* or caricaturist, for whom recognition is the goal, and whose works are characterised by a "saturation" of their chosen idiolect ("too much like [x] to be [x]"), the forger wants "to disappear".[32] Modern cases in Assyriology are ubiquitous from attempts at making fake cuneiform tablets.[33]

In the ancient world, forgeries of legal and contractual texts are numerous in Akkadian literature. This is unsurprising, since the formulaic nature of such texts makes the extraction of an idiolect quite simple. The model court documents, "pedagogical exercise[s], in

> … but only to point it out and — because it is impossible to clear up the lexical area effectively — at least provide its users with a conceptual tool enabling them to check and focus with greater swiftness and accuracy what it is they are (probably) thinking about when they (haphazardly) utter the word parody". Dentith's second criticism is that Genette's approach "loses sight of the social and historical ground in which that [parodic] interaction occurs, and the evaluative and ideological work performed by a parody". This is a fairer argument, though Genette never claimed to be an anthropologist or cultural historian. As long as one proceeds within the cultural framework of the texts they have chosen to study, as in this paper, Genette's approach is still of great use.

30. Partially overlapping with the present survey is the overview in Jiménez 2017, 100–103, who discussed the *Lagaš King List*, the *Gilgameš Letter*, the PMN, and the *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*). Though not exclusively concerning "parody" but rather pedagogical humour, Zaia 2025, 135–148, also overlaps here, discussing (among others) the *Real Estate for the Birds*, the *Gilgameš Letter*, the PMN, and the *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*). Cases not included due to scope are: *Ninurta-Pāqidāt's Dog Bite* (also known as *The Illiterate Doctor of Isin* or *Why Do You Cuss Me?*), a partially imitative text used for a pedagogic end in which names and places are lifted from bilingual and topographical lexical lists (Reiner 1986, 1–6; George 1993, 63f.; Milstein 2022, 255–258; Zaia 2025, 140–143); *At the Cleaner's* (see Foster 2005, 151f. for translation and further literature), which Foster (1974, 73) called "obvious parody" — I see no hypotext or even idiolect present here. See also Milstein 2022, 264f. on two pieces of humorous Edubba literature.
31. Genette 1997, 28.
32. *Ibid.*, 161.
33. See Michel 2020, 25–60, and esp. 39–56.

which a teacher of law required his pupil to compose a convincing and ostensibly authentic court document",[34] are exemplary exercises in serious imitation. This is not to say that all are completely serious: S. J. Milstein convincingly demonstrated the humour of one such document, in which an adulterous wife and lover are brought before the assembly on the very bed where they had been caught red-handed (though whether this is playful or satirical is hard to ascertain).[35]

A conspicuous case of Forgery is the *Cruciform Monument of Maništušu*.[36] Purporting that Maništušu, the 23rd century BCE Akkadian king, bestowed special benefits to the Šamaš temple at Sippar, the text incorporates archaising elements by way of Old Akkadian sign forms to create the illusion of a storied artefact.[37] The purpose, as suggested by its latest editor E. Sollberger, was to create a *fraus pia*, "pious fraud", "to establish the great antiquity of some privileges and revenues of the Ebabbar at Sippar, thereby strengthening the temple's claims to them".[38] However, elements of language and content are Old Babylonian or younger,[39] and the physical monument is decidedly Neo-Babylonian.[40] Indeed, Sollberger would even suggest that in the frequent use of the expression sìla instead of ban, when applied to amounts larger than nine sìla, the scribe had "overreach[ed] himself in his efforts to compose an 'archaic' text".[41] In other words, it is a poor attempt at imitation: "As a lapicide the author of [the *Cruciform Monument*] does not deserve very high marks".[42] Though most scholars have correctly labelled the text a forgery, M. A. Powell would, in the same article, term it both a pastiche and a forgery, "not modelled on a single Old Akkadian inscription".[43] While Powell was correct to signal that the text is involved in the procedure of imitation, here Genette's distinction of moods is

34. George 2009, 146.
35. Milstein 2022, 259 (with fn. 17)–262, with an overview of other pedagogical exercises and previous literature. See now also Zaia 2025, 138f., who argued, regarding the humorous examples of this practice, that the "blend of somewhat tedious and formulaic material with instructional humor inspires creative thinking and reflection on genre and style" (139).
36. Editions by Sollberger 1968, 50–53; Al-Rawi & George 1994, 139–142; discussion in Longman III 1991, 79–83 and Michel 2020, 30–33.
37. Gelb 1949, 346f.; however, some syllabic signs, expressions of quantity, and linguistic forms cannot belong to the Old Akkadian period.
38. Sollberger (1968, 50), who took the term *fraus pia* from Gelb 1949, 348.
39. Michel 2020, 30–33: OB elements include *ilkum* corvée and the *nadītum* priestess.
40. Aside from the NB monument, the text is known in several copies that complicate its dating. Sollberger 1968, 52, argued that a duplicate from Sippar (Si 3 + Ni 1288) was the basis of the monument. The Sippar original, from its colophon, purports to be copied from an inscription in Babylon that Sollberger noted could be an authentic Maništušu text. Longman III (1991, 82) noted that Sollberger's dating could not be proven (though cf. 82 fn. 13 where he concedes it might still be correct). The duplicate edited in Al-Rawi & George 1994, 139, claims to be a copy of an original from Borsippa, so that "the document belongs to the traditional corpus of texts copied and recopied in the Neo-Babylonian period by the scribes of the northern centres".
41. Sollberger 1968, 51.
42. Gelb 1949, 52 fn. 19.
43. Powell 1991, 20. *N.B.*: that his argument that the monument should not be (fraudulently) attributed to Maništušu, but Naram-Sin, should not be entertained. The new manuscript from Sippar (IM 124625, i 2) confirms that Maništušu is named in the opening lines (Al-Rawi & George 1994, 146).

of use, since the term "pastiche" conjures the idea of joviality. Nonetheless, the *Cruciform Monument* demonstrates that imitation is far from limited to smaller, unique documents.

The epistle, according to B. R. Foster, is one of the genres upon which "parodies" were composed "Throughout the history of Akkadian literature".[44] Instead, we have numerous cases of imitation in what is now a vast corpus.[45] The majority are completely serious and are forgeries of royal letter writing that correspond to the case of the model court documents, in that they were used for pedagogic ends.[46] Of particular interest due to its purported authenticity (though perhaps not pedagogic) is VAT 13294, allegedly sent from a high-ranking official to king Šulgi.[47] The letter is certainly from the first millennium and found in Babylon, but the scribe wrote the text "in an imitation of Ur III script"[48] and even followed the Neo-Sumerian "letter-order" scheme in its introduction, *i.e.*, placing the name of the sender before the addressee (Obv. i 1–6): [...] x [...] x-lá [... -^{d}s]ìn-ke$_4$ [na-b]é-a [$^{(d)}$šu]l-gi [lu]gal-mu ⌜ù⌝-na-a-du$_{11}$, "[...] Mr x-Sin (thus) says: 'to Šulgi, my king, say'.".[49] Copies of the royal letters from the OB period tend to have the reverse, *i.e.*, addressee and then sender.[50] As Michalowski noted, "there is no way of establishing if this is a copy of a real letter or a late fabrication",[51] which is the mark of a well-executed forgery and speaks to the difficulties when determining if these texts are "real" or "fabricated".

2.2 Playful Imitation: Pastiche

Legal contracts are also subject to playful imitation, pastiche in Genette's system.[52] There are two clear examples. The first is called, by Foster, the *Monkey Man*.[53] It makes use of at least one piece of clear legalese (5–6): *ša dēna dabāba ina muḫḫīšu ubta''ûni*, "he who seeks against him a lawsuit or complaint". The phrase *dēna* (*u*) *dabāba bu'û* is entered in the CAD (B/2 s.v. *bu'û*, 365a–b) with the special meaning "to file a lawsuit and complaint" (only in MA and NA), with numerous other attestations from real legal documents.[54] Further, the text includes a date formula (10–11: ITI.ZÍZ UD-1.KAM *līmu* ^{md}IŠKUR–SAG-*ši–i-ši*, "first day of the month of Šabāṭu, eponym year of Adad-reš-iši), and lists witnesses (12–13: IGI ⟨⟨^{m}⟩⟩^{d}30 IGI ^{d}UTU IGI ^{d}IŠTAR IGI ^{d}*gu-la*, "in the presence of Sin, Šamaš,

44. Foster 2007, 38.
45. Michalowski 2011, 216–224, contains many examples with further literature. See especially 217f. for the debate on the authenticity of the "Royal Correspondence of the Kings of Ur", with responses to Huber 2001, 169–206, and Hallo 2006, 85–104. Recently, Frazer 2024 (with other examples of imitative letters), 65, concluded that such a debate is a "flawed endeavour" to begin with due to a lack of objective criteria on which to base (often circular) arguments in favour of (in)authenticity.
46. Michalowski 2011, 223.
47. Edition in Neumann 1992, 29–39; see also Michalowski 1993, 117f., for an English translation.
48. Michalowski 2011, 223.
49. Following Neumann 1992, 31–33; Michalowski 1993, 117f.
50. Neumann 1992, 30. See also Sollberger 1966, 2f.
51. Michalowski 1993, 117; Neumann 1992, 38f., and 2006, 19f., argued, conversely, for its authenticity.
52. See Genette 1997, 22–24; 73–158.
53. Foster 2005, 768. See Franke & Wilhelm 1985, 19–26, for a full edition.
54. See also Franke & Wilhelm 1985, 24: "Der Wortlaut des Vindikationsverbots … folgt dem üblichen mittelassyrischen Formular".

Ištar, and Gula)".[55] However, the text is inscribed on what appears to be a clay foot, a sure indicator of its unreality, and the "contract" concerns a "monkey-man" (LÚ *pagû*), whom a woman has rescued and raised from a river.[56] The text is thus a mock-adoption document, made clearer by the name of the monkey: ^{m}ÍD–SU, or *Narû-erība*, "The river(god) has replaced", understood by Foster as "The-river-god-has-provided-a-replacement-child".[57] In addition, it loosely follows the common content-structure of adoption documents:[58] 1–4 correspond to the adoption statement; 5–6 a stipulation; 6–7 a penalty clause; and 10–13 the date and witnesses (all of whom are gods).[59] The line between pastiche and caricature (see below section 2.3) is not hard and fast in this text. Though the *Monkey Man* appears to be playful, thereby termed pastiche here, it is arguable that the text has satirical qualities. Child adoption was a means of securing future care in old age, both materially and religiously via funerary offerings.[60] To substitute a child for a monkey in this context could be viewed as more mocking towards to the adopter. The physical object, a foot, may also speak to exaggeration and hence satire, when considering the practice of imprinting a child's foot on clay tablets.[61] As related elsewhere in this paper, however, the benefit of Genette's methodology is the lesser need to precisely determine the text's mood, since the boundary between a playful and satirical text is fluid. All one must do is signal this fluidity.

The second example, which Foster termed a "satirical legal document",[62] is the so-called *Real Estate for the Birds*, an imitation of land-purchase contracts, in which a *šēdu* ("genie")-bird (2) buys non-arable land at the *bāb irkalli*, the "Gate of Hell" (16). It employs the language (e.g., 17: *ina āl zakûti*, "in a town of tax-exemption")[63] and precise formulation of purchase contracts,[64] but makes particular elements avian: the currency

55. See *ibid.*, 24.
56. Simians seemed to be a favourite subject of supposed humorous texts. See discussion on imitative letters above and compare SEpM 16 (B14, 3.3.7), "Monkey to Mother" (Kleinerman 2011, 158–160), and possibly another pastiche.
57. Foster 2005, 768 fn. 4.
58. Paulissian 1999, 6; Ellis 1975, 130–151.
59. Franke & Wilhelm (1985, 24) remarked that while the sequence Sin, Šamaš, and Ištar is common in Babylonian and Assyrian convention, Gula, the last name in the list, does not appear in the lists of gods in MA royal inscriptions (although she had a temple in Aššur and some MA personal names bear her name). They added that in the curse formula of a MB *kudurru* (BM 90840) she appears after the same sequence of gods (Sin, Šamaš, and Ištar).
60. See Livingstone 2007, 17; 25; Wunsch 2003–24, 209–211.
61. Livingstone 2007, 18.
62. Foster 2005, 942f. (translation). See Kwasman & Parpola 1991, 232f. (SAA 6 288), and more recently Kwasman 2018, 205–220, for an edition (K 8398).
63. Following Foster 2005, 942 fn. 3; Kwasman & Parpola (1991, 232) preferred to read a town name, Zakuti. But later Kwasman (2018, 210) suggested that what is meant here is "an untaxable place"; see also *ibid.*, 205: "As is common in land sales, a topographical description is given".
64. Following Postgate 1976, 12, and Radner 1997, 316, the formula of such contracts and the corresponding elements in SAA 6 288 are: "seal identification" and "seal impression" (1–3 and space for impressions); object sold (4–17); initiation of transaction / *uppišma* clause (18); owner / *issu pān* clause (19); price / *ina libbi* clause (19–20); completion of transaction / *ilqe* (21); confirmation of transfer / *kaspu kammur tadin* (21); exclusion of litigation / *tuāru dēnu dabābu laššu* (22 in restoration); penalties of litigation (23–r.5); witnesses (r.6–19); and date (r.20–22). See other such contracts in SAA 6 (e.g., 10) and note Radner 1997, 45: "der Text [muss] von einem mit diesen Werken bekannten Menschen

becomes *kupāte* ("bird fodder")[65] and in the witnesses there are, beside good Akkadian names, U'a-u'a the *akkû* (owl), Qu'a-qu'a the *qāribu* (crow?), and Ḫalli-arrakate ("Long-legs") the *kurkû* (goose).[66] Further, at the bottom of the tablet, there appear to be claw-shaped marks, intended to represent sealings (perhaps in the manner of fingernail impressions).[67] As with the *Monkey Man*, this indicates the text's unreality. In addition, the literary nature of the text is witnessed in rare orthography and vocabulary.[68] Scholars have already suggested that the text is humorous.[69] However, T. Kwasman went further, pushing back against Parpola's caution that the text ought not to be read as a "parody", given the very real elements in the text, such as some personal names and the toponym Kar-Nergal.[70] In his later edition, he termed the document a parody "based on imitation": "parody, which was mentioned by Parpola, is based on imitation. It mocks another text and alters wording making it ridiculous or producing a ridiculous effect … It appears that most of what has been interpreted as humor is conflated with parody".[71] He went on, in discussion of Foster's preferred "satirical legal document", to note that

> satire is a literary category that may use humor or other devices such as irony or ridicule in order to point out some folly or misgivings about a situation, person or event. Applied to the present text it would mean that it is satirizing human land sales e.g. high property prices.[72]

While it is certainly true that the text engages in imitation, some serious objections must be raised: (1) if "parody", under Kwasman's definition (it is uncertain where his definition came from) "mocks another text", what is the previous text being mocked here (unless the genre of land-purchase contracts is implied); (2) how are we to differentiate between "humour", "mocking", and "producing ridiculous effects"; and (3) if satire is a literary category, how is it different from parody, which according Kwasman's definition also uses ridicule? This is where the benefits of Genette's strict approach are made manifest.

verfaßt worden sein, der außerdem mit dem Formular einer Kaufurkunde vertraut war".

65. The meaning of this word is uncertain, but it is some kind of plant. CAD K has three separate lemmas for the following words (550a): *kupatu* A, "(mng. uncert)"; *kupatu* B, "a plant", based on its appearance in a lexical commentary from Aššur (mur-gud D) as ú mušen = *kupatum* = *šammu*(!) *iṣ*[*ṣuri*]; and *kupātu*, "(mng. unkn.)", in the text under discussion, for which they added that "no connection can be assumed between the lex. passage and the NA ref.". However, given that *kupatu* B must literally mean "plant of bird", a connection seems more likely than not, and this appears to be how previous translators and editors (see fn. 62) have understood it. The lexical commentary is now published by Weiershäuser & Hrůša 2018, 212–223, who followed Deller 1991, 9f. (no. 11) in translating *kupātu*, "Mistel".
66. For these names see also Radner 1997, 313 fn. 1775, with further literature.
67. Foster's (2005, 943) suggestion, now confirmed in the new edition by Kwasman 2018, 206f. See Radner 1997, 36–39, on sealing by fingernail impressions.
68. Kwasman 2018, 215.
69. Scurlock 1993, 11f. (no. 17); Radner 1997, 45; Zaia 2025, 139.
70. Kwasman & Parpola 1991, 232 fn. 288. Cf. Kwasman 2018, 214: "The names are not actually that real as only Ṭab-salamu is otherwise attested (once in a broken context), whereas the other names are unique or reconstructed".
71. Kwasman 2018, 213–215, and esp. 215.
72. *Ibid*.

These terms, “satire”, “imitation”, “parody”, are clearly delineated, allowing the scholar to express with greater accuracy the textual practices with which a manuscript engages. The text under discussion is better understood as a playful imitation of the genre of land-purchase contracts. And while Parpola was wary of such an interpretation, due to the realistic elements found in the text, the point of a good pastiche is precisely to imitate these elements, which are then simultaneously applied to the new playful subject of birds. Whether the text is a possible “excerpt from a literary work”, “part of an ‘event’ e.g. a property sale that occurred in some myth or legend”,[73] is difficult to determine. But one could point to other legal documents which engage in similar textual practices, such as the *Monkey Man*, to strengthen prior arguments that the piece is intended to be a simple piece of humour.

2.3 Satirical Imitation: Caricature

The cuneiform example *par excellence* of satirical imitation, caricature in Genette,[74] is the (problematically titled) *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*).[75] The text opens with a pseudo god-list in which the deities and their respective cities are mismatched (K 4334 Obv. i).[76] There follows a section (K 4334 Obv. ii) which is both a humorous self-praise hymn of Ištar[77] and a piece of mock love literature (perhaps related to the divine love lyrics of Ištar and Marduk).[78] The third column (K 4334 Obv. iii) is difficult to decipher, but perhaps includes the “journey of a king of Dilmun”.[79] After this, a section (CTN 4 205, r. i) demonstrating “perversion of regular omen collections” appears.[80] The fifth section (K 4334 r. i′) finally introduces the *aluzinnu*, who recounts the various jobs he can do in the style of a profession list.[81] Lastly, the sixth portion (K 4334 r. ii′) is a mock menology,[82] in which the meals to be eaten are grotesque and supposedly draw upon gastronomical and medical texts.[83]

73. *Ibid.*, 215f.
74. Genette 1997, 89–98.
75. The fullest edition is still Ebeling 1931, 9–19. As noted by Veldhuis 2003a, 628 fn. 1, and Zaia 2025, 144f., the title *Aluzinnu Text* is a possible misnomer, since the *aluzinnu* appears once and it is not apparent that all the various pieces form one composition (hence the title *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*)). Jiménez 2017, 101f. fn. 273, is yet to publish his new edition, but the eBL has stated that it will be uploaded in the course of 2023/4 (at the time of publishing this has yet to be updated). For a partial translation see Foster 2005, 939–941, and previously 1974, 74–79, with Akkadian. Veldhuis 2003b, 23–27, summarises with select translations from passages; Rumor 2017, 199–202, offers a summary. See also Römer 1975–76, 43–68.
76. Jiménez 2017, 102; Rumor 2017, 199; Lambert 2003.
77. Jiménez 2017, 102, based on an unpublished portion of text.
78. Rumor 2017, 200. Veldhuis 2003b, 24f., argued that it is a king to be mocked here.
79. Rumor 2017, 201.
80. See Veldhuis 2006, 495f. Foster 1974, 77, considered these legal provisions.
81. Jiménez 2017, 103, with further literature.
82. As opposed to “hemerology” by Jiménez 2017, 103 (though the composition perhaps draws on hemerological texts). See now Kikuchi 2024, 9–11, for discussion of hemerological/menological text terminology. I follow her distinction in using “ menology” “nur für die Lehre von Monaten und die zugehörigen, nach Monaten angeordneten Texte”, which is the case in the *Aluzinnu Text*(s).
83. Rumor 2017, 20; see also Milano 2004, 249–256.

As mentioned in section 1.1, the misnomer "parody of genre" is often applied to the *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*),[84] which obfuscates rather than elucidates the structural and textual practices at play. The third column was termed a "possible parody on the journey of an Assyrian king" by Milano.[85] It seems that Milano was implying that the "journey of the king of Dilmun" is somehow cognate to the royal journey Assyrian kings took,[86] but here the term "parody" should not be used, reserved only for that which applies to texts. The same caveat should be applied to Zaia's (2025, 145f.) description that "[the *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*)] parody the highest level of elites, their knowledge, and the genres important to them", and that "the collection was a parody of the scribal curriculum and the professional roles for which students were training".[87] The *Aluzinnu* text can be understood as caricature because of how mocking and thus satirical the text is vis-à-vis its imitated genres, exemplified in the scatological remarks of the menology section (K 4334 r. iii 17′–19′ + K 6392).

The *Dialogue Between Put-Ištar and His Son Mannu-utarrissu* (YBC 2394) is one of the more recently published examples of caricature.[88] As above, its classification as "parody of [Sumerian 'Instruction' compositions]"[89] obscures that its form and organisation is an imitation of that group of texts. Its satirical mood, however, does not derive from grotesque language (as with *Aluzinnu*), but rather an "abusive tone and the contempt displayed".[90]

2.4 Serious Transformation: Transposition

There are many ways of rendering serious transformations, transposition in Genette's words.[91] Allusions and quotations (see fn. 22, above) are numerous and constitute singular instances in cuneiform literature where minor transformations have occurred. But the foremost, large-scale application of transposition in the ancient Near East is translation: "transposing a text from one language to another".[92] As the most famous literary text of two millennia, *Gilgameš* (hereafter *Gilg.*) was translated into a variety of languages, such as Hittite and Hurrian. It is difficult to know what version of the Akkadian epic the Hittite translation is based on, since the latter seemingly predates the generally accepted period

84. As "parody": Foster 1974, 74–79; Veldhuis 2003a, 628 fn. 1 ("collection of parodies of various learned text types"), 2003b, 23–27, and 2006, 495; Milano 2004, 249f.; as "parody" and "caricature": Rumor 2017, 199–202; as "satire": Foster 2005, 939, and 2007, 39; as "omnibus parody" Jiménez 2017, 103; 2020, 100; as "parody" of a variety of items Zaia 2025, 144f.
85. Milano 2004, 249 f.
86. See Llop & Shibata 2016, 67–98.
87. Though cf. Zaia's (2025, 145 fn. 105) intriguing suggestion that the text is "an imitation of exercise tablets" due to the various genres collected on one tablet.
88. Edition in Foster & George 2020, 37–61.
89. Foster & George 2020, 38.
90. *Ibid*. See also Fechner 2022, 449–452, for further elements of exaggeration and hence the satirical mood.
91. On the practice of transposition and the many ways one can achieve this see esp. Genette 1997, 212–400.
92. Genette 1997, 214 (see esp. 214–218). Another example of transposition via translation is *Ištar's Descent*, the Akkadian hypertext of the Sumerian hypotext *Inanna's Descent*. On the relationship of these two compositions see, e.g., Sladek 1974, 34–51; Reiner 1985, 29–49.

of standardisation and canonisation for SB *Gilg.*[93] Nonetheless, in the eyes of the most recent editor of the Hittite version, "the Hittite editor/translator must have begun with an Akkadian *Vorlage* similar to the work credited to Sin-leqi-unninni, but lacking [certain] elements".[94] The structural dependence is almost certainly on one hypotext. The hypertext, Hittite *Gilg.*, then displays all the hallmarks of a typical transposition. There is: translation (above); prosification (Akkadian metre is swapped for Hittite prose);[95] excision (e.g., Hittite *Gilg.* does not depict the Urukeans complaints under Gilgameš; the dreams of Gilgameš before the arrival of Enkidu and later the battle with Humbaba are suppressed; etc.);[96] but also augmentation or addition (e.g., Gilgameš' meeting with the personified Sea and later the Moon God in the steppe).[97]

2.5 Problematic Case 1: The Disputation Poems

The disputation poems are complex cases. In Jiménez's thorough study, he argued that they are "parodies" based on their "Hymno-Epic dialect", speech-introduction formula, cosmogonic prologues, and quotations from "highly sophisticated literary texts such as the *Theodicy* or *Gilgameš*".[98] However, to take one example from Jiménez's work, the fragmentary *Series of the Spider* is remarkably challenging.[99]

The text begins with its cosmogonic prologue: the assembly of gods creates the universe and all its living creatures. The spider then begins to boast of its pre-eminence, before Ea (called here Ninšiku) creates two rivals, *ḫamānīru* and *ešqapīzu* (*hapax legomena*), and the three set to debating. After a series of exchanges, the spider begins what Jiménez terms "a grandiloquent speech that contains several clear quotations from texts such as the *Theodicy* and *Gilgameš* … and in which the parodic character of the text is obvious".[100] The remainder of the text then becomes very fragmentary.

The language register used in the text is clearly high, in contrast to the protagonists, who are decidedly humble. Jiménez points to literary word forms such as *puḫri* (8; 10), a ŠD stem verb (*šuparruru*, 20), a "pseudo locative-adverbial" (*banûtū'a*, 25), and a stock-literary verse (*lā ādir tāḫāzi*, 25).[101] Such a register points not to specific literary text, but to an idiolect generated from Akkadian *belles lettres*. This would qualify the text as an imitation, not transformation or parody. The structural relationship of the hypertext, the Disputation, to its generic group of hypotexts, "high" Akkadian literature, is thus clearer.

But the picture is problematised if the *Theodicy* and *Gilg.* quotations adduced by Jiménez are accepted. These are: *limdā šibqīya* (26) from *Theodicy* 265, *limad šibqīy*[*a*];[102]

93. See George 2003, 3–70, and Beckman 2019, 1–14.
94. Beckman 2019, 10, who rejected the idea that the Hittite *Gilg*. is a "direct reflection of oral tradition or an independent composition not based in some way on earlier Akkadian (and Hurrian?) texts".
95. See esp. Genette 1997, 219–225. Beckman 2019, 8 (*Element No.* 1).
96. See esp. Genette 1997, 229–235. Beckman 2019, 8 (See *Elements No.* 4; 10; 13; 17).
97. See. esp. Genette 1997, 228f.; 254–259. Beckman 2019, 9f. (*Elements No.* 39; 40).
98. Jiménez 2017, 97.
99. Edition in *ibid.*, 291–323.
100. *Ibid.*, 291f..
101. See philological commentary in *ibid.* 312–316.
102. See edition on eBL by Heinrich 2022a.

and *puḫḫurat elīkun* from SB *Gilg.* I 250, *mātu puḫḫurat ina muḫḫīšu*.[103] Imitations, *stricto sensu*, never directly allude, quote, or borrow.[104] But nor is the text a complete parody, because the quotes pertains to two lines, *i.e.*, the hypertext has not transformed the hypotext *en masse*, and thus outside of this line the *Theodicy* is barely recognisable. Instead, the quote could be a select parodic instance, where a minimal transformation has taken place, congruently situated within a text which imitates a high Akkadian register. Thus, while entirely correct to point to the "parodic character" of the Spider's speech (above), it is of lesser use to classify the whole text as a parody,[105] not least because it simplifies what must have been quite a complex textual procedure in which the scribe engaged.

2.6 Problematic Case 2: The Divine Love Lyrics

Akin, and perhaps related to the second section of the *Aluzinnu Text*(*s*), are the "Divine Love Lyrics".[106] This hotchpotch of texts, recitations, and poetic passages, from different findspots (Nineveh, Sippar, etc.) and periods (late Neo-Assyrian and late Babylonian) was collected into four groups by W. G. Lambert. The poetic portions narrate the jealousy of the goddess Zarpanitu, whose adulterous spouse Marduk has been "consorting" with Ištar of Babylon. The texts are to be taken together with a ritual tablet (BM 41107 + BM 41005), that reveals the ritual to be one of "divine adultery or jealousy", a *qīnayātu* (BM 40090+, r. iv 34–36), that "gives the poetry a cultic setting".[107]

Two of the poetic passages of the "Divine Love Lyrics" have been considered "parodies" of love literature.[108] The first "parodic passage" (K 6082 + 81-7-27, 241, col. B 11–17) would appear to show Marduk questioning why his *tappattī* ("my second-rank wife,

103. Edition by George 2022 on eBL; see previously George 2003, 552f. with the numbering 252. The quotation here is not so certain, given the only point of contact is the D. Stat. third fem. s. stative verb from *paḫāru*.
104. Genette 1997, 78. Note the very similar case of *La secchia rapita* (1615–1617), a mock-heroic poem that includes touches of parody in its paraphrasing. As noted by Genette (1997, 135f.), the speech of the watchmaker to her husband in the second *canto* is taken from Dido's speech to Aeneas at the end of *Aeneid* IV: "But the line between imitation and transformation is very hard to draw in this instance". It seems imitations use transformation more than Genette originally envisaged. Even the *Batrachomyomachia* (269) has one direct quote from Homer (though Hosty 2020, 33f. with fn. 58, was suspicious of its originality given its uniqueness in a text where the poet appears keen to avoid such practices). The use of direct reference in imitations can function as an invitation to the reader to identify the hypotext.
105. See, e.g., Jiménez 2017, 97: "These factors make it clear that Babylonian disputation poems should be classified as parodies".
106. Originally published by Lambert 1959, 1–15 and again in 1975, 98–135. A new fragment has been published by Fincke 2013. On the emotion of jealousy in this text see Da Riva 2020, 306–334.
107. Nissinen 2001, 123f.; Edzard 1987, 68 f.; Da Riva 2020, 314.
108. Foster 1974, 79; on comic elements in the text cf. Edzard 1987, 68. In the following the writer compares the "Lyrics" to Wasserman's (2016) corpus of love literature of the third and second millennium, in lieu of a comparable work for love literature of the first millennium. Because Wasserman could examine a number of texts together, more general features of this genre could be extracted, verified, and provide more certain points of comparison. Nevertheless, the other (non-medical/incantational) shining example of first millennium love literature, *Nabu and Tašmetu* (SAA 3 14) certainly conforms to the aspects compared here, with its focus on the appearance of Tašmetu, avian imagery, and flow of speech.

beloved") farted and comparing her appearance to a gecko and cooking pot.[109] Here the constellation of lover and beloved and the attention to the body and complexion of the latter is typical of love literature,[110] and thereby imitative, but note the (not-so) subtle difference: typically in Akkadian love literature the term for "skin" is *šīru*;[111] here it is *mašku*, which, though also used for human flesh, is more widely attested as "hide" or "leather", and is thus doubly degrading.[112]

The second passage in question (LKA 92 and 81-2-4, 8–17) depicts Zarpanitu describing the rival lover's (Ištar's) genitalia as foul-smelling and warns the *ḫaḫḫuru*-bird to beware the *kamūnu* (a fungus) and *nipiš suḫāti* ("smell of the armpit"). The evocation of *ḫaḫḫuru*-bird is significant. In Akkadian love literature birds are "a typical semantic feature", "expressing the separation of lovers" and being "bearers of good tidings".[113] Here the bird is instead given a warning by Zarpanitu, thus inverting the usual semantic associations.

Both passages cited above are first person speeches and thereby exhibit the "natural flow of speech" found in Akkadian love literature of the third and second millennium.[114] But rather than "Love Lyrics", these texts could aptly be described as "Jealousy Lyrics". Their relation to wider Akkadian love literature is (un?)clear[115] and could persuade one to interpret them as caricatures, *i.e.*, satirical imitations, of the genre of love literature, given their vulgar language. However, as suggested to the writer by Rocio da Riva (edition forthcoming), the fragmentary nature of the texts and their context make the identification of humour very challenging. Their status as imitations is more certain.

There is an intriguing possibility that the composition is engaged in the textual procedure of transformation. Da Riva and E. Frahm suggested that the catchline to the beginning of a commentary on an unknown literary text (K 4657+ 60′) references the very same rites we find in the "Jealousy Lyrics": *qīnayātu*.[116] The unknown literary text has now been identified as an earlier version of the same lyrics we have here, but enacted in Nippur and with Nippurite protagonists: Enlil, Belet-ili, and Šuzianna.[117] It is impossible to discern any more about this original version: how did the narrative progress? what was its

109. On these unbecoming descriptions see Foster 1974, 79 fn. 23. To the best of the writer's knowledge, it has not been suggested that this is the speech of Marduk but given that the speaker is male (*sisiketīšu*, 8; *šu* and *mār*, 9) and the only male protagonist so far attested in the text is Marduk, this is a reasonable conclusion. For a similar notion of the beloved's flatulence, compare the Sumerian "proverb" (1. 12): nig$_2$ ud-bi-ta la-ba-gal$_2$-la ki-sikil tur ur$_2$ dam-ma-na-ka še$_{10}$ nu-ub-dur$_2$-re, "a previous thing which was not there: a young girl was not farting in her spouse's lap" (see Alster 1997, 9). There also exists an Emesal variant of this "proverb" (Alster 2007, 130) and later Sumero-Akkadian bilingual (Lambert 1960, 260; Alster 1997, 9; 2007, 130). A forthcoming article from the author will treat this "proverb", perhaps "joke", at length.
110. Wasserman 2016, 44.
111. *Ibid.*, 59–62.
112. CAD M, s.v. *mašku*, 376a–379b.
113. Wasserman 2016, 48f.
114. *Ibid.*, 23.
115. Nissinen 2001, 124; Da Riva 2020, 314f.
116. Da Riva & Frahm 1999–2000, 181f.
117. Frahm & Jiménez 2015, 328f., based on OECT 11 69+70 i 40′–41′; Da Riva 2020, 316 f. These figures

language register? What is clear is the dependence of the "Jealousy Lyrics" on this earlier text. However, unique to the latter, as far as is attested, is its coarse and vulgar language. In the words of Lambert, "imagery of the boldest kind is commonplace, and the eroticism is the most explicit for ancient Mesopotamia. Parallels are hard to find".[118] Could the later version of the lyrics have used more vulgar expressions than its earlier version? If so, the "Jealousy Lyrics" might represent one of the earliest attested forms of burlesque travesty, which "rewrites a noble text by preserving its "action", meaning its fundamental content and movement …, but impressing on it an entirely different elocution, or 'style' ".[119] However, to follow the methodological advice given above, the more prudent reading is still to view these lyrics as *imitations* of the genre of Akkadian love literature.

2.7 Problematic Case 3: The *Letter of Gilgameš*

More obscure textual practices are at play in the famous *Letter of Gilgameš*.[120] It has been called parody, satire, and caricature, mainly due to disagreements over a humorous nature of the text.[121] Whether the text is humorous or not cannot be answered, but a clarification of the hypertextual relationship exhibited in the letter should at least be attempted before embarking on that question. The suggestions that the letter is based on SB *Gilg.* VIII and wider elements found in the poem favour a transformative relationship: Gilgameš is the *migir Šamaš*, "favourite of Šamaš" (3); one of his gods is Lugalbanda (34); and his demands for materials and precious commodities, *ana irat Enkīdu ibrīya lukīn*, "so that I may fix [them] on the chest of my companion Enkidu" (23), evokes Gilgameš' desire to make a gold funerary statue of his friend (SB *Gilg.* VIII, 71).[122] However, other elements

later became those found in text under discussion. Through the syncretism between Marduk and Enlil, Belet-ili became Zarpanitu (Oshima 2017, 218a). Šuzianna was identified in god-list K 1451, 1 (CT 25, 49) as Belet-Babili, "lady of Babylon", who is the same as Ištar of Babylon (Krebernik 2011–13, 377b; Frahm & Jiménez 2015, 329).

118. Lambert 1975, 99; echoed by Da Riva 2020, 321.
119. Genette 1997, 58.
120. First edition by Gurney 1957, 127–135. A Late Babylonian exemplar (Ni 2869) likely from Sippar was then identified by George (2003, 118 with fn. 111). See now the edition in Frazer 2024, 73–114 (a translation can also be found in Foster 2005, 1017–1019). For general discussion and the text's difficulties see Kraus 1980, 109–121; D'Agostino 2000, 50–58; and Zaia 2025, 139f.
121. Most arguments in favour of a humorous reading base themselves on the immense numbers of commodities requested by Gilgameš (e.g., Campi 2024, 102; Zaia 2025, 139). See Foster 2005, 1017, as possible "parody on the Assyrian royal style"; later Foster 2007, 39, as satire of *Gilg.* VIII; Kraus 1980, 120, as possible "bewusster karikaturaler Persiflage"; see also Campi 2024, 102, who identified a "clear parodic aim" in the "absurd, farcical amounts" Gilgameš demands. The political interpretation of Kraus based on Gilgameš's title "King of Ur" in the text should now not be followed: "This association with Ur as well as Uruk must be a distant legacy of the efforts of Ur-Nammu and Šulgi of Ur to identify themselves in their considerable literary output as brothers of the great hero" (George 2003, 119).
122. George 2003, 118f. See also Frazer 2024, 93 and 99, with previous literature (and the commentary between 88 and 109, e.g. 107, for additional references to the "Epic"). This hypothesis could be strengthened should Frazer's restoration in line 10, [*ana ṣalmi š*]*a* ^{d}*Enkidu*, "for the statue of Enkidu" (following Tournay & Shaffer 1994, 276 fn. 5) be accepted. Zaia (2025, 140, with previous literature) also considered it significant that a tablet from the school in Ḫuzirina, the same findspot of the *Letter*, contained the corresponding and relevant portions of the SB *Gilg.* VIII.

of the letter certainly do not belong to the tradition as embodied in the poem, and thereby speak to an imitative relationship: Gilgameš is *narām Marduk* ("beloved of Marduk", 3);[123] other gods accompany Lugalbanda in 34; and "the subscript of the letter repeats the common epithet of the omen apodoses" where Gilgameš features.[124] Most prominently, Gilgameš is called the "King of Ur" throughout the text, which as A. George notes, must derive from traditions beginning with Ur-Nammu and Šulgi.[125] If the letter were taken as derived solely from the "Epic", there could be an intriguing case of transformation, in which the style of the hypotext, SB *Gilg.*, has been transformed into the format of a letter. However, the incorporation of elements from wider traditions surrounding Gilgameš should dissuade from reading the text as a parody or transposition of the "Epic" alone. Instead, the text is a kind of double imitation, first of royal letter writing, and second of the motifs and themes concerning Gilgameš by the first millennium.[126]

2.8 Problematic Case 4: The Bel-eṭir Text and "*Narû*-Literature"

Lastly, there is the curious case of the Neo-Assyrian *Bel-eṭir Text*,[127] a (supposed) diatribe against a (possible) rebel of the Assyrian state.[128] K 1351 cites the SB *Cuthean Legend* (hereafter SB *Cuth.*) from its opening line: *ṭupšinna pitēma narâ šitassi*, "Open the tablet-box and read the stele!".[129] However, "rather than praising the man, as would a stela, it

123. George 2003, 119; Frazer 2024, 89.
124. George 2003, 119 (see also 112–117).
125. *Ibid.*, 119. See also fn. 121, above, and Frazer 2024, 88.
126. Zaia (2025, 139f.), from the pedagogical perspective, similarly suggested that the text was "employed to enliven and communicate formulae and generic conventions to students" and compared it to the model contracts.
127. SAA 3 29. The second Bel-eṭir text, 82-5-22, 88 (SAA 3 30), is traditionally labelled a "parody" of an ÉN, "incantation", from its *incipit* (see Foster 2005, 1021f.; Lenzi 2019, 189; Edmonds 2025, 43 no. 28, terms it an "execration text"), that recites Bel-eṭir's name with degrading epithets. The ÉN is, however, damaged and cannot be confirmed from the photo. I thus do not address it here. If it were an incantation, then imitation comes to mind and not strict parody, since there is likely no one hypotext in mind.
128. Until recently, it was uncertain who this person is. However, with Frame & Parpola's (2023, 122) publication of a new NB Bel-etir letter sent to Ashurbanipal (SAA 22 151; see PNA 1/II s.v. Bēl-ētir, 299b no. 17, with reference to other historical letters pertaining to an individual of the same name), Edmonds (2025, 43–46 no. 28) proffered a convincing and updated historical sketch (see earlier overviews in Michalowski 1999, 84–87; Machinist 2018, 356f.). He inferred that Bel-etir was associated with (and perhaps an attendant to) a rebel king of the Chaldean Bit-Dakkuri tribe, Šamaš-ibni, whom Esarhaddon executed after deportation to Assyria in 678 BCE. Further, he demonstrated the possibility that Bel-etir could have befriended Ashurbanipal, during the latter's crown princeship, should he have joined Šamaš-ibni in being deported. His evidence for a close relationship is seen in Bel-etir's "non-standard" (Frame & Parpola 2023, 122 n. 151; Edmonds 2025, 44 no. 28) greeting to Assurbanipal and possible degrading name for Šamaš-šuma-ukin in letter SAA 22 151. As Edmonds (2025, 45 no. 28) concluded, however, an inventory text (SAA 7 51) refers to "scholarly texts looted from Bēl-ēṭir's Bīt-Ibâ dated 29th Addaru (XII) 648 (eponym Bēlšunu)" and indicates an end to the friendship between king and Bel-etir. SAA 3 29 (and 30), seems to attest as much, though their mood cannot be taken as a given. Sansone (2023, 261) argued that even if Bel-eṭir were a real person, he ought to be treated as a "literary construct" in this text.
129. Foster 2005, 1020, who also noted that lines 21–22 allude to SB *Cuth.*: *ina pān annīti tenēšētu appī-šunu iltabnū mā agātu ṣibittu u puluḫtu*, "In face of this, mankind 'stroked their noses', saying: 'this

presents a litany of abuses and insults".[130] At the text's end (r. 4–10), the stele is again referenced, purporting to offer admonishment "for posterity". The text is unquestioningly labelled a "parody" in the scholarship, some suggesting of a single hypotext in SB *Cuth.*,[131] others a "parody" of royal inscriptions and so-called *narû*-literature.[132] De Zorzi recognised its actual nature, a "parodistic imitation",[133] with Sansone crucially adding:

> but the *Bel-etir Narrative* is not a parody of any one text or any one genre. It is a narrative in which several texts are mentioned or composed, all of which are to an extent parodies in their own right. This cannot be confused with the whole text amounting to one overall parody.[134]

That K 1351 has SB *Cuth.* in mind is certain from the opening line (elsewhere only appearing in SB *Gilg.*, which may itself be drawing upon SB *Cuth.*).[135] It is a genuine citation *per* Genette, a "complete congruence between the text citing and the text cited".[136] This is the "parodistic" element. Aside from the *incipit*, however, the hypotext is barely visible. K 1351 abandons the first person narrative form of SB *Cuth.* for a traditional omniscient narrator to report the "stela".[137] Like SB *Cuth.*, it makes use of a flashback to describe Bel-eṭir's origins (Obv. 2–4):

> *ultu adīni*$^{?}$ ^{m}*Ṣallâ lā immedu šadâšu šū … lā īdēšu šarru // ardu dāgil pān* ^{m}*Šamaš-ibni mār bā'iru šaplum lā* [*simat*] *šarrūte // išpik zê* ^{m}*Zēru-kēn šārānu tappê* ^{m}*Nummuraya nīku*
> When Ṣalla had not yet disappeared forever, he … the king did not know him, a slave serving Šamaš-ibni, son of a lowly fisherman, unbefitting of kingship, a shit-bucket of the farter Zeru-ken, raped companion to Nummuraya.

Compare SB *Cuth.* 31–36:[138]

> *ṣābī pagrī iṣṣūr ḫurri amēlūta arēbī pānššun // ibnûšunūtīma ilū rabûtu // ina qaqqar ibnû ilū ālûšu(n) // Ti'āmatu ušēniqšunūti // šassūršunu Bēlet-ilī ubanni*

(is) correct behaviour and awe' ". I am unable to identify what exactly is being alluded to in SB *Cuth.* It seems Foster meant the general "spirit" of the end of SB *Cuth.* (171–172) *per* the reading of Machinist 2018, 358f. Machinist (359) also suggests a possible allusion in the writing of Bel-eṭir's name, EN.KAR, to En-me-kár, the legendary king referenced at the beginning of SB *Cuth.*

130. Lenzi 2019, 188.
131. Westenholz 1997, 263; Michalowski 1999, 85 (who also says "similar texts"); Shipp 2002, 43–46; Foster 2005, 1020; Haul 2009, 108 fn. 35; Dewar 2019, 26.
132. Livingstone 1989, xxviii; Machinist 2018, 359: "parody not only of the presumed Bel-eṭir stela, but of the Cuthean Legend itself"; Fink / Parpola 2019, 184 fn. 18; Sansone 2023, 261–262; Edmonds 2025, 43 no. 28 (as both "literary parody of *narû*-literature" and "satirical *narû*-text"). For '*narû*-literature' see further fn. 139.
133. De Zorzi 2019, 226.
134. Sansone 2023, 264–265 (see also 270).
135. See Walker 1981, 191–195; Michalowski 1999, 87; and now Mitto 2023, 115–117, whose edition of the school tablet BM 72553 has led to the full restoration of the beginning of SB *Cuth.*
136. Bach 2020b, 30.
137. See also Machinist 2018, 358.
138. Following the edition of Mitto 2022 on eBL with translation by Foster.

// ina qereb šadî irte'ûma īteṭlūma irtašû minâti
The great gods created them, people of partridge body, a humanity whose faces (were) ravens. On the earth (where) they created (them), the gods (were) their cohabitants. Tiamat suckled them, their womb, Belet-ili made (them) beautiful. In the midst of the mountain(s) they grew up, reached manhood, and attained (their) physique.

The content between these passages is hardly congruent. Then, in place of SB *Cuth.*'s central piece of enemy hordes, scouts, and omens (47–148), K 1351, albeit in a fragmentary context, appears to contain a mocking narrative against Bel-eṭir (7–r. 3). The final admonishment of K 1351 then looks to the past, focussing on all that Bel-eṭir did wrong (r.4–10; e.g., r.7: *ramānšu itta'id*, "he praised himself"; r.8: *šūtūma idabbub šūtūma ina''ad šūtūma iqabbi šūtū*[*ma uštar*]*raḫ*, "he himself did the speaking, he himself did the praising, he himself did the saying, he himself took pride"). This is in stark contrast to SB *Cuth.*, which looks to the future when addressing the reader (149–180; e.g. 157: *lā tapallaḫ lā tatarrur*, "may you not be afraid, may you not tremble"; 159: *attā ina sūn sinništīka šipra lū teppuš*, "may you do work in the embrace your wife"; 175–176: *tup-šarrū enqūtu lizkurū*[?] *narâka*, "let wise scribes pronounce your stele"), the crucial last two lines reading: *šūt yâši taktarba arkû liktarrabka kâša*, "you who have blessed me, may someone in the future bless you!".

None of this speaks to the practice of parody. Instead, the extant generic features of K 1351 belong to royal inscriptions and so-called *narû*-literature, *i.e.*, first person fictional-*narû*.[139] The line between the two is incredibly blurry, since the latter are imitations of authentic royal inscriptions.[140] Nonetheless, they share an idiolect that can be identified here, notably in Bel-eṭir's boasts: *ina māt Aššūr u māt Akkadî māḫira ul īši*, "In the land of Aššur and Akkad I have no rival", Obv. 5);[141] *ali šāninī ina māti kalāma*, "Where in all of the land (is) my rival?", Obv. 6), both of which would not be out of place in a royal inscription.[142] Michalowski also noted that the expression (*ana*) *aḫrâtaš* (r.5) is only ever attested in royal inscriptions.[143] The majority of its content follows the typical order of a

139. For discussions of this term see the overviews of Westenholz 1997, 16–24, Haul 2009, 95–131, and more recently Frazer 2022, 824–826. Texts previously recognised as "*narû*-literature" are more heterogeneous than once assumed. *Per* Galter 1986, 73, the classification overemphasises the first person narratives, disregarding others. As I use it here, it refers to the first person narratives.
140. See Haul 2009, 133f.
141. *Māḫira ul īši* and minor variations (e.g., third person) are well attested in the corpus of first millennium Assyrian royal inscriptions. Of the 58 instances of *māḫiru*, 30 are in the construction we find in K 1351. *N.B.*: the Sumerographic rendering used here, GABA.RI, is exceedingly rare, found in only in the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic*, Sg. II 52, Esh. 48, Asb. 23, and Asb. 60.
142. There are no attestations of the rhetorically phrased Obv. 6 in the *Royal Inscriptions of Assyria Online* corpus (available via Oracc at https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/riao/), but variations of *māḫira ul īši* with *šanīna* are attested 28 times (discounting Sennacherib's "Palace-without-rival"). Also compare the semantically close and frequent phrase: *ša kibrāt erbetta šanīnšu lā īšû*, "who has no rival [among the rulers] of the four quarters (*i.e.*, the whole world)".
143. Michalowski 1999, 84. See CAD A/2, s.v. *aḫrâtaš*, 193b, and *N.B.* the attestation in *Enūma Eliš* V 76. The use of the adverbial expression with *ana* in this text must be a scribal error. The adverb is

royal inscription on a reductive and miniature scale:[144] a (degrading) genealogy (Obv. 2–4); a (insulting) quasi-historical narrative (Obv. 5–r.3: that we have a short narrative seems clear from r.2–3, which appears conclusive to previous events); and a conclusion (r.4–5). The language and content-structure are the imitative element.

Through the combination of hypotext and generic idiolect, the text is not a "parody", but what Genette terms a *generic chimera* or *contamination*, the presence of two different but now fused together hypotextual elements, e.g., two genres, or one text and one genre, in a single hypertext.[145] In this case, the presence of a hypotext in SB *Cuth.*, and a genre in royal inscription, is far more complex than the statement "parody of SB *Cuth.*" implies. Naturally, it leads to a more complex interpretation.[146] Both hypotext and idiolect serve to create a new singular text. K 1351 is, in essence, a piece of "*narû*-literature", within which a purportedly real, though probably virtual stele is presented.[147] It serves to denigrate the maker of the virtual stele, Bel-eṭir.[148] The imitation of royal inscriptional language between Obv. 2–r. 5 is employed to report said stele. The parodistic and citational *incipit*, which takes from SB *Cuth*., is by no means a "parody" of that text. Instead, it conjures for the reader the expected generic themes and features associated with that text and those like it (military might and far-off expeditions, divine interventions, etc.), and then swiftly reverses or removes them (no military endeavours; distinct lack of the divine but for a reference to Pazuzu). This is at its most clear when, at the end of K 1351, there is reference to *ana arkûti*, "the future" (r.6), much like a typical admonition to a future ruler in a royal inscription or SB *Cuth*. Instead, however, K 1351 focusses on all that Bel-eṭir did wrong in the past.[149] The SB *Cuth.* hypotext is also a signal of the generic game

never attested with a preposition. The substantivized form, *aḫrâtu*, can take the preposition, but one would then expect the genitive *aḫrâti*.

144. Grayson 1980, 140–171 *apud* Machinist 2018, 332f. See similarly Sansone 2023, 271.
145. On the presence of *generic chimera* in *Esarḫaddon's Apology* see Bach 2020b, 36–38. Sansone 2023, 265, uses the similar term "hybrid genre".
146. See also most recently Sansone 2023, 270–276, whose close reading concluded that the text displays courtly resentment, while simultaneously reaffirming the *status quo* of propagandistic participation.
147. This kind of text is not a *unicum per se* in the ancient Near East. In the century after the *Bel-eṭir* text, the *Stele of Adad-guppi* combines a first person (autodiegetic) royal inscription with third person (heterodiegetic) funerary text: "the text as a whole must be understood to be written in the words of Adad-guppi, but words placed in her mouth by another person. This, however, does not mean that the events and even the opinions associated with Adad-guppi are unauthentic" (Longman III 1991, 102). See edition in Schaudig 2001, 500–513; discussion in Longman III 1991, 97–103; most recently Yun 2017, 277–294.
148. Already noted by Machinist 2018, 358.
149. See similarly Sansone 2023, 267. There may here be a play with Enmerkar as noted by Machinist 2018, 359, though not as he understood it: "And if EN.KAR = Bel-eṭir is a playful echo of Enmerkar, then the association makes of Enmerkar — who in the Cuthean Legend is a failed, but not ridiculous ruler — someone who becomes a pilloried fool on the model of Bel-eṭir". Rather, the humour comes from the fact that Enmerkar failed to leave a stela, though was still remembered. Contra, in K 1351, Bel-eṭir did leave a "stela", and the result, converse of SB *Cuth*., was *ana tēlte u bilte ina pī nīšī ittaškin*, "he was made in the mouth of the people a (mocking) saying and insult"; on the meaning of *tēltu* see Van De Mieroop 2011, 316.

at play.[150] Haul convincingly demonstrated that SB *Cuth*. could well have been recognised by the Babylonian or Assyrian as a piece of literary fiction.[151] As such, the scribe, deliberately straddling the murky line between real and fictional royal inscription, evoked that quintessential and famous fictional *narû* of Naram-Sin, in order to evoke the fictionality of Bel-eṭir's monument, all while using the very real language of related royal narrative texts.

3. Case Study: PMN *as Mock-Heroic Pastiche*

It remains to demonstrate the application of this methodology to the PMN. This case study is included to show how one can take Genette's system, of which only the framework was applied in the text survey, even further. It allows one to delineate in fine-grained detail the structural procedures in a specific text.

3.1 Introduction to PMN[152]

The PMN is a short tale (approximately 160 lines) describing the clever revenges of a poor man, Gimil-Ninurta, on the mayor of Nippur after he had mistreated him. It was first edited by Gurney in 1956.[153] At the time, the tale was known in three manuscripts: two from Ḫuzirina (mod. Sultantepe), STT 1 38 (SU-1951.78) and 39 (SU-1952.252), and one from Nineveh, K 3478, all dating to the Neo-Assyrian period and in Neo-Assyrian script. STT 38, which preserves most of the text, is a four-column tablet of 160 lines. STT 39, corresponding to lines 72–82 of STT 38, appears to be from the upper right corner of a single-column tablet, with its obverse inscribed and its reverse blank. K 3478, the reverse of which is destroyed, corresponds to the opening 18 lines. Corrections to the edition were published by O. Gurney in 1958,[154] and O. Gurney and P. Hulin published a further fragment, STT 2 116 (SU-1952.292), a join to STT 39 (thus SU-1952.252 + SU-1952.292), the obverse of which is destroyed, a few years later.[155] George then provided minor corrigenda and collations of STT 38 in 1993.[156]

A further fragment, N 4022, was published by M. de J. Ellis in 1974, consisting of a small fragment of a school tablet from Nippur dated to the Neo-Babylonian period and in

150. See also relevantly Sansone 2023, 263: "for instance, once we understand that the poem satirizes the generic conventions of the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions … we will see that it is engaged in a reflexive commentary on the production and dissemination of propaganda and its effects on readers …".
151. See Haul 2009, 161–187, and esp. 186. The notion that a reader in the ancient Near East could detect fictionality in the literary-historical texts has in the past been challenged: Longman III 1991, 207f.; Schaudig 2001, 5. Gilan (2008, 267–284) maintained that it is impossible to know if the Hittite audience of the *Cannibal Text* (CTH 17) regarded it as fiction. See contra in Haul 2009, 133–159 for theoretical discussion on fictionality in the ancient Near East, and esp. 176–187 for fictionality and SB *Cuth*. See also Michalowski 2011, 206, on the fictionality of the Puzur-Numušda correspondence; Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 300f.; Helle 2020, 54–61, on authorship; Feldt 2020, 282–298, on myth and fiction in SB *Gilg.*; and Frazer 2022, 824–826.
152. See now also the overview in Campi 2024, 71–80.
153. Gurney 1956, 145–162; Gurney & Finkelstein 1957, plates L–LIII (nos. 38–39).
154. Gurney 1958, 245.
155. Gurney & Hulin 1964, plate CXLIII.
156. George 1993, 75.

Neo-Babylonian script.[157] Ellis considered the tablet faces indeterminable, noting that one side preserved two columns, one of which corresponds to the PMN's *incipit*, the other an unknown composition, and the other side a section of the lexical list ḪAR-*ra* = *ḫubullu* (iii 282–295). P. D. Gesche (2001, 790), however, in her study of first millennium school tablets, assigned N 4022 to the "type 1" format of school tablet, in which lexical lists are most often found on the obverse.[158] For this reason, she assigned the PMN excerpt here to the reverse, which is now followed in the eBL edition.[159] Subsequent joins have since been identified by Jiménez and Peterson for the eBL, resulting in the manuscript CBS 11301 + CBS 11338 + CBS 11417 + N 4022 + N 4036.[160] As relayed by M. Frazer (2024, 77), Jiménez (forthcoming) will publish the joined manuscript, which contains not only the lexical list and PMN excerpts, but also a verbal paradigm and extracts from the *Gilgameš Letter*, the *Sargon Birth Legend*, an Akkadian proverb, and "perhaps a hymn of self-praise".

Most recently in 2021, A. C. Heinrich, under the auspices of the eBL, published two more Neo-Assyrian fragments, K 19604 and Rm 468, which correspond to lines 20–25 and 95–105 // 109–117 of STT 38 respectively.[161] Thus, while B. Ottervanger's 2016 edition is still of much use,[162] today the most current version is that available on the eBL.[163] Differences between the manuscripts are minimal and amount to minor variations in spelling.[164]

The tale of the PMN can be separated, following Cooper,[165] into five sections:

(I) Introduction (1–22): the *incipit* introduces our protagonist, Gimil-Ninurta (hereafter GN), a citizen of Nippur (*mār Nippūri*) and poor man. He owns no valuable possessions and no food. Desiring a change of circumstance, GN decides to sell the clothes off his back to buy a sheep. Instead, he buys a three-year-old goat. Eager to throw a feast for his friends and family, he realises that the goat is not enough to feed them all. Nor does he have any beer for the feast. Fearing the anger of his relatives, he determines to take the goat to the mayor (*ḫazannu*) of Nippur.

(II) First contact with the mayor (23–71): the gatekeeper of the mayor, Tukulti-Enlil, announces GN's arrival to his master. Angry that a citizen should be left waiting, the mayor invites GN inside. The mayor asks why he has brought him a goat and GN explains his circumstances. Fragmentary lines now follow, but when we resume, the mayor has given GN only bones, gristle, and third-rate beer. Expelled from the mayoral dwelling, GN promises threefold revenge to the gatekeeper. The mayor laughs upon hearing this. GN then turns to the palace of the king, in hopes of fair judgement.

157. Ellis 1974, 88f.
158. Gesche 2001, 44–49; see also Zaia 2025, 145 f.
159. Heinrich 2022b.
160. See *ibid.* on eBL for these manuscripts and joins. In particular, for CBS 11301+, see https://www.ebl.lmu.de/library/CBS.11301
161. Heinrich 2021a, 170–173.
162. The edition could only use STT 38, STT 39 + 116, K 3478, and N 4022.
163. Heinrich 2022b.
164. Heinrich 2021a, 170–173.
165. Cooper 1975, 164.

(III) Second contact / first revenge (72–114): GN requests to borrow a chariot from the king for one day in return for a pound of red gold. Without question, the king grants him the chariot and noble clothing. GN then rides back to the mayor's house, capturing two birds on the way and sealing them in a box. The mayor greets GN as if he were nobility. The protagonist explains, in pretence, that the king has sent him to take gold to Enlil's temple, the Ekur. After treating GN to a feast, the mayor falls asleep. GN now releases the birds. At dawn, the mayor wakes up to find the box empty, exclaiming that the gold has been taken. In a dramatic display, GN tears his garments and beats the mayor from head to toe. The mayor begs forgiveness, giving GN two pounds of red gold and new clothes. GN then exits, telling the gatekeeper he has enacted one revenge: two remain.

(IV) Third contact / second revenge (115–139): GN goes to a barber, where he shaves his head and disguises himself as a doctor. Approaching the mayor's house, he tells the gatekeeper that he can cure ailments. Before the mayor, GN outlines the bruises where he had previously beaten him, duping the mayor into thinking he is skilled. GN then makes an excuse: his cures only work in darkness and isolation. With the mayor to himself, GN ties him to the ground and beats him a second time.

(V) Fourth contact / third revenge (140–160): GN finds a young man, and, in return for a reward, commands him to stand in front of the mayor's house and shout: *anāku ša enzi*, "I am the one of the goat!". Meanwhile, GN hides under a bridge. Upon hearing this cry, the mayor sends all his personnel in pursuit of the young man. However, left alone outside, GN seizes the mayor and beats him for a third time. GN leaves for the open country; the mayor returns to the city, crawling.

Various dates have been proposed for the origin of this composition. Gurney initially suspected a time before the Old Babylonian period, based on the attestation of the potentiality particle *tušāma* (17) which fell out of use post-OB,[166] and a possible correspondence at line 40 ([*mīn*]*u ḫibiltakāma kadrê našâta*, "what is your wrong-doing, that you bear me a gift?") with the proverb KAR 174 iv 8–10: á-zi-da-zu máš ḫé-da-gál gùb-bu-zu kadra ḫé-da-gál, "let a goat be carried in your right hand (and) a bribe in your left".[167] E. Speiser suggested that the NA scribe of STT 38 may have copied a tablet from the Middle Babylonian period, due to a perceived confusion of the sign forms UŠ and MA and through what he thought was an allusion to *Enūma Eliš* III 69 (*uškēnma iššiq qaqqara maḫaršun*, "he prostrated and kissed the ground before them") at PMN line 73 (*uškēnma iššiq qaqqara maḫaršu*, "he prostrated and kissed the ground before him").[168] The only manuscript to preserve a colophon, STT 38, informs us that it was composed (169) *ina* ITI.ŠE U$_4$-21.KAM *limmu ḫanāni*, "on day 21 of the month of Addaru, eponym year of Ḫanana", which corresponds to 701 BCE. Finet argued that the tale was composed c. 100–

166. See attestations in CAD T s.v. *tuša*, 494a–495a.

167. Gurney 1956, 158f. See also Gordon 1960, 140 with fn. 138; Ellis 1974, 88; Jason 1979, 194; Annus 2024, 132; and Campi 2024, 93 fn. 77. The transliteration and translation (with minor changes) is from Alster 1997, 101.

168. Speiser 1957, 43 f. See also Dietrich 2009, 335. *N.B.*: that all the *Enūma Eliš* manuscripts preserving this are from the NB period, and a parallel attestation exists in SB *Nergal and Ereškigal*. See further under section 3.4 below (esp. fn. 215) and the edition of Heinrich 2021b on eBL.

150 years before this date, who considered the older words (e.g., *tušāma*) archaisms and thought that correspondences to SB *Gilg.* X, a text which took its final form around 1000 BCE, were suggestive of such.[169] One of Finet's examples is the PMN *incipit* (1–2), *eṭlu mār Nippuri katû u lapnu* // *Gimil-Ninurta zikrāšu lummunu amēlu*, "a man, a citizen of Nippur, needy and poor, Gimil-Ninurta his name, a very wretched man", which he compared to SB *Gilg.* X 40–41, [*ammēni aklā lēt*]*āti quddudū pānūka* // [*lummun libbāka qat*]*û zīmūka*, "[why are your] cheeks [consumed], your face bowed, [your heart very wretched] (and) your face [exhaust]ed?".[170] This argument was, in turn, followed by Ottervanger, who added that a possible correspondence to the *Advice to the Prince*, 8–10 (also composed around 1000 BCE) at lines 72–82 suggested a composition at the turn of the first millennium.[171]

All of these arguments are problematised because we now recognise that the PMN likely had its origins in "favole folkloristiche ed umoristiche" (D'Agostino 2000, 111–113) both by its similarity to certain types of folklore (e.g. the "Master Thief" cycle) and paralleled story-events found in Middle Eastern and European folklore.[172] As such, Gurney's remark that the tale "doubtless had its roots in an oral tradition of immemorial antiquity"[173] is likely true. With that being said, that at least STT 38 was intended to be enjoyed as a written composition is clear from both the visual puns on sign-forms, as identified by S. B. Noegel,[174] and its colophon (165): *ana tāmarti Qurdī-Nergal*, "for the reading of Qurdi-Nergal". Thus, while likely having an oral background, it is valid to treat the text as we have it as a written composition. Its dating must remain uncertain. In the following, the first millennium time frame is adopted, though only because most of the analysis must draw, as a necessity, on STT 38. Regardless, this will not affect the arguments to come.

3.1 Previous Interpretations of PMN

The PMN has been subject to different interpretations and analyses. The majority focus on content, leading to the text being read variously as socio-political comedy (due to the bureaucratic corruption exhibited by the mayor and seeming ambivalence of the king),[175] "crisis literature" (exhibited in the GN's attempts to alleviate his social decline),[176] and a

169. Finet 1992, 102–106.
170. Following the edition of George 2022 on eBL.
171. Ottervanger 2016, ix–x; see also Zaia 2025, 145f. fn. 113.
172. See Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) no. 1538 (Uther 2004, 273f.); Gurney 1972, 149–158; Kločkov 1975, 218–229; Jason 1979, 189–215; Saporetti 1985 for a comparative folkloric analysis of the PMN's appearance in Sicily; and Campi 2024, 83f.
173. Gurney 1956, 157.
174. Noegel 1996, 177–182; e.g., line 8, where SAG is used Sumerographically in KAŠ.SAG, "(first-rate) beer"; see fn. 229, but also syllabically in the same line to write *i-riš* in the phrase *ana erēš*, "in desiring". See also Annus 2024, 120.
175. Cooper 1975, 167; von Soden 1990, 174 (with German translation); Milano 1998, 6–12; 21f.; D'Agostino 2000, 109–116; D'Agostino 2014, 69; Lenzi 2019, 190; Annus 2024, 120f.; Campi 2024, 82 f.
176. Dietrich 2009, 333–345; Campi 2024, 107f. *N.B.*: that Dietrich reached this conclusion by radically reading GN as the previous mayor, nowhere confirmed in the text; see further Ottervanger 2016, xi fn. 9.

"human-centred" tale, due to the perceivable lack of divine will and authority in the text.[177] More generally, the humorous tones of the text have been recognised and derived from aspects of its content and writing, such as GN's abuse of the practices of the medical profession,[178] and the linguistic games and wordplays,[179] hallmarks that the piece was intended for scribal (as well as originally popular) entertainment.[180] All this is in tandem with the overt slapstick and violent humour in the three deceptions.[181]

Attempts at classifying the genre of the text beyond simply humorous have similarly diverged over a variety of terms, including parody, satire, and pastiche.[182] Besides being in some cases mutually exclusive, the profusion of different terms has hindered a clearer interpretation of the text. It will be suggested instead that the text is best read as a "mock-heroic pastiche".[183] Several scholars have already approached this reading. A. Finet (1992, 102) examined instances of "intertextuality" between the PMN and the SB *Gilg.* X, concluding that "la multiplication de ces pastiches du langage 'noble' pour rapporter les mésaventures d'un personage du commun se charge de 'vis comica' pour les initiés".[184] S. Helle (2020, 190–224) reached a similar conclusion based on the PMN showing a "two-act structure", a "literary device" found in many of the so-called Akkadian "Epics": "Gimil-Ninurta's tale may be read as an ironic twist on a standardized aspect of "high" literature, which is here put to more humorous uses" (217f.). More recently, A. Annus (2024, 119–125) has argued that several (content) parallels emerge between the PMN and Ninurta Mythology.[185] Near contemporaneously, G. P. Campi (2024, 101–106) acknowledged that "several scholars have seen in PMN some form of parody of different literary forms and genres, especially epic" (101), though emphasised that the text is a "parody of the pious suffer motif" and in dialogue with so-called "Wisdom Literature".[186] These

177. Ottervanger 2016, xi–xii; Campi 2024, 80f.; 103.
178. Worthington 2010, 30f.
179. Noegel 1996, 169–186.
180. Minunno 2014, 64f.
181. See now also Campi 2024, 81f. and Zaia 2025, 146f., for a comprehensive overview of the different forms of humour exhibited in the tale.
182. For pastiche see Finet 1992, 102. For parody see Jiménez 2017, 101 (and fns. 271; 272); Finn 2019, 20–22. For "parody" as well as "pastiche-like" see Campi 2024, 107. "Satire" is only used in the contentual, not generic sense (e.g., Cooper 1975, 167).
183. See also Vanstiphout 1988, 191–227, who argued that the *Tale of the Fox* was a "satirical animal epic" using similar lines of inquiry as below.
184. See similarly Ali 1972, 87–100, for GN's "gentlemanly pretension".
185. E.g.: Gimil-Ninurta's name, "revenge of Ninurta", and the god's function as "defend[ing] the poor and underprivileged" (121) as well as the term's significance for royal ideology; GN's riding in a chariot and Ninurta's return to Nippur in *Angim*; GN catching birds and Ninurta's victory over monsters, including Anzu, in *Angim*; and GN and Ninurta releasing entrapped birds in PMN and the *Hymn to Ninurta as Helper in Misery*. See further 125–140 for Annus' comparison between PMN and the *Testament of Job*.
186. Both Campi (2024) and Annus (2024) draw comparisons between the PMN and (the *Book* / *Testament of*) *Job*, but whereas the latter examines the influence of the PMN on the biblical text, the former also adds (with explicit reference to Genette, 101) that the PMN is a hypertext to "pious sufferer" texts. Campi (2024, 87f. fn. 60) added that the relationship exhibited in the PMN to the "epic genre" "should not automatically rule out other patterns of connection" and instead "attest[s] all the more to the fact

interpretations begin to capture the text, but it will become clear that focussing on singular identifications of humorous effects (in the case of Finet and Helle) overlooks the extent to which a "heroic" idiolect saturates the work as the real defining feature of the PMN (cf. Campi above).

3.3 Mock-Heroic Pastiche and "Heroic Style"

According to Genette, a mock-heroic pastiche "[consists] of treating a vulgar subject in a noble style and using the heroic style in general: that is, without specific reference to any particular noble text".[187] Mock-heroic pastiche exhibits the structural relationship of imitation. Particular to the genre, it "accomplishes its potential *vis comica* … only when it takes aim at one noble style in particular, one that we can enjoy identifying and seeing lampooned", the success of which lies in an incongruity between subject and style.[188]

Genette never strictly defined "heroic style": applied to cuneiform literature, it might be considered the style of text in which a "hero" appears, necessitating a cultural definition of "hero". However, there exists no straightforward concept of a "hero" in ancient Near Eastern cultures, not least because said cultures span millennia. A. Zgoll (followed by J. Bach, who noted that Zgoll's theory is essentially similar to Klaus von See's concept of heroic exorbitance), defined the "hero" as "Grenzgänger, die sich an bestimmte, in ihrer Gesellschaft geltende Grenzen wagen, diese Grenzen prüfen und teils überschreiten".[189] These boundaries are situated along a horizontal and vertical axis, the former representing martiality, the latter wisdom.[190] Heroes need not always be positive examples, however: there are anti-heroes too,[191] and even Gilgameš fluctuates between polarities in SB *Gilg.*[192]

that the PMN is a work in dialogue with other literature". He suggested that while the relationship of the PMN to "epic" "play[s] on a compositional level", the connection to "pious sufferer" texts is "oriented toward the conveyance of an overall message". Should Campi's (2024, 86–96) connections to "pious sufferer" texts be accepted, then strictly speaking, in Genette's terms, the PMN would be an example of *generic chimera*/*contamination* due to the fusion of distinct hypotextual elements (compositionally "epic" but thematically "pious sufferer"), which Campi seems to recognise when terming the text's tropes "a deliberate attempt to parody ancient understandings of piety" and simultaneously calling the PMN a "pastiche-like work" (107) in its (proposed) various hypertextual relationships — although "parody of motif *x*" is at odds with Genette's understanding of parody as the playful transformation of one (or several) hypotext(s).

187. Genette 1997, 143. The *Batrachomyomachia*, an ancient Greek poem of war between frogs and mice narrated in the epic-style of Homer, is the example *par excellence*. For the latest edition see Hosty 2020, and esp. 14–21 on parody and pastiche. For Genette (1997, 134), this poem is not actually a pastiche as the name implies, but a caricature, "because its stylistic traits are both exaggerated and depreciated by an 'inappropriate' application and are thus doubly satirized". Be that as it may, Genette kept the term mock-heroic pastiche to remain in line with the "classical tradition" that had adopted that term. The present writer follows suit, only noting that the *Batrachomyomachia* and indeed the PMN could still be viewed as pastiches, if one identifies their mood as solely for pure entertainment.
188. See esp. Genette 1997, 134–142.
189. Zgoll 2008, 5. See the concurring analysis of Bach 2022, 27–47, and esp. 31: "Das Faszinosum der Heldensage ist nicht in einer Vorbildlichkeit, sondern in einer durch Amoralität ermöglichten Transgressivität ihrer Protagonisten zu sehen".
190. Zgoll 2008, 16; 19.
191. E.g., Naram-Sin regarding his prudence in SB *Cuth*.
192. Zgoll 2008, 21; see esp. Bach 2022, 35–47.

"Heroic style" might then be the style of any text in which the protagonist exhibits the above phenomena, but this is a very broad definition.

Genette also used "heroic style" interchangeably with "Epic style".[193] The Western concept of "Epic" has proved challenging in its application to Mesopotamian poetic narrative.[194] There exists no native designation akin to the term, even though emic notations such as *šēru* and *zamāru*, "song" (the logogram of which, ŠÌR, is attested in the colophon of an Akkado-Hittite fragment of *Gilg.*, KBo 19.116 2′),[195] grouping of similar texts in catalogues, and labels that correspond to performative contexts or distinguish between different musical accompaniments suggest that some native notion of "genre" existed.[196] Nor does there exist a consistent modern grouping of cuneiform texts under the taxonomy "Epic". Some modifications to Genette's theory are required.

"Heroic style" will be defined here as the idiolect extracted from any text (extant in the first millennium) in which a "hero", *per* the definition of Zgoll, Bach, and, by extension, von See, appears. These texts are often recognised as "Epics" by Assyriological scholarship too. Though a broad definition, this approach is apt in the Mesopotamian textual network, where generic boundaries are "far more fluid".[197] Provided that the features analysed below are also found in those texts recognised as "heroic", or "epic" poetic narratives by other scholars, then their constituting a "heroic style" can be accepted. Given the criticism of the imprecision of the use of the term "parody" raised above, one might contend that this definition of "epic" or the "hero" is overly vague. But the search for precision with "parody" arises from a desire to accurately describe the textual procedures (transformation or imitation) involved in texts often labelled with this term, not to censure the use of the ascription. The purpose of Genette's system is not to supply us with genres: terms such as mock-heroic pastiche, burlesque travesty, and parody are simply modern short-hand names that correspond to specific transtextual relationships, which are universal. The above definitions of "epic" and the "hero" are employed to situate the following analysis, as much as can be, within the realms of cuneiform literature.[198]

In addition, there will be adduced some elements of a more general "noble style", *i.e.*, an idiolect taken from texts where the protagonist is of higher standing than Gimil-Ninurta (e.g. royal inscriptions). The presence of these elements do not serve to undermine the

193. Genette 1997, e.g., 12; 58; 82; 89f.

194. Not only "Epic", but indeed all Western generic application. The classic example of Vanstiphout 1986, 1–11, and follow ups in 1999a, 703–717 and 1999b, 79–99, are still of much use. See also discussions in: Westenholz 1983, 327–336; Vanstiphout 1988, 207f.; Tinney 1996, 15–18; Pongratz-Leisten 1999, 74 and 2001, 12–31; Haubold 2002, 1–19; Wasserman 2003, 176–178; Edzard 2004b, 491–494; Martin 2005, 9–19; Sasson 2005, 219f.; Noegel 2005, 233f.; Haul 2009, 11–13; Michalowski 2010, 7f.; Kämmerer & Metzler 2012, 2–4; Guichard 2014, 71–75; Hess 2015, 254–257; Jiménez 2017, 77 fn. 205; Lenzi 2019, 79f.

195. See George 2007, 43f.

196. See fn. 194, above.

197. Noegel 2005, 244.

198. While the search for genre in cuneiform literature is still a thorny proposition, with even Vanstiphout (1999b, 94) arguing for caution when trying to impose modern categories on ancient texts, in the words of George (2007, 45), "there is no doubt that understanding of literature can be deepened by classification from a modern perspective".

mock-heroic, but rather reinforce what the scribe was attempting. After all, heroes were frequently (or became) kings in cuneiform literature.[199]

3.4 "Heroic" Language Register, Formulae, and Verse in PMN

Scholars have long acknowledged that the PMN is written in a literary register.[200] There are Standard Babylonian forms[201], Hymnic-Epic Dialectical[202] features, archaisms,[203] and literary syntax.[204] Many "Epic" verse-formulae adduced by Hecker are also found in the PMN.[205] Said features are not exclusive to the "heroic style", but they certainly appear in those texts in which a "heroic" register is used.[206] Interestingly, it seems typical of "epic texts [to] use a rather simple style, with ordinary words, short clauses, and relatively few stylistic adornments".[207] This would accord with the case in the PMN, although given the shortness of this text relative to longer "Epic" compositions, the inclusion of such features might betray that the scribe wanted to saturate the text with this idiolect. Moreover, it has been noted that the PMN "is one of the very rare non-epic texts to feature speech introduction formulae".[208] Speech introduction formulae are also not exclusive to the heroic style,[209] but are found therein more often than in other Akkadian literature.

199. To state the obvious examples: Gilgameš; Etana; Marduk, etc. Adapa is, of course, a counter-example.
200. This was generally acknowledged by D'Agostino 2000, 109–116. See now also Campi 2024, 82f.
201. PMN 41: *tisītu*, SB by-form of *šisītu*, "shout, cry", acknowledged by Ottervanger 2016, 28. Possibly PMN 78 on Ms. B *mušše*, "refined" — see discussion in Ottervanger 2016, 34; on Standard Babylonian see Groneberg 1987 and overview in Hess 2020, 473–488.
202. PMN 7: *kabattuš*, acknowledged by Jiménez 2017, 101 and fns. 271–272. PMN 148: *kamêtuš*, acknowledged by Finet 1992, 102. On the Hymnic-Epic Dialect see von Soden 1931, 163–227 and 1933, 90–183; Hess 2010, 101–122.
203. PMN 17: *tušāma* acknowledged by Finet 1992, 102.
204. George 2003, 434f., and further examples in Ottervanger 2016, xiv, for the separation of a noun and its attribute by a predicate and noun-adjective reversal (e.g., PMN 15); Worthington 2012, 190–197, and esp. 197 (PMN referenced) for "honorific nominatives" (e.g., PMN 70–72).
205. See esp. in Hecker 1974 the following examples: single-verse formulae (101–141, e.g., PMN 13; 21; 69; 73; 144); "Doppelvers" formulae (145, e.g., PMN 7–8; 33–34; 36–37); "relation-word-epithet" formulae (164, e.g., PMN 1; 13; 15; 24; 25; 28; 31; 39; 44; 58; 61; 65; 87; 105; 110; 118; 119; 136) and *N.B.* (164, fn. 4): "*mār Nippuri*^{ki} nimmt im 'Armen Mann' stets die Stelle des 2. Stichos ein … was übrigens auch für *ālu Nippuri*^{ki} … und *ḫazan Nippuri*^{ki} gilt"; "terminative-adverbialis + *wašābum*" (168, e.g., PMN 3); "verse-closing" formulae (170, e.g., PMN 70; 84); "verse filling" formulae (171f., e.g., PMN 34; 64; 72; 109; 124; 135).
206. E.g., SB *Gilg.*; see George 2003, 431–433, though they are not common.
207. Kouwenberg 2012, 438; see also George 2003, 431; Annus 2024, 139.
208. Jiménez 2017, 101; first evidenced by Finet 1992, 102. *Ana* PN *amāta izakkar*, "he speaks the word to PN", is the most common (PMN 25; 27; 39; 65; 110; 119; 136). According to Sonnek 1940, 228, it appears in SB *Gilg.*, *Ištar's Descent*, *Etana*, *Enūma Eliš*, and *Erra*. *Itti libbīšu lummunīšu imtalli*, "with his wretched heart he deliberates", is used twice (PMN 11; 16). Though not direct speech, it accords with similarly introduced internal monologues found in *Nergal and Ereškigal* and *Ištar's Descent*, for which see Vogelzang 1990, 59.
209. As noted by Jiménez 2017, 92f. fn. 246, they also appear in *Agušaya Hymn B*, *Marduk's Address to the Demons*, and *Instructions of Šupe-ameli*. There is still no comprehensive study of speech introduction formulae in Akkadian literary texts, though see the doctoral thesis of Kirkham-Smith 2021, who compares direct speech in Homer and Near Eastern literature, defining the corpus of the latter as *extended mythological narratives*. For a sole Assyriological focus see Jiménez 2017, 92–97. Older

Some phraseology is also paralleled in "heroic" as well as royal texts.[210] PMN 71, *ina ṭēmi šarru rubû u šakkanaku iparrasū dīn kitti*, "by reason, the king, noble, and governor will make a true decision", is at first grammatically challenging. If one reads a genitive compound *ina ṭēmi šarri*, "by reason of the king", we expect the construct state *ṭēm*. In addition, rendering the line in this way makes the *rubû u šakkanaku* subjects, which is in disjunction with what follows in the narrative, since it is the king who will render the judgment for GN. Ottervanger's suggestion of a "self-standing adverbial phrase" *ina ṭēmi*, "by reason", is perhaps best.[211] The arising grammatical difficulty could be explainable as an attempt to deliberately incorporate phraseology of a "noble" and "heroic" idiolect, thereby leading to its awkwardness.[212] For a semantically similar sequence can be found in SB *Gilg.* VI 16 (*lū kamsu ina šaplīka šarrū kabtūtu u rubû*, "kings, important ones, and nobles shall be bowed down beneath you"), which, *per* A. George, is a "literary cliché",[213] near-identically read (and closer still to the PMN line) in a prayer to Gilgameš as a judge of the Netherworld (*šarrū šakkanakkū u rubû maḫarka kamsū*, "kings, governors, and nobles are kneeled before you").[214]

A further example of "heroic" phraseology can be recognised in PMN 73, *uškēnma iššiq qaqqaru maḫaršu*, "he prostrated and kissed the ground before him", which is found near identically in *Enūma Eliš* III 69 (*uškēnma iššiq qaqqara maḫaršūn*) and SB *Nergal and Ereškigal* 33 and 203 (*ikmīsi iššiq qaqqaru*/*a maḫrīša*).[215] Lastly, PMN 89, *mannu attā bēlī*, "Who are you, my lord …", employs the *mannu attā* phrase found frequently in the hortatory / curse sections of both *narû*-literature and royal inscriptions (thereby both

works include Sonnek 1940, 225–235; Vogelzang 1990, 50–70; and Mayer 2007, 117–144.

210. Possibly related, though fragmentary and thus not included here is PMN 114: *ḫazannu išmēma kal ūm*[*i īšu*]*š*, "The mayor heard (this) and was upset all day", now confirmed (and *contra* previously understood *iṣīḫ*, "he laughed") by fragment Rm 468 r. iii 6′. As noted by Heinrich 2021a, 173, a parallel phrase is possibly found in the *Toil of Babylon*, which in Lambert's (2013, 306f.) edition reads (K 3657+ i 9): [*išme ri*]*mmassina kala ūmi īšuš*, "he heard their groaning, was upset all day".
211. See Ottervanger 2016, 33, for commentary to this line, though *N.B.* that *ina ṭēmi* as an adverbial phrase is without parallel according to the CAD Ṭ, s.v. *ṭēmu*, 85a–97a. The eBL (Heinrich 2022b) preferred "Since it is the king's will that prince and governor shall give just verdicts", hence *ina ṭēmi šarri* (LUGAL). See now also Campi 2024, 95f.
212. If this is GN's direct speech, as understood by the edition of Van Buylaere 2010 for the Oracc *Geography of Knowledge in Assyria and Babylonia* project (https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/cams/gkab/P338355), this is case where the protagonist's language is at odds with his person — see section 3.7.
213. George 2003, 830.
214. KAR 227 ii 7–11; LKA 89 ii 14–22. See George 2003, 134, for text and translation. Another similar sequence, *ilu*, *šarru*, *kabtu*, and *rubû*, is found frequently in a wider range of prayers and incantations (See Lenzi 2011, 192), notably the corpus of anti-witchcraft rituals (with thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the ubiquity of the sequence in the corpus of anti-witchcraft rituals). These are available via the Oracc project *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals* online (https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/cmawro/).
215. For *Enūma Eliš* following the edition of Lambert 2013, 78 and Heinrich 2021b (eBL); for SB *Nergal and Ereškigal* 33 (and 203) following the edition of Ponchia & Luukko 2013. Speiser 1957, 43f., suggested PMN 73 was "copy-pasted" from *Enūma Eliš* III 69, but the parallel formulation in SB *Nergal and Ereškigal* should dissuade from taking this argument.

"heroic" and "noble").[216]

3.5 "Heroic/Epic" Poetic Features and Literary Devices in the PMN

Of those texts traditionally termed "Epic", poetic and stylistic features include *Damqa-mīnim* constructions — in which an adjectival or (rarely) substantival *regens* ends in *-am* and is coupled with a substantive *rectum* in the absolute state or genitive[217] — similes, merismus, repetition, word pairs, metaphors, paronomasia, and polysemy.[218] This is neither an exhaustive list nor especial to "Epic". However, the PMN exhibits many of these features in its 160 lines,[219] though this can only betray, again, the highly literary nature of its composition. S. Helle identified a more concrete literary device found in six "Epics", which he termed the "two-act structure": a text divided in two parts, in which the second part expands the first with mirroring between both.[220] It appears in *Atra-ḫasīs*, *Enūma Eliš*, *Gilg.*, *Etana*, *Nergal and Ereškigal*, *Erra*, and, crucially, the PMN.[221] Though not necessarily unique to Akkadian "Epic" or exhibited by all "Epic" texts,[222] that the PMN also exhibits this feature should now come as no surprise.

3.6 'Heroic' Narratological Features in the PMN

A comparison of the narratological features[223] of Akkadian "Epics" is yet to be published.[224] L. K. Altes noted that SB *Gilg.* uses, like Homer in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a narrator external to the narrated world (for Genette an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator) who largely refrains from ideological comment, instead using direct speech that alternates in the typical fashion with narrative summary to convey the thoughts and feelings of the protagonists.[225] This focus on direct speech is one certain feature that distinguishes the Akkadian "Epics" from other cuneiform literary works. J. Haubold has shown that *Enūma Eliš* is over 50% direct speech, and in SB *Gilg.*, Tablet I is 53% reported speech, Tablet

216. See Moran 1959, 130–140; Vanderhooft 1999, 53; Haul 2009, 128f. fn. 86. E.g., SB *Cuth.* 149; an Aššur-eṭel-ilani inscription (RIMB 2 B.6.35.5, line 4; see Frame 1995, 267). Attested three times in Nabonidus inscriptions *per* CAD M/1 s.v. *mannu*, 217b.
217. See Wasserman 2003, 45–60.
218. Wasserman 2003, 178; Noegel 2005, 233.
219. Noegel 1996, 169–186, for wordplays and puns; Ottervanger 2016, xii–xiv, and commentary (21–46) for hendiadys (e.g., PMN 1), chiasmus (e.g., PMN 5), simile (e.g., PMN 140; 147), and merism (PMN 35–36; 149). For merism see also Wasserman 2003, 82 fn. 101.
220. Helle 2020, 192f.
221. *Ibid.*, 193–212.
222. *Ibid.*, 192.
223. In other words, a narratological analysis, with elements including narrative *mood* (e.g., distance, function of narrator), *instance* (e.g., focalisation), *level* (e.g., embedding of narratives), and *time* (e.g. *analepsis*, *prolepsis*, and narrative speed). These terms can be found in Genette 1980 and 1988.
224. Bach 2020a, 122–178, structurally approached the Middle Assyrian royal "Epics", noting that they differ from royal inscriptions due to their extradiegetic-heterodiegetic narrator (*ibid.*, 122f.). However, the royal "Epics" remain somewhat distinct from their non-historiographic counterparts in their contemporaneity with events discussed and degree of fictionality, for which see Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 300f.
225. Altes 2007, 191f., who added that there are multiple focalisations in the text, *i.e.*, of the narrator, of Enkidu, of Ištar, etc. The above focusses only on the focalisation of the narrator.

VI 62%, and Tablet XI 81%.[226]

The PMN employs a similar narrator as in SB *Gilg*. They are the traditional "omniscient" narrator, who fulfils only the narrative function (*i.e.*, they do not address the audience directly, which is equally rare in SB *Gilg.*).[227] Direct speech constitutes 40% of the narrative, which rises further if one discounts lines used to introduce the direct speech itself to 45%.[228] Both figures are remarkably high in such a short text, and together with the narrator, betray an attempt to incorporate a "heroic"/ "epic" idiolect via narratological features.

3.7 "Heroic" Characterisation and Thematisation in the PMN

Throughout the PMN several themes and the characterisation of GN are suggestive that the poor man is not only so. The initial driving force of the narrative is GN's hunger. This hunger is for no ordinary food, but *šīru u šikaru rēštû*, "flesh and top-quality beer" (PMN 8), so that the protagonist appears a regular "Feinschmecker", "a gourmet who appreciates good meat and top quality beer".[229] In a similar vein, after failing to acquire the sheep, GN notes that with his three-year old goat, *ul ibašši naptanu*, "there would be no banquet" (PMN 18).[230] The term *naptanu* is frequently used in royal and divine contexts (as meals for kings and gods) and is another indicator that GN is a man of great aspiration.[231] S. Ermidoro cited the PMN and *Tamarisk and Palm* as examples of the meal also being organized by the "common man", *i.e.*, not only in the royal context.[232] It is, however, interesting that both these examples are texts that deliberately employ a high register, so that the *naptanu* may not be as "common" as suggested.

Having then suffered injustice at the hands of the mayor, Gimil-Ninurta's triple-deception demonstrates some "heroic" thematization. Though not always in agreement, scholars have identified in broad strokes the themes typical of Mesopotamian "Epic". These include making a name for oneself, dangerous encounters, journeys to far-flung places; overcoming adversaries, and demonstrating wisdom and/or cunning.[233] The last theme is the most prominent in the PMN, where "human wit as a means to overcome grief and frustration in the face of injustice"[234] plays a major role, namely in the aforementioned

226. Haubold 2019, 17.
227. Cf. discussion in Campi 2024, 95f., on the possibility that PMN 71 could be a parenthetical interjection of the scribe.
228. Counting 62 lines of direct speech in 154 lines of text — discounting the highly fragment lines 52–57, that themselves may also be direct speech if Ottervanger 2016, 30f. was correct. In this case, the figure rises to 46%.
229. Ottervanger 2016, 22. However, as rightly noted by an anonymous reviewer, the logographic spelling as it is found in PMN 8, KAŠ.SAG, can simply mean *šikaru*, "beer".
230. Translated as a hypothetical due to *tušamma* in the previous line.
231. CAD N/1 s.v. *naptanu*, 319a–323b. See, e.g., the contrast of the "low" vs. "high" meal in *Theodicy* 185 (eBL ed. Heinrich 2022a): *mālil erqi naptan rube* … […], "the eater of greenery [devours] the banquet of the prince", and note Jiménez 2017, 85: "The phrase *mālil arqi* is thus a derogatory description of a poor person, who cannot afford to eat meat".
232. Ermidoro 2015, 248–251 and fn. 21.
233. See overviews in Alster 1995, 2324f.; Sasson 2005, 226–228; Noegel 2005, 242f.
234. Ottervanger 2016, xii.

three deceptions.[235] Part and parcel too, of Gimil-Ninurta's cunning, is the overcoming of his adversary in the *ḫazannu*, "mayor".

Perhaps the greatest contentual hint that the PMN is to be read as a mock-heroic pastiche lies in the first deception (PMN 70–113): *iltēt narkabta ina qibītīka liddinūnimma* // UD-1 KAM *ēma uṣammaru izimtu lukšud*, "On your command, let them give me one chariot. For one day let me achieve (my) desire, wherever I strive" (PMN 76–77). The narrative quite emphatically depicts its protagonist as a mock-nobleman, complete with chariot (a *sim*[*at rab*]*ûte*, "symbol of greatness", PMN 83)[236] and *nēbeḫu* ("belt" or "sash", PMN 82). The garment is also mentioned in SB *Gilg.* I 225 with the same verb found in PMN 82, *ez/sēḫu*, "to gird".[237] This is duly fitting, in a mock-heroic text. The first deception is therefore also self-referential and metonymic, having the content of the text refer to its own form and structure. There may also be recourse to this at PMN 105, where B. Ottervanger noted the reversal of addresses: Gimil-Ninurta becomes *bēlī*, "my lord", and the *ḫazannu* the *mār Nippūri*, "citizen of Nippur".[238] Thus, as the king allows Gimil-Ninurta to dress-up as nobleman, the scribe dresses his text accordingly.[239]

3.8 Implications

Reading the PMN as a mock-heroic pastiche has several implications. First and foremost, it clarifies the text's hypertextual relationship. The PMN is not a parody, for it does not transform one text. It is, with A. Finet, better termed a pastiche, because it takes its style from a range of hypotexts which can rightly be considered "heroic" or "noble". This leads to an incongruity between the protagonist and subject matter, a poor man who wants to have a party. Herein lies the text's *vis comica*, taking us beyond the clear revelry the PMN betrays in its slapstick, violent depictions of revenge. The humour is far more subtle, with the scribe equally engaged in a humorous generic twist. This twist, the revenge of a poor man told as an "epic", subsequently informs and reinforces the previous, singularly identified interpretations of the text. As noted in its introduction, scholars have harkened on to the socio-political tones, in which a poor man overcomes bureaucratic corruption, its focus on the human as opposed to the divine realm, and its mockery of the medical profession. Much of this boils down to what J. Cooper (1975, 167–170) would term "role reversal".[240] The identification of the text as mock-heroic is not needed to recognise these humorous moments but rather allows us to view these singular instances not just as aggregated comic elements. They are subsumed under the mock-heroic practice and are the result of the

235. Perhaps with recourse to the Sumerian *Epic of Enmerkar and Ensuḫkešdanna* where three impossible tasks are to be solved? See Alster 1995, 2324.
236. On the prestige of and individuals associated with chariots see Waetzoldt 2014–16, 617b–618b. As pointed out to me by S. Helle, this may well have recourse to the "heroic" genre too.
237. First noted by Gurney 1956, 160, and followed by Ottervanger 2016, 35.
238. Ottervanger 2016, 38.
239. With thanks to S. Helle for pointing this out to me. On the self-referentiality of cuneiform literature see most recently Helle 2023, 93–107 (with previous literature), and esp. 103 on metonymy. Annus 2024, 122, compares this scene with Ninurta's chariot return to Nippur in *Angim*.
240. In addition to previously cited literature see Zgoll 2003, 181–203, for PMN as "Reziprozität als Norm".

text's structure. The narrative is itself one that plays in reversal. Thus, the king is depicted as ambivalent in contradistinction to the active roles they play in traditional "epic" texts. The divine nature of the "epic" protagonist and intervention of the gods is done away with. And the learned profession of doctor is rendered a cunning device by which GN can exact his revenge.

Further, the recognition of this type of humour reflects on this text's use in the scribal curriculum. That the PMN was part of scribal training in at least Neo-Assyrian Sultantepe and Neo-Babylonian Nippur is confirmed by the colophon of STT 38 and a student's fragment found in Nippur. To a similar end, *Ninurta-pāqidāt's Dog Bite* is another humorous text used for didactic purposes, aiming to aid the students in memorising complex Sumerian names.[241] Both the PMN and *Ninurta-pāqidāt* are discussed together as examples of humorous Mesopotamian texts, but they share more than this: as *Ninurta-pāqidāt* familiarises the student with Sumerian, the PMN does likewise with the "heroic" idiolect. It is even possible that both texts were introduced to scribes at the same level of education. The colophon of *Ninurta-pāqidāt* (IM 78552, 35) reads: [*ana*] *šitassī šamallê šaṭir*, "inscribed [for] the recitation of apprentice scribes". The PMN colophon on STT 38 indicates the text was for the reading of one Qurdi-Nergal, written by the *šamallû* Nabu-reḫtu-uṣur. However, it is likely that Qurdi-Nergal was also a *šamallû* at the time Ms. A was written, given that he is called as such in the colophon of STT 192, dated two months before Ms. A was written.[242] The PMN is, therefore, another example of didacticism via humour in the training of Mesopotamian scribes.[243]

There is also bearing on the history of literature and genre. The *Batrachomyomachia* is frequently cited as the earliest example of mock-heroic texts. The analysis above has demonstrated that the spirit of the mock-heroic was very much alive in first millennium Mesopotamia, and thus centuries before the Greek witness.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to show the benefits of employing a strictly structuralist approach to the topic of parody in ancient Near Eastern literature. More often than not, scholars have been content to label texts parodies, when in fact the texts exhibit different hypertextual relationships. Either this, or one text, which is termed a parody by one scholar, is subsequently labelled a caricature or a pastiche by another. But if we want to convey, as accurately as possible, the textual procedures a text engages in, and moreover, not inadvertently overlook through loose terminology and intellectual shortcuts any of the

241. See George 1993, 63–72; D'Agostino 2014, 69f.; fn. 30, above.

242. *Per* Ottervanger 2016, 45; *contra*, Pearce 1993, 186.

243. See Milstein 2022, 253–268. Cf. now Zaia 2025, 146f. with esp. fn. 115: "There are some hints that, as with *The Doctor of Isin*, the story contains (or actively incorporated) other material from the school curriculum … However, there is not enough compelling evidence to conclude that *The Poor Man of Nippur* was purposefully designed around specific pedagogical aims. The parallels to curricular material may have nonetheless added to its appeal as a composition that could be used to teach students". Zaia would instead emphasise the "normative behaviors and cultural expectations" (147) established by the tale (given the socio-political overtones and transgressive, negative, but humorous model of GN) as a means of enculturating students.

erudition of the scribes who bequeathed us these tablets, we should no longer be satisfied with such an approach. Genette's system offers an alternative. The writer does not intend to censure the use of the term parody or advocate solely for Genette to the detriment of other approaches. Nor does he necessarily expect the terminology used in this paper to become the standard for Assyriology — cf. Genette's own self-deprecation in *Palimpsests* (1997, 26) regarding the adoption of his terminology: "I hold no real hopes for its future". Whether one uses the phrase "parody of genre", or "imitation of genre", might even be considered to boil down to semantics. The emphasis lies, instead, on drawing attention to the subtle, yet crucial differences between creative textual practices. This has a knock-on effect on determining whether a piece of cuneiform literature is humorous or not, a question which, bar obvious cases and textual instances of semantic incongruity, has proven challenging. For even before doing so, the survey of texts above has shown that a more sensitive approach is required to better elucidate the hypertextual relationships between texts typically termed parody. Only then should one begin to comment on the text's humour.

Using the strict definitions of parody advocated in this paper, namely the playful transformation of one (or a few) hypotext(s) by one hypertext, shows the phenomenon to be as yet unattested in ancient Near Eastern literature, at least at the textual level. There are singular instances of parody confined within specific texts by way of allusions, but no whole work that meets this criterion. Transformation is instead confined to its serious mode, *i.e.*, transposition, in the Ancient Near East, as may be seen by the numerous works of ancient translation. In contrast, imitation, whether serious, playful, or satirical, has been identified in abundance. There is probably no singular reason for this, although two suggestions can be made. First and foremost, the fluid nature of ancient Near Eastern "genres", which frequently overlap, comes to mind. Imitation may well have come more naturally to the scribes who worked within this system. The second most obvious reason is the pedagogic contexts in which many of these texts, notably the model court documents, fictitious letters, and legal documents found their form.[244] The purpose of such texts was likely to acquaint the trainee scribe with the idiolects they would need to employ when writing such documents over the course of their career. As such, less of an emphasis is placed on transforming one specific text, but rather on acquiring the conventions necessary to imitate a whole generic corpus. If the vehicles to train such competencies were often humorous compositions, this may well have been due to the need to facilitate learning, as was argued for the PMN above.[245] In the end, however, that parody is as yet unattested in cuneiform literature remains mysterious, though the writer holds out hopes that an example will one day be discovered.

The title of this paper, *mīnu attā malṭarī*, itself a (poor) attempt at a parody of PMN 89 (*mannu attā bēlī*), posited the question: "what are you, my text?". It is hoped that the system applied in the preceding pages helps the modern scholar find the answers.

244. See similarly Matuszak's commentary *apud* Zaia 2025, 150: "what is actually there [are] predominantly parodic texts in the widest sense, which play with 'genre' conventions and are hence particularly amenable to pedagogic pursuits".

245. On this topic see now the detailed and theoretically grounded approach of Zaia 2025, 131–157, esp. 138–140, with arguments to the same effect.

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