

AN ANALYSIS OF THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE TRICKSTER ARCHETYPE CAN BE APPLIED TO THE GODDESS INANNA/ISHTAR

Leana Wessels

Department of Ancient Languages

University of Pretoria

E-mail: wessels.leana@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Inanna/Ishtar is regarded as the most important goddess of the Sumerian pantheon, yet she disrupted the social order and distorted the normative boundaries of Mesopotamian society. The classification of Inanna/Ishtar has proven to be problematic. This article attempts to assess the extent to which the trickster archetype can be applied to the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, and how this aspect can illuminate her entire personality. Two myths are studied, namely the myth of Inanna and Enki, and the narrative in Tablet VI of the Epic of Gilgamesh which depicts an altercation between Ishtar and Gilgamesh. The portrayal(s) of the goddess in these myths hold true to the paradoxical nature of the goddess, which can be identified with the trickster archetype. It can be argued that Inanna/Ishtar's identification with the trickster reflects the progressively marginalised position of females in the ancient Near East, although it was recognized that they had some power with which to obtain their goals.

INTRODUCTION

Outline of topic

This article is an attempt to assess the extent to which the trickster archetype can be applied to the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. A description of the goddess will be given, followed by an analysis of the “trickster” archetype. Two myths¹ will be studied which are considered to contain examples of Inanna/Ishtar as trickster. First, the myth of Inanna and Enki: the transfer of the arts of civilisation from Eridu to Erech will be considered, noting in which ways she does or does not exhibit trickster characteristics.

¹ For the purpose of this study, the definition of myth given by Stith Thompson is accepted. He defines myth as “[having] to do with the gods and their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth” (Thompson 1955:484).

This myth was chosen for its significance to both historians of civilization and cultural anthropologists, for it attempts to explain and validate the restoration of a Sumerian city to eminence and prosperity. Furthermore, the author lists and analyses the 94 traits which were considered to be central features of Sumerian urban civilisation (Kramer & Maier 1989:57). Second, the role of Ishtar in Tablet VI of the Epic of Gilgamesh will be investigated, again with a focus on the extent to which Ishtar acts or does not act as trickster. The Epic of Gilgamesh is the longest, and possibly the greatest, composition written in cuneiform Akkadian that has yet been discovered. Interest in the epic comes from the opportunity it offers us to trace earlier folktales which helped to develop the work, and to investigate how the Epic changed in written form (Dalley 1989:39). Following this, there will be a brief consideration of the possible implications of an extended classification of Inanna/Ishtar as trickster or deceptive goddess, as well as the possibility that this reflects upon the view of women in the ancient Near East.

Sumerian religion and mythology is a field much researched in ancient Near Eastern studies. The Sumerians and Semitic peoples were among the first to leave their mark on the cultural development of Mesopotamia (Steinberg, 1988:6-7). In recent years it has come to light that the classification of ancient Near Eastern goddesses has proven to be somewhat problematic. Very few of these goddesses fit only one, easily definable category (for example, a “mother goddess” or a “fertility goddess”). Cornelius (2004:6) has attempted to approach this problem from an iconographic point of view, differentiating between iconographic “types” and acknowledging the individuality of a deity. Cornelius (2004:15) posits that “iconography of the mind” can provide a deeper understanding of systems of belief and cultural symbols in the ancient world. However, the inclusion of relevant iconographic material is beyond the scope of this study.

The goddess Inanna/Ishtar has been repeatedly classified as a fertility goddess and/or a goddess of war. Ringgren (1973:59-60) stated that Ishtar/Inanna appears in several local forms which may be regarded as having their “own individuality”, and also that Ishtar/Inanna as goddess of war was popular in Assyria, whereas her fertility and mother-goddess aspects were emphasised primarily in Sumerian religion. Several scholars do not see a coherency in these, as well as the many other offices attributed to Inanna/Ishtar, and thus try to treat Inanna/Ishtar separately according to her different guises (Harris 1991:262).

This study will attempt to show that the different aspects of Inanna/Ishtar are united in the clearly distinguishable quality of the trickster that is exhibited by her. This characteristic of Inanna/Ishtar has been largely neglected in research.² It is likely that a thorough examination of this characteristic of Inanna/Ishtar will help to illuminate her entire personality. It could also possibly give further insight into the ancients' view on women.

Research problem

When studying religion, it is important to note the complex relationships between the *source material* upon which the belief is based, the *medium* through which this material is expressed and the *origin* of this material, the *people* involved in the religious system and what these people *actually believe*, as well as the *power relations* between the various groups of people involved. The relationship between females and religious systems is especially relevant to this study, although this relationship is difficult to define or investigate. This is particularly true when the only available data comes from ancient Near Eastern material concerning “the divine” and “the female”, as expressed through the existence (or non-existence) of goddesses in texts or other representative material (Fontaine 1989:67).

Trying to trace the development of the “historical goddess” Inanna/Ishtar, who supposedly originated in the Neolithic era, is difficult given the lack of any written data from that time (Fontaine 1989:68). Once the goddess is encountered in the Bronze and Iron ages throughout literature,³ she is thoroughly integrated into the patriarchy to which she belongs.⁴

The complex and problematic history of the syncretism and eventual fusion of the Sumerian Inanna and the Akkadian Ishtar is briefly discussed below. Note that for the purposes of this study the goddesses will be treated as synonymous, since the

² With the possible exception of the article by Fontaine (1988), although her emphasis differs from this study.

³ As with all ancient sources, the texts themselves have an inherent bias. Some texts survive war and natural disasters while others are lost to us. Some only survive in fragments. Others have not yet been discovered. Another problem is the translation of texts from an ancient language which is all but dead, to a modern tongue transfused with modern vocabulary. Thus, we lack a complete written record, and that which we do have is biased and often shrouded in ambiguity and limited in scope (Fontaine 1989:67).

⁴ For example, Inanna acts on behalf of her city Uruk, and the goddess' power is used to support and maintain the institution of kingship (Fontaine 1989:69).

distinctive aspect that will be focussed on (the goddess as trickster) is exhibited by both, and they share other features and characteristics (Harris 1991:261-262).

One must ask whether it is fair to assume anything about the role of women based on the apparent position of the goddess relative to her male counterpart(s). What is the relationship of a text to the society from which it originates? Is it possible to draw accurate and relevant conclusions about the structure of a society based solely on the fantastical representations of their gods?⁵

It is helpful to tentatively classify a text in terms of its degree of verisimilitude.⁶ Both of the primary texts used in this study exhibit a high degree of verisimilitude from the viewpoint of the intended ancient audience. The Epic of Gilgamesh was considered to contain historical allusions, and the myth of Inanna and Enki was intended as a charter myth.

Conceptual framework and methodology

The method to be used in this study is a hermeneutical and narrative critical reading of two mythic texts in order to investigate a certain feature of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar which has been largely ignored in previous studies. The meta-theories that form a background to this study are thus philosophical hermeneutics, (narrative) critical theory, and feminism as a form of reception-criticism.

A narrative critical reading of the myths allows the researcher to consider these narratives as such. Since the story, as well as the characters (Inanna/Ishtar in particular) can be dealt with in their capacity as characters in a narrative, their representation and/or characterisation is significant. This approach is thus empirically verifiable in terms of narratology and narrative criticism. In other words, conclusions should be drawn from the events represented in the narrative, rather than speculation or extrapolation.

In the 1960s, a feminist critique of male-dominated societies started to emerge.

⁵ An answer to these questions will be attempted by applying the theory of literary hermeneutics.

⁶ According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (2008), verisimilitude is defined as the appearance or semblance of reality in narrative texts. The action presented should either be convincing according to the audience's experience or knowledge, or the audience must be willing to accept improbable events as "true" within the context of the story (as in science fiction). A text based on (purely) referential discourse exhibits a high degree of verisimilitude, while a text which is largely symbolic or expressive exhibits a lower degree of verisimilitude.

For example, Radford-Ruether (2006:2) has propagated her dissatisfaction with the way in which women have been marginalised throughout the whole of religious history. In fact, the question of whom or what defines the “norms” in society, and how this influences research in the social sciences, has become central to many scholars (Brown, 1997:12). In ancient studies, this concern, amongst others, has been addressed through feminist research (influenced by developments in post-structuralism and post-modern theories). The word “feminism” as used in relation to ancient studies, usually denotes an attempt to view ancient material from a new perspective that emphasises the point of view of groups regarded as “marginal” or outside of the cultural mainstream (Brown 1997:13). Yet the aim is not necessarily to invert the status quo or to replace a male-centred world-view with a female-centred world-view, but to consider many different perspectives before drawing conclusions that may stem from the perspective of only one group (Radford-Ruether 2006:2-8). A feminist reading of the myths as employed in this study aims to reflect awareness that the goddess Inanna/Ishtar is a female divinity that reflects male constructions of the female or feminine, at least to a certain extent. It is thus logical to assume that her role as the trickster reflects an androcentric shaping of the feminine, yet one cannot simply assume a one-to-one relationship between representations of an ancient goddess, and the general way in which females were viewed in the ancient Near East (Radford-Ruether 2006:8).

Nevertheless, one must note that, as per literary hermeneutics, a text functions in a “hermeneutical circle” – it both responds to social reality, and helps to shape it. Trying to understand a narrative phenomenon requires that the reader recognizes the larger context within which the narrative has its function and, in turn, it requires that the reader to be aware of his/her grasp of the phenomenon and how it influences the understanding and meaning of the larger context (Wachterhauser 1986:23).

The influence of the researcher’s own scholarly bias cannot be underestimated. Any academic work is a product of its time, influenced by the political, social and cultural trends and currents that pertain at the time of its making. The binding of the researcher’s time is apparent both in the choice of subject as well as the treatment of it, yet this quality is inescapable, since all scholars are bound by their historically and linguistically mediated pre-understandings and prejudices (Binger 1997:32-33). Any text functions as an exponent of the time in which and for which it was written, as well as an exponent of the themes and material it deals with (Binger 1997:14). There is thus

a clear connection between the text, the author, the audience, and the social reality in which the text functions. It is possible to draw valid conclusions about the historical situation and salient cultural trends at the time in which the text was written. However, the quality and authenticity of the texts are a major determining factor of the quality of the interpretation.

This study is therefore conducted immanently and reception-critically as the emphasis falls on the content of the text and the ancient and modern audience's understanding and experience of it.

THE GODDESS INANNA/ISHTAR

In order to attempt a classification of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, it is useful to consider the syncretism of the goddesses, as well as her development and characteristics in the religious system(s) in which she functions.

The syncretism of Inanna and Ishtar

“Syncretism”⁷ can refer to the coexistence of ambiguous elements, whether or not these elements originate in other religions or other contexts (for example in social structures), within a coherent religious system (Pye 1971:83, 93). Since religion is not static, different elements from different religions, which are often adopted within the system, can change according to the context (Pye 1971:85-86). Syncretism can also arise due to alienation within a religion with regards to certain elements in its structure that continue to exist merely because of their familiarity, thus causing ambiguity regarding the meaning of the element (Pye 1971:86, 91). This ambiguous clash of meanings must be resolved in order to restore the logical structure of the religion. Michael Pye has proposed three different ways of resolving this ambiguity. First, one meaning can be extended until it eliminates the other (*assimilation*).⁸ The second is the *fusion* of the elements within the system until a single coherent pattern emerges that

⁷ The precise meaning of the term is disputed.

⁸ Although it is tempting to assume that the syncretism between the goddesses happened as a result of the Sumerian language and culture being replaced by the Akkadian language and culture, this offers a reductionist and incomplete explanation for the complexity of the goddess' development.

differs from the original patterns such that a new system has emerged. Third, the different meanings can completely separate (*dissolution*) (Pye 1971:92).

It is unclear how the syncretism of the goddesses Inanna and Ishtar came to be. Also, these goddesses are associated not just with each other, but with Antum, Astarte, Anat,⁹ Asherah, Qudshu, Athena and/or Aphrodite, as well as several lesser goddesses or local goddesses (Cornelius 2004:92; Dever 2005:177, 179; Jacobsen 1979:137, 140; Marcovich 1996:43-59).¹⁰ Plotting the various associations between these goddesses, as well as the reasons for their syncretism is challenging given the lack of evidence. These goddesses could thus have syncretised through assimilation, fusion, dissolution or a combination of the three.

However, the goddesses Inanna and Ishtar are very closely linked and share various qualities, such as their aspects as rain goddess, goddess of war and goddess of the morning and evening star. The name Ishtar (Ištar) goes back through the form Eshtar to ‘Attar and his female counterpart Astarte (‘Aṯtart) (Jacobsen 1979:140-141).

The development and characteristics of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar

To understand the development of the goddess Inanna/Ishtar it is necessary to consider some important factors of the religious system(s) in which she functioned, as well as the development of the system(s).

One way that people (both ancient and modern) use to describe religious systems is through metaphors, even though this method has its limitations¹¹. Jacobsen stresses the importance of the experience of the “numinous” in Mesopotamian religion, and how this features in the three religious metaphors with which he describes the progression of Mesopotamian religion (Jacobsen 1979:5, 11).

In Mesopotamian religion, this experience of the numinous was considered to be an imminent rather than transcendent feature of a phenomenon/deity.¹² There exists,

⁹ Dever lists Qudshu, Asherah, Astarte, Ishtar and Anat as different names for the same goddess.

¹⁰ For example, Ishtar of Arbela can be equated with the Assyrian goddess Mullissu, and Ishtar of Nineveh’s counterpart is the Assyrian Ninlil (Cornelius 2009:15)

¹¹ Ancient metaphors are bound to have meant something different to the people who originally used them than for modern researchers. The limitations of the human nature of religious metaphors should be taken into account, since the purpose of the metaphor is to point to something beyond this world from which it originates (Jacobsen 1979:3-5).

¹² Thus, the “numinous power” was considered to be the external evidence of an indwelling spirit which acts as cause and/or stimulant (Jacobsen 1979:5-6).

therefore, a relationship between the name of the (external) thing, the god's name (as well as his place of dwelling), and the immanent power of the god. The form of the god could be adjusted to the salient feature, or could be expanded to variations of the interpretation of the underlying numinous power, thus giving way to plurality and differentiation in the religious system (Jacobsen 1979:6).

The first or earliest metaphor that Jacobsen describes is that of the bound, intransitive numinous power in phenomena that were important for survival. Accordingly, powers of fertility and yield were given priority (Jacobsen, 1979:26). In this metaphor, Inanna/Ishtar¹³ was the goddess of the communal storehouse, while her groom Dumuzi/Tammuz was the "one great source of the date cluster".¹⁴

In the third millennium, the dangers of war and attack intensified (as attested by the massive walls that have been found around cities), and protection came from collective security, especially around the new office of (constant) kingship. Gradually, all the leadership roles in major communal undertakings were united in the king.¹⁵ The impact of this new ruler/saviour figure is reflected in the second divine metaphor of the gods as "rulers" and the universe as polity. Accordingly, the character and importance of gods and goddesses were redefined according to their relationship with the new institution of kingship (Jacobsen 1979:79-81). While other goddesses were demoted or domesticated, Inanna/Ishtar continued to be adored, possibly because of her association with two important mythic cycles central to kingship ideology, namely the sacred marriage and the descent and ascent from the netherworld. Inanna/Ishtar was also the patron deity of the Sumer-Akkadian dynasty of Sargon, which had considerable power and influence (Radford-Ruether 2006:50). The third metaphor resembles a family. The gods act as "parents" and care about the individual worshippers (Jacobsen 1979:20).

According to ancient sources,¹⁶ Inanna is the seventh deity in the pantheon and she is the most important goddess, as well as the most difficult to understand.

¹³ Originally Ninanna[k], "Lady of the date clusters" (Jacobsen 1979:32)

¹⁴ The Marriage of Inanna and Dumuzi was of central importance to the early religious metaphor. Already in fourth millennium texts Inanna is depicted as the dutiful daughter and eager bride; witty, rich, noble and spoiled (Jacobsen 1979:26-32).

¹⁵ Note that the "numinous" power of the ruler figure emerged in abstract qualities such as majesty, energy and socio-political power (Jacobsen 1979:78-79).

¹⁶ The main sources are materials from Sumerian literary compositions that both preserve "Old Babylonian" copies, and reflect views from the third millennium onward. Earlier and later materials were used as complement to these sources (Jacobsen 1979:95).

Inanna/Ishtar's exact relationship to the other gods and goddesses in the Sumerian pantheon is convoluted and confused. Sometimes she is listed as the daughter of An (as in the Epic of Gilgamesh), or she is identified with the wife of An, Antum, since they both represent the power of rain clouds (Jacobsen 1979:137). In other instances she is stated to be the daughter (or granddaughter) of Nanna, Enlil, or Enki (as in the myth of Inanna and Enki) (Ringgren 1973:9). In her earlier role as goddess of thunderstorms and rain, she was associated more closely with her brother Ishkur as well as Ninurta.

This role of Inanna/Ishtar as the goddess of rain and thunderstorms may explain her identification as a goddess of war. In the process of humanizing rain or thunder deities, they are often represented as warriors riding into battle (Jacobsen 1979:137). Her association with fertility is probably due to her role in the sacred marriage. Inanna/Ishtar is also the goddess of the morning and evening stars, and according to the hymn from the time of Iddin-Dagan of Isin, this makes her an arbiter of justice. The same hymn notes her role as protectress of harlots and the alehouse (Jacobsen 1979:139-140).

In trying to define the multi-faceted and complex goddess, Harris (1991:264) states that Inanna/Ishtar is a goddess who incorporated irreducible paradoxes in such a way that she transcended them. The goddess represented order and structure; but at the same time she embodied disorder and anti-structure. Texts and myths about her reveal an entity that frequently disrupts the social order. Harris notes that she can be "wild and savage, excessive in her sexuality and love of war". Her psychology and behaviour reflected, distorted, and ultimately confused the normative categories and boundaries¹⁷ in Mesopotamian society. Yet this negative¹⁸ aspect of Inanna/Ishtar served to define and protect the underlying structures of Mesopotamian society (Harris 1991:263).

For example, in a hymn by the *entu* priestess Enhuduanna, daughter of Sargon,

¹⁷ It is significant that Inanna/Ishtar transcends these categories and boundaries because this highlights an important characteristic of the trickster. Much of Inanna/Ishtar's power and the fascination she holds for humans is linked to this quality. For example, Mesopotamians believed that the transformation between the sexes (which was a quality associated with Inanna/Ishtar) was done in order to teach the people religious fear and reverence (Harris 1991:270).

¹⁸ By defying those boundaries, she showed what they define; and by behaving differently, she illuminated how one should behave.

ruler of Akkad (2370-2316 BCE), Inanna is described as follows:

To run, to escape, to quiet and to pacify are yours, Inanna ...

To destroy, to build up, to tear up and to settle are yours, Inanna ...

To turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man are yours, Inanna ...

Business, great winning, financial loss, deficit are yours, Inanna ...

Neglect, careful preparation, to raise the head and to subdue are yours, Inanna ...

Slander, untruthful words, to speak inimical (words) (and) to add hostile words are yours, Inanna ...

To initiate a quarrel, to joke, to cause smiling, to be base and to be important are yours, Inanna ... (Sjöberg 1986:189-195)

Another example of Inanna/Ishtar's transcendence of boundaries is the androgynous character of the goddess. Several Ancient sources juxtapose the masculine and feminine traits of Inanna/Ishar. She breaks down the boundaries between the sexes by incorporating characteristics of both. Furthermore, she is able to exhibit these characteristics at the same time (Harris 1991:268-269).

Prophetic texts from the eighteenth century prominently feature Ishtar (Cornelius 2009:15). Such texts have been described as "human transmissions of allegedly divine messages", while the prophets themselves act as "direct mouthpieces" of the gods from whom they receive their message (Nissinen 2003:1). It can thus be said that Inanna/Ishtar transcends the boundaries between the mortal world and the realm of the gods.

Inanna/Ishtar also transcends the boundaries between social classes. Prostitutes and kings clearly belong to vastly different social spheres, yet Ishtar considers herself to be the equal of Gilgamesh and acts accordingly (Harris 1991:271-272). Play (*mēlulu*) also forms an integral part of Inanna/Ishtar's personality. The word *mēlulu* was used in reference to dancing, acting, and the arena of war (Harris 1991:274).

Kramer stresses Inanna/Ishtar's sexual ignorance ("I am one who knows not that which is womanly – copulating. I am one who knows not that which is womanly – kissing") (Kramer 1985:117-132). On the other hand, Inanna/Ishtar is strongly identified with female sexuality, and she represents the female side of courtship and sexual union. She is never the dutiful wife and mother, and never patronizes motherhood, childcare or weaving (Radford-Ruether 2006:50). In fact, her association with prostitution and war seems to place her outside the female domestic domain,

while her love of carnage is often highlighted (Harris 1991:269).

Inanna and Ishtar have also been identified with many lesser deities, to such an extent that the name Ishtar could be used as a designation for “goddess” in general. Inanna/Ishtar was also very popular, and different cities worshipped her in different ways with focus on different functions. It is thus difficult to trace how and when her many aspects were developed (Ringgren, 1973:9-10; 56; 59-61).

THE TRICKSTER ARCHETYPE

Many theories have been posited on the possible social role of the trickster¹⁹ in narratives, ranging from “pure entertainment to a psychological steam-valve for critiquing social values to a means of testing and expanding social boundaries”. It is also possible that trickster narratives reflect the vulnerability of those in authority, and it can be said that such narratives comment on the fragility of the social order (Steinberg 1988:2-3; 9-10).

Part of the pervasiveness of the trickster archetype and the confusion regarding the definition of the trickster archetype is due to the tendency of modern scholars to apply this archetype to any character that makes use of deception, thus blurring together at least two distinct character types (Carroll 1984:105). These character types are the “clever hero” (who consistently outwits stronger opponents), and the “selfish buffoon”. The selfish buffoon trickster type was first applied to North American Indian stories by Daniel Brinton (Steinberg 1988:2). This type of trickster tries to use trickery and deceit in order to attain instant gratification, although his elaborate plans often backfire and leaves him/her looking foolish (Carroll 1984:106).

Yet the trickster also serves as a cultural hero. Carroll suggested that the reason for this juxtaposition of a cultural hero and a buffoon lies in a combination of Freudian psychoanalytic theory²⁰ and Lévi-Straussian analysis (Carroll 1984:110-114). The

¹⁹ The theory of “archetypes” was first proposed by Carl Jung as part of his psychoanalytical theory of the Collective Unconsciousness and “primordial images”. These images are described in terms of their potential to respond to the world in a certain way. According to Jung, there is an archetype for every situation in life. The most well-known Jungian archetypes are the Anima/Animus, the Shadow, and the four “universal archetypes”: Mother, Spirit, Rebirth and Devil (Burger 2010:102-103).

²⁰ Note that the main criticism against the “universal” approaches of Freud, Jung and Campbell are that they are not empirically verifiable, and are thus not falsifiable (Carroll

logical structure of myth is based upon a chain of psychological associations which enables the mind to evade unpleasant dilemmas, such as the “Freudian dilemma”. According to Carroll (1984:113) all humans desire both immediate gratification of base instincts,²¹ as well as the development of civilisation. However, some desires (including the Oedipus complex) leads to the destruction of civilisation. This dilemma is resolved in the character of the trickster, who goes to great lengths to gratify his/her impulses, as well as helping to develop culture, allowing for a positive psychological association. On the other hand, the uninhibited gratification of desires leads to the destruction of culture, thus creating a negative association and balancing the conditions of the dilemma in order to resolve it (Carroll 1984:114-115).

The goddess Inanna/Ishtar resolves a second dilemma, namely the existence of a powerful and popular female deity that functions in a patriarchal society. From research in the social sciences, it appears that individuals resort to trickery under certain social conditions, such as a lack of authority.²² The trickster, in this case Inanna/Ishtar, thus uses alternative strategies to those in authoritative positions in order to achieve goals or gain compliance with their wishes. Her use of this power is limited only by the social norms of the society within which she operates (Steinberg 1988:6).

For the purpose of this study, the trickster archetype is taken to have the following characteristics: s/he is lusty and loud, a shaper of cultures, transforms or transcends boundaries, acts as a link between the sacred and the profane, tricks others and is tricked by others (mostly this behaviour has a comical aspect), s/he is usually of low social standing and thus uses wit and trickery instead of traditional forms of power to accomplish certain goals (Steinberg 1988:2-4).

1984:116).

²¹ According to the Freudian psychoanalytical perspective, these urges are eating, excretion, sexual intercourse and any other physical activity that produces a sense of diffuse pleasure. All humans are supposed to have these impulses, although most people learn to inhibit these urges as they mature (Carroll 1984:113).

²² “Authority” is defined as the right to make decisions and demand obedience. It is distinct from “power”, which includes the ability to make decisions *not* allocated to the individual or his/her role, and to act effectively on persons or things (Steinberg 1988:6).

THE CONTENT AND ANALYSIS OF TWO ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MYTHS

In this section, an overview will be given of the content of the two myths that will be investigated in order to determine the extent to which the trickster archetype can be applied to the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. The myth of Enki and Inanna originated from the Sumerian era, while the standard version of the Epic of Gilgamesh originated from the middle Babylonian era.²³

Enki and Inanna: The transfer of the arts of civilisation from Eridu to Erech

This myth of the transfer of the arts of civilisation from Eridu to Erech (Uruk) can be characterised as a charter myth²⁴ or etiology which “explains” the restoration of a Sumerian city to eminence²⁵ and leadership (Kramer & Maier 1989:57).

The basic plot tells how Inanna tricked a drunken Enki into handing over the *me*.²⁶ Inanna was the tutelary deity of Erech. Rejoicing in her powers of womanhood, Inanna decides to journey alone to the temple/palace of Enki, called Abzu, which was located in Eridu (Fontaine 1988:89). When she is close, Enki (who was all-knowing) directed his *sukkal* (vizier), Isimud, to welcome the goddess with food and drink, treating her

²³ The widest geographical spread of tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh occurred during the mid- to late second millennium BCE, although the standard version dates from the second half of the seventh century BCE (Dalley 1989:47-48). The myth of Inanna and Enki was written in the second millennium BCE or earlier (Kramer & Maier 1989:57).

²⁴ The charter-myth theory was developed by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). According to him, myths acts as “the ancient precedent, whether real or fictitious, which justified and formed the institutions that make up the structure of the society in which the myth is found” (Signorile 1972:119).

²⁵ The myth relies on two salient tenets in Sumerian thought. First is the belief in the existence of eternal, fundamental, unalterable and comprehensive powers, duties, standards, norms, rules and regulations known as *me*, which relate to every aspect of the known world and the ancient world-view. Second, some scribes and/or priests believed that these *me* were turned over to Enki (the wise Sumerian sea-god) by An and Enlil. Enki’s temple, Abzu, was located in Eridu. Thus any city wishing to obtain supremacy and pre-eminence in Sumerian civilisation had to do so by getting the *me* from Enki in Eridu (Kramer & Maier 1989:57).

²⁶ The exact meaning of the *me* has long been debated, but for the purposes of this study it is important to note the connection between the *me* and Inanna/Ishtar, since both have to do with antitheses. The *me* include seemingly contradictory powers, duties, roles and standards (such as the art of straightforwardness and the art of treachery; the art of kindness and the kindling of strife, etc.) (Harris 1991:267).

as an intimate colleague (Kramer & Maier 1989:58). Enki and Inanna then start a prolonged and competitive drinking bout. The drunken Enki becomes generous and proclaims that he will present, cluster by cluster (14 clusters in total), all of his precious *me* to his daughter Inanna, and “holy Inanna took them in” (Kramer & Maier 1989:59-63).

Inanna itemizes the 94 *me*, one by one, claiming that Enki gave them to her. Enki, still in his expansively generous mood, calls for his *sukkal* and instructs him to make sure that Inanna arrives safely in Erech. Inanna loaded the *me* onto the Boat of An, but by this time Enki is regaining his senses. He examines his Abzu, and finds the *me* missing. He quickly summons Isimud and, again cluster by cluster, demands to know where they are. Isimud dutifully tells him that he gave them to his daughter (Kramer & Maier 1989:64-66). Enki sends Isimud forth to fetch 50 giants of Eridu to help him seize the boat, but Inanna calls on her *sukkal*, Ninshubur, to help her. Enki tries four more times to have the boat brought back to Eridu, asking for help from 50 *lahama* – monsters from the sea, then the “big fish”, the “watchmen of Erech”, and finally the guardians of the Itutungal Canal. Ninshubur pleads with her mistress, but Inanna is confident that she will succeed in bringing the boat home (Kramer & Maier 1989:66-67).

Finally, Inanna arrives at the Nigulla gate and proceeds to their last stop, the “White Quay”, where the goddess unloads the *me*. On the way she docks at the gate of the *gipar*.²⁷ Eventually she unloads all 94 *me*, as well as some *me* that were not originally given to her by Enki (such as the art of women, allure, etc.) (Fontaine 1988:89).

Inanna plays the role of a “seeker-hero” (who sets out on a quest in order to accomplish some distinct goal) as opposed to the “victim-hero” (who is driven to action by a villain). She thus fulfils the role usually ascribed to a male hero. Yet Inanna resists total masculinisation, since she originally set out on her journey in celebration of her womanly powers, and she is often referred to by epithets such as “daughter”, “maiden”, “woman” and “lady” (Fontaine 1988:91). It is clear then that she acts as an androgynous personality, who incorporates both masculine and feminine qualities. This characteristic can be associated with the trickster, since she transcends

²⁷ Originally the *gipar* was a storehouse, but also the place of the “sacred marriage” fertility rite, as well as the dwelling place of the human participants in the rite (Kramer & Maier 1989:67).

the boundaries of genders and alters societal gender-norms.

In the first section of the myth, it is unclear whether Inanna foresaw the outcome of the drinking bout, or whether she simply made good of an opportunity which presented itself. In either case, she exhibits the quick wit associated with the “clever-hero” trickster archetype: she does not take the *me* by brute force – she simply manipulates the situation in which she finds herself to her advantage.

In the final scene, Inanna also clearly exhibits an important quality of the trickster: she is a *shaper* of societies. She does not simply take the existing *me*, but adds several new *me* that would undoubtedly influence and change the society in which she functions. Her subjects thus viewed her as both a creator and a destroyer (in her office as goddess of war) (Kramer & Maier, 1989:67-68).

In the end, she proves herself the true equal (if not superior) to the foolish “Lord of Wisdom”,²⁸ and by the end of the tale, Enki acknowledges her genius (and thus also the power which she obtained in her role as trickster) and apparently decides that his best option would be to ally himself with her.

The Ishtar-Gilgamesh encounter in the Epic of Gilgamesh (Tablet VI)

The Epic of Gilgamesh is not univocally defined as a myth, yet it is certainly one of the most interesting works in Akkadian narrative literature. It cannot be strictly called a religious text, and the gods are generally depicted in a surprisingly disrespectful manner. The main theme of the Epic is the futility of man’s striving to be able to live forever (Ringgren 1973:71-72). For the purpose of this study, the main focus will be on tablet VI.²⁹

²⁸ It is noteworthy that Inanna is able to trick the supposed Lord of Wisdom in this way (i.e., by using his “own game” against him). Enki is also stated to be the father of Inanna, thus implying a connection between “wisdom” and “trickery” (wit).

²⁹ The Akkadian epic consists of eleven tablets together with a supplement (Ringgren 1973:71). As the text now stands, only tablets I, VI, X, and XI are more or less complete, and 575 out of the 3000 or so lines are still completely missing. The standard version is known from a total of 73 manuscripts extant: 35 that have survived from the libraries of King Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, eight tablets and fragments from three other Assyrian cities, and 30 from Babylonia. At the time of its construction, there were already Old Babylonian Gilgamesh tablets that tell the tale of the integrated Gilgamesh epic. This version was called *Shūtur eli sharrī*, “surpassing all other kings”, and was probably based on an earlier oral tradition (George 1999: xxi, xxvii, xxviii).

The setting is Uruk. After Gilgamesh³⁰ washes himself and puts on clean clothes, Ishtar “looked with longing” at Gilgamesh, and then “proposes” to him, pronouncing a marriage-formula of sorts (Abusch 1986:145). Gilgamesh refuses her, reminding her of the fates suffered by six of her former suitors (the god Tammuz, the *allallu*-bird, the lion, the horse, the shepherd, and Ishullanu the gardener). In fact, he goes into some detail about these victims, each of whom suffered some dire fate (Abusch 1986:149-150).

Ishtar becomes angry and rushes up to heaven “in a furious rage” to plead her case before her father, Anu. She complains that Gilgamesh scorned her, “telling a tale of foulest slander, slander about me and insults too” (Tablet VI, 85). Anu points out that it was she who provoked Gilgamesh, but she insists that Anu give her the Bull of Heaven (the constellation Taurus) so that she may punish Gilgamesh’s arrogance with death. When Anu seems reluctant to comply, she threatens him with violence until he gives in (George 1999:51).

The Bull wreaks havoc in Uruk, but Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu discovers its weak spot and Gilgamesh, “like a butcher, brave and skilful, between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot [thrusts] his knife” (Tablet VI, 145). Ishtar’s tantrum worsens as she “went up on the wall of Uruk-the-Sheepfold, hopping and stamping, she wailed in woe...” (Tablet VI, 150). She gathers her courtesans, prostitutes and harlots and mourns the death of the Bull. Gilgamesh and Enkidu further insult Ishtar by returning to the palace in triumph to boast and celebrate their victory (George 1999:47, 54-55). The rest of the Epic continues the adventures of Gilgamesh.³¹

³⁰ King Gilgamesh (part god, part man) is the strict ruler of Uruk. To divert his attention from his subjects and to give him a worthy rival (and friend), a goddess creates a wild man Enkidu. At first Enkidu lived among the beasts on the steppe, but as his sexuality develops (with the help of a prostitute) he becomes completely human. He leaves the animals and goes to Uruk where he meets Gilgamesh. After a duel, the two decide to be friends (Ringgren 1973:71). Gilgamesh and Enkidu set off for adventure. First, Gilgamesh (despite discouragement from Enkidu) decides to travel to the “cedar forest” to slay the monster Humbaba which was placed there by the god Enlil to guard the forest. He ensures himself of the help of the sun-god and the accompaniment of his friend Enkidu. At this point the fourth tablet is badly damaged, but the next states that the friends penetrated the cedar forest, cut down cedars, and slew Humbaba (Ringgren 1973:71). These events are described in the first five tablets.

³¹ After these events, the Epic describes how the wrath of the gods is excited by the actions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. As punishment for the deaths of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, they cause Enkidu to die. Gilgamesh laments his friend’s death, and is confronted with his own mortality. He goes off, therefore, to seek eternal life by finding the only immortal man,

The depiction of Ishtar in the Epic of Gilgamesh holds true to the paradoxical nature of the goddess, which can be clearly identified with the trickster archetype. On the one hand, she is depicted as a compassionate goddess who “cried out” in despair at the destruction of mankind by flood. On the other hand, Ishtar is depicted as lusty, aggressive, vindictive and vengeful in Tablet VI. That both these aspects were incorporated into the Epic of Gilgamesh suggests that the author was comfortable with the oxymoronic character of the goddess (Harris 1991:263-264).

The entire episode in Tablet VI is slightly strange, since Gilgamesh never explicitly gives us reason to believe it necessary or even desirable to refuse Istar. One wonders then why Gilgamesh is so set in his belief that a relationship with Istar would end badly for him (Abusch 1986:147). It has been suggested that the marriage-formula used by Istar implies finality and control (rather than a mutual partnership) (Abusch 1986:149). The context of the formula also suggests that the setting of the proposal is in the “infernal regions”. Ishtar is in fact trying to trick Gilgamesh into thinking that he will obtain power and status in the world of the living, while her actual offer is for obeisance to a dead ruler in the netherworld. The proposal constitutes an offer to Gilgamesh to become a functionary of the netherworld, and the details refer to the funeral rites and activities that Gilgamesh will perform in the netherworld should he accept (Abusch 1986:150-152). From this perspective, it is easy to account for Gilgamesh’s vehement refusal. Ishtar is threatening to deprive him of that which he values most (life) and replace it with that which he fears most (death) (Abusch 1986:161).

Tablet VI of the Epic of Gilgamesh provides a valuable example of Ishtar as the trickster (selfish-buffoon). She indeed exhibits several of the characteristics of the trickster: She is lusty (and vocal in her desires). Not only does she (a female) propose to Gilgamesh (a male), she also throws a tantrum in front of her father when she is refused. Ishtar influences “traditional” culture by subtly altering the marriage formula

Utanapishtim (the hero of the flood). After many difficulties and adventures, he reaches the place by “the source of the rivers” where Utanapishtim dwells. He tells the story of the flood and discloses how he got eternal life. The secret is a plant of life, that “makes the old young”, which Gilgamesh fetches from the bottom of the sea. He is on his way home, but while he is bathing along the way, a snake steals the plant away, forcing Gilgamesh to return to Uruk unsuccessful in his mission. The twelfth tablet, which is a translation from the latter half of one of the Sumerian Gilgamesh poems, describes how Gilgamesh calls forth the spirit of Enkidu, and receives a description of the miserable conditions in the land of the dead (George 1999: xxviii; Ringgren 1973:72).

in order to achieve her specific goal. Ishtar tries to use trickery in order to achieve her goal, but ends up being shamed by Gilgamesh, who refuses her, insults her, gets her into trouble by killing the Bull of Heaven, and insults her again by celebrating in light of her defeat.

Ishtar transcends several boundaries – god(dess) to man, female to male, prostitute to king, human to animal, and life to death. Firstly, she breaches the gap between the divine and the realm of mortals by proposing to Gilgamesh (although various other gods and goddesses have acted in a similar fashion – Gilgamesh himself was born of the union between a goddess and a man). Next, it is odd that a female would propose to a male, and as noted above, Ishtar’s proposal is not phrased in a way that implies a mutual agreement. As the goddess of prostitution, Ishtar’s attempt to affiliate herself with Gilgamesh (a king) is also noteworthy since it involves the merging of a strict social boundary. Nor is Gilgamesh the only king with whom she associates herself (her special relationship with kings extends from early times down to Ashurbanipal, the last Assyrian king) (Harris 1991:271). Some of the “lovers” whom Gilgamesh alludes to in this passage are animals, thus suggesting that Ishtar transcends the boundary between human and animal as well. Lastly, Ishtar attempts to force Gilgamesh to join her in the underworld, again transcending a boundary, between that of the living and of the dead. The transcendence of boundaries is an important characteristic of the trickster archetype, thus supporting the notion that the trickster archetype can be applied to Ishtar.

THE STATUS OF ANCIENT WOMEN AND GODDESSES

Radford-Ruether posited that the religious metaphors that reflect the development of civilisation in the Ancient world reflect the changing status of women (Radford-Ruether 2006:44-46). The earlier metaphor of immanent “natural powers” suggested parallel gods and goddesses, with a “fluid exchange of power”. The later metaphor of the gods as rulers in which the pantheon more strongly resembles estate management or political assembly, tended to marginalise goddesses as wives or helpers. Rather than having distinct personalities in their own right, they shadowed the male gods and acted as auxiliaries (Radford-Ruether 2006:45-47). Women in general also suffered a decline in status during this period.

The myths discussed in this study were developed in this time, yet the goddess

Inanna/Ishtar accrued power (Fontaine 1988:88). It is possible that Inanna/Ishtar's seemingly self-serving and deceptive behaviour could reflect the increasingly marginalised position of women and goddesses (Fontaine 1988:92). The function of the trickster goddess thus relates to the intentions of the mythographers and scribal and priestly classes. The goddess who uses power to act on her own behalf may seem to be a frightening figure, and she is thus "demoted" or domesticated to an unstable and "hysterical" woman in the case of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and a Donor-figure³² in the case of Inanna and Enki (Fontaine 1988:99). This allows the author to absorb the female power exhibited by the goddess and to make it acceptable in a patriarchal, androcentric society.

CONCLUSION

It seems apparent then that the trickster archetype can be applied to the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. After discussing the goddess according to her representation in the primary sources and opinions thereof in secondary sources it is clear that she portrays some of the key characteristics of the trickster archetype. In the two myths discussed, she exhibits several of the fundamental characteristics associated with the trickster: she is lusty and loud, a shaper of cultures, transforms or transcends several boundaries (this is especially clear in the Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet VI), acts as a link between the sacred and the profane, tricks others and is tricked by others, and she is associated with a group of lower social status and thus uses wit and trickery instead of traditional forms of power to accomplish certain goals. The application of the trickster archetype to Inanna/Ishtar should lead to a re-examination of the goddess' classification simply as a "goddess of love and war", since it is clear that her personality and domain reflects a much broader and more complex flux of behavioural characteristics and spheres of influence. Furthermore, it can be reasonably argued that Inanna/Ishtar's identification with the trickster reflects the progressively marginalised position of

³² According to Vladimir Propp (1968:79-83), a set of "dramatis personae" are found in myths and other narrative genres which were influenced by principles of traditional (i.e., oral) composition. Such character roles are defined by the actions performed by the various players, and there are seven typical roles which he identified: Hero, Villain, Donor (giver), Helper, Sought-for-person (such as a princess) and "Her Father", Dispatcher (sender) and False Hero. This analysis offers a valuable tool in analysing the narrative.

females in the ancient Near East, although it was recognised that females held some power (such as trickery) with which they could obtain their goals.

As noted in the introduction, the strength of the approach used in this article is that it regards the narratives discussed as narratives, and thus offers conclusions that are empirically supported. A hermeneutical reading of the texts also offers potentially valuable insight into the ancient Near Eastern world-view, and a feminist background offers a more balanced view-point from which the texts can be analysed which avoids the exclusion of previously marginalised groups. One downside when dealing with sources that survive from ancient times is that they are often incomplete, and are often translated from an ancient language which is no longer in use into a modern language which already implicitly reflects the translator's world-view.

It would be a valuable endeavour to consider additional myths, including myths in which Inanna/Ishtar does *not* clearly exhibit trickster characteristics, in order to define more accurately the extent to which she can be characterised as such and aid us in the future classification of ancient Near Eastern goddesses, as very few fit one easily definable category or description.

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