

# Humor and Cuneiform Literature

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This essay has a two-fold purpose: to survey cuneiform texts that can be considered humorous, and to outline, if only in brief, the social context of Mesopotamian humor. Whether or not it is true that man alone of the animals is able to laugh, laughter is loss of inhibition, and the man who laughs is at once most human and most himself. The sense of humor revels in the inevitable gap between what is and what is supposed to be: for example, the pleasant delusion of self-presentation and the self as others see it, the reality of the body and the pretense of clothes and scents, ambition as opposed to performance. Humor is aware of this gap, wit expresses it, and laughter is the grateful acknowledgment of that expression.

Humor is human and universal. People laugh at the same things; what varies from culture to culture is the restrictions the relaxation of which gives rise to laughter and the modes of expression wit will employ. The humorous elements will always be the same.<sup>1</sup> The universal character of humor gives it a low reputation. Among scholars humorous texts are referred to as "popular literature," "folk sayings," or the like. This is true insofar as humor belongs to what may be considered universal expression, which is not bound by any language or culture but appears in identical forms in different times, places, and levels of cultural development. Yet the notion of "popular literature" is inexact if one adopts the view that humor is produced by the few for the enjoyment of the many. Paradoxically humor is often the most characteristic and revealing portion of a literature, as it tends to stress reality at the expense of ideology.<sup>2</sup>

If humor is universal in human society it seems absurd to assert it was unknown in Mesopotamia, although this has been done. To quote Contenau, "on ne voit pas rire le

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1 A concise discussion of the nature of humor is that of Franz Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* (Leiden, 1956), 1f. I owe many insights to his analysis. I am considering here humor as a literary phenomenon. Wit has been studied extensively by medical men; introductions to that literature will be found in G. Bateson, "The Position of Humor in Human Communication," *Cybernetics, Ninth Conference*, ed. H. von Foerster (Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, 1952), and J. H. Goldstein ed., *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (New York, 1972). The medical aspects of humor within cuneiform literature were briefly touched on by J. V. Kinnier-Wilson, *AS* 16 (1965), 297.

2 For the relation of humor to the study of society there is an analysis of the Sumerian proverbs by E. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs* (Philadelphia, 1959), 285f. Somewhat the same approach was used by I. M. Diakonoff in his "Obščestvennye otnošeni ja v šumerskom i vavilonskom fol'klоре," *VDI* 1966, No. 1, 9-27, often with original interpretations.

Mésopotamien; il semble ne pas connaître le délassement.”<sup>3</sup> Reasons for this stifling of the humorous sparks in cuneiform literature are not far to seek; the difficulties offered by the texts themselves, which for the modern reader entail a ponderous philological approach that leaves little energy for humor to inspire. Wit at its best is quick and natural and our understanding of ancient modes of expression far from either. The second reason lies in a common assumption that the ancient Mesopotamian always took himself and his way of life seriously. The scholarly and religious predilections of some of the modern editors of ancient texts have led them to see scholarly and religious purpose in whatever texts they choose to deal with.<sup>4</sup> I hope to show here that in some cases a humorous interpretation is defensible.

An early humorous text is the “Tale of the Three Ox Drivers from Adab,” known from two Old Babylonian copies published by de Genouillac as a “hymn in honor of the kings of Adab.”<sup>5</sup>

1.	ku!-li-li eš <sub>5</sub> -àm	dumu adab <sup>k</sup> i-ke <sub>4</sub> -ne
2.	du <sub>17</sub> in-da-ab-tuk-uš-àm	di-da ab-kin-kin-e
3.	inim íb-ta-an-šár-šár-eš-àm	lugal-e an-ta ba-an-gi
4.	lugal-me	gu <sub>4</sub> -da-ri ì-ak-e-dè-nam
5.	gu <sub>4</sub> lú-aš-a-kam áb lú-aš-a-kam	giš <sup>š</sup> mar lú-aš-a-kam
6.	enmen* bí-tuk-un-da-nam	a nu-mu-un-da-gál*
7.	lú-gu <sub>4</sub> -da-ra a ù-um-te-si	a ga-nag-en-dè-en-e-še
8.	gu <sub>4</sub> -mu ur!-mah-e ù-bí-kú!	gu <sub>4</sub> -mu-ta ba-ra-è-dè-en-e-še
9.	lú-áb-ba-ra a ù-um-te-si	a ga-nag-en-dè-en-e-še
10.	áb*-mu kúm-šè ù-ba-è*	áb-mu-ta ba-ra-è-dè-en-e-še
11.	lú giš <sup>š</sup> mar-ra-ra a ù-um-te-si	a ga-nag-en-dè-en-e-še
12.	giš <sup>š</sup> mar-mu gú!-un! ù-un-du-du-ru	giš <sup>š</sup> mar-mu-ta ba-ra-è-dè-/ en-e-še

3 G. Contenau, *La vie quotidienne à Babylone et en Assyrie* (Paris, 1950), 309.

4 Previous essays dealing with humor in cuneiform literature are F. Ali, “*Min adabi 'Ibazli walfukāhati 'inda 'ssūmiriyyīna wal-bābiliyyīna*,” *Sumer* 26 (1970), Arabic portion 87-100. Ali begins with general remarks about humor and literature, then translates various proverbs, fables, and the “Poor Man of Nippur” into Arabic with explanatory remarks. Brief but full of references and ideas is F. R. Kraus, “*Altmesopotamisches Lebensgefühl*,” *JNES* 19 (1960), 117-32. Works of related interest are B. van de Walle, *L'humour dans la littérature et l'art de l'ancienne Égypte* (Leiden, 1969) and E. M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, 1965). I owe these latter references to K. J. Polinger and William W. Hallo.

5 TRS 80; TRS 83 (lines 5-12); STVC 97. For the possibility that this text may later have formed part of a larger composition, see Falkenstein, *OLZ* 56 (1961), 372-73. His partial treatment of the text in *Indogermanische Forschungen* 60 (1952), 114f. is basic to this one. I am very grateful to Samuel Noah Kramer for the use of collations of TRS 80 he made many years ago. These are indicated with asterisks. All responsibility for readings or interpretations must of course be mine alone.

13. gan ga-ni-súb-en-dè-en gan ga-an-ga-àm-gi-dè-en  
 14. gud-e ba-a-lá-e ab-lá áb a-SÌLA-gar-ra-bi ab-šur-šur-ru amar  
     gišmar-ra zú bí-in-gub  
 15. amar-e a-ba-kam amar-e a-ba-àm\* ba-an-túm  
 16. lugal-e gù\* nu-mu-un-ne-ši-íb-gi sé-ek-rum-šè ba-da-an-ku<sub>4</sub>  
 17. lugal-e sé-ek-rum-ta ad mu-un-di-ni-íb-gi-gi  
 18. [ ] x an-ta ba-an-ge-eš-a  
 19. [ ] gu<sub>4</sub>-da-ri! ì-ak-en-dè-en  
 20. [ ] gišmar lú-aš-a-kam  
 21. [ ] a nu-mu-un-da-gál  
 22. [ ] a ga-nag-en-dè-en-e-[-še]  
 23. [ ] x

(rev.)

80. inim-a-ni é-a x [ ]  
 81. ga-nam lú gišmar-ra-ke<sub>4</sub> [ ]  
 82. gišmar-ra ní-g-gú-un ù-un-[du-du-ru] gišmar-ra è-x [ ]  
 83. mē?\*-líl?-na?\*- ù-da-an-gin é-a-ni-ta ba-ra-è-[ ]  
 84. gu<sub>4</sub>-giš giš-šè sag!-? bí-in-tùm-mu-da é-a-ni-a ba\*-ta-an-x-x  
 85. x\*-x\*-x\*-x\*-x\* DU-x um\*-ma\*-ni ti-e-a  
 86. lugal-e inim-inim-ma ní-g ù-dè-en-šub di šub-ba-ni-ta me-ni  
     ab-ta-an-šub-ba  
 87. . . . . aš . . . . . geštug é ù-un-x ha-mu-da-gi-gi  
 88. gú-un-na-ni aš-du<sub>9</sub>-du<sub>9</sub>-da x-x gur?-gu-la an-dí-b-ba nu-mu-  
     un-da-gi-gi  
 89. lugal-e sé-ek-rum-ta è-da-ni-ta  
 90. lú-aš šà-ga-ni aš šà-ga-ni ba-an-ši-ib-si  
 91. lú dam-a-ni hul an-gi<sub>17</sub>-ga-àm dam-a-ni-ta ba-an-da-gin  
 92. lú me-ni me-ni ba-an-da-šub  
 93. inim-galam-galam-ma dumu adab<sup>ki</sup>-ke<sub>4</sub>-ne  
 94. inim-galam-galam-ma-ta di in-dí-b-dí-b-bé  
 95. ldpa<sub>5</sub>-nigìn-gar-ra pa<sub>4</sub>\*-šeš-ne-ne um-mi-a dingir-adab<sup>ki</sup>-ke<sub>4</sub>  
     dub-sar-bi

Once there were three friends, citizens of Adab  
 Who fell into a dispute one with the other, and went to seek justice.  
 Many were the words they had on the matter, so they went before the king.  
 "Our liege, we are cattle drivers,  
 One man has an ox, one man a cow and one man a wagon.  
 We became thirsty and we had no water.  
 'If the ox driver would get water, then we will all drink'.  
 'A lion might devour my ox, then I would be out my ox!'  
 'If the cowherd would get water, then we will all drink'.  
 'My cow might die of the beat, then I would be out my cow!'  
 'If the wagon driver would get water, then we will all drink'.  
 'The load might crush my wagon, then I would be out my wagon!'  
 'Well, let's all go off together then let's all come back together'.  
 The ox mounts her and mates with her, the cow conceives and drops her calf which



has been amply discussed, so need not be treated at length here.<sup>9</sup> The story is well-known. A poor man buys a goat which he takes to the mayor, hoping the mayor will prepare it for a proper feast and thus relieve the poor man of the obligation of inviting his kin and neighbors. The mayor pretends to be indignant at a "bribe" though he has no scruples at accepting it, and the poor man is sent home with a bit of gristle and a drink of cheap beer. The story of his revenge makes up the rest of the poem. Gurney has shown the same story has parallels in folklore from western Europe even down to minute details of the plot.

In what way do these texts meet our criterion as humor? They require for enjoyment suspension of logic and willing acceptance of the incongruous (at the risk of proclaiming the obvious: the birth of the calf, the poor man's renting a chariot from the king). There is a piquant balance of ingenuity and imbecility that gives each a pleasing internal harmony. No particular linguistic or cultural background is needed to appreciate them, as they appeal to the humor, the playful substratum of human nature, rather than the thoughtful superstructure.

Yet humor is not always simple enjoyment of the human condition. There is always some wit to ridicule the pompous fool, and there is no crueler weapon in his arsenal than parody, either broad and brutal (burlesque) or suggestive and penetrating (satire). Some humorists enjoy the discrepancies of human word and deed; others have ideals that tinge their perception with bitterness and disappointment. One would be sensitive indeed to the nuances of another tongue if one could perceive the subtleties of satire, and no such interpretation would go undisputed.

To begin with obvious parody, we consider a group of texts characterized by assault on the dignity of another by making him appear ridiculous. An appealing example of this genre is the sketch "At the Cleaners." The text portrays a self-important fop who gives elaborate instructions to the cleaner as to how his garment should be cleaned, dried, and delivered to his home:

3. *ša-at ra-ma-ni-ka la te-ep-pe-eš*
4. *si-is-si-ik-tam qá-ap-si-da-am ta-na-ad-di*
5. *pa-nam a-na li-ib-bi-im tu-ta-ak-ka-ap*
6. *qá-ši-it-tim ta-la-aq-qá-at*
7. *me-eḫ-ḫa-am qá-at-nam ta-ra-as-sà-an*
8. *i-na ma-aš-ḫa-li-im ta-ša-aḫ-ḫa-al*
9. *si-si-kà-at qá-ap-si-di-im tu-pa-at-ta-ar*
10. *i-na me-e na-am-ru-tim ta?-di-x-x*

3. Don't do your usual!
4. You should lay out the *fringe* and the *lining*(?)
5. You should pound it face inwards
6. You should pick out the *fuzz*

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9 O. R. Gurney, "The Tale of the Poor Man of Nippur," *An.St.* 6 (1956), 142-62, *An.St.* 7 (1957), 136. The bird episode was clarified by E. Reiner in *JNES* 26 (1967), 185. The most recent discussion is by Gurney in *An.St.* 22 (1972), 149-58. A translation into Arabic and commentary have been made by Ali, *Sumer* 26 (1970), who prefers to see the catching of the birds as gentlemanly pretension on the poor man's part. For the date of the text see E. Gordon, *Bi.Or.* 17 (1960), 140 note 138.

7. A fine *paste* you should concoct
8. You should strain it in a strainer
9. You should open the fringes of the coat
10. You should . . . it in clear water . . .<sup>10</sup>

Finally the cleaner roars in disgust that no one could repeat the instructions, much less carry them out, and suggests the customer complete such an enormous task as cleaning his garment by going to the river and washing it himself. He departs for lunch and leaves the customer expostulating and abusing him.

The most wide-ranging example of this same genre is the *aluzinnu*-text, unfortunately badly broken, which has been a bugbear since the early days of Assyriology.<sup>11</sup> One of the difficulties of the text has been to decide what an *aluzinnu* is. Two views have been suggested: either he was a professional man who could be made the butt of jokes (like the lamentation singer to be discussed below) or else he was a buffoon who made a living entertaining others with parodies, mimicry, and scatological songs. The lexical evidence assembled by Meissner 'points to the second interpretation, as in lists the term *aluzinnu* is preceded by words like *dābibu*, *ākil karši* 'character assassin' and followed by *šāritu*, *naššīḫu*, and *tēzu*, 'flatulent', 'afflicted with diarrhoea', perhaps to be translated more crassly as 'blow-hard', 'windbag', or as metaphors applied to jeerers or harsh critics, as in certain impolite English expressions.<sup>12</sup>

Text	Museum Number	Place of Publication
A	K 4334	<i>II R</i> , 60 No. 1.
B	K 9886	Pinches apud Weidner, <i>AfO</i> 16 (1952/3), 310, with plate xiv.
C	K 6392	Virolleaud, <i>R. Séém.</i> 9 (1901), 257; Langdon <i>Babyl.</i> 7 (1913/23), pl. xvi.
D	K 9287	Boissier <i>R. Séém.</i> 9 (1901), 159-60.
E	K 8321	Meissner, <i>BA</i> 3, 51.

10 Text: *UET* VI/2, no. 414. Edition: C. J. Gadd, *Iraq* 25 (1960), 181f.

11 Text A was first published as *IIR* 60 No. 1, and has been collated several times, most recently by the writer (1974). The most ambitious treatment of the text remains that of E. Ebeling *TuL* #2. He thought it portrayed a dead man desiring to enter the underworld where he is examined by a panel of judges. In a review of the volume in *OLZ* 37 (1934), 411f., von Soden pointed out that the text is in fact a parody in the form of a dialogue that seems to spare no aspect of Mesopotamian scholarly endeavor, and it is his view that I have enlarged upon here. For further remarks on this text there is Ebeling in *MAOG* X/2 (1937) and an important contribution by Meissner in *MAOG* XIII/2 (1940), 4f., who suggested the *aluzinnu* was a professional clown. W. G. Lambert plans a new edition of this text utilizing unpublished fragments, hence only the better preserved portions are considered here.

12 Meissner loc. cit. *CAD* A/1, 392 is more cautious, preferring to leave the matter open. It should however be noted that the entry in the *Lú*-lists (see the lexica s.v. *kalû*, *aluzinnu*), which corresponds to the *aluzinnu*, also corresponds to the *kalû* or lamentation singer, perhaps on the basis of the posture adopted while performing his office. The subsequent entries having to do with excretion might have been entered by attraction to *lú-ḫal-tuš-a* and not really refer to an *aluzinnu* at all.

B and D could be parts of the same tablet; E might well be part of A. All texts collated, readings based on collation are marked with an asterisk.

The text begins (A 1-37, as far as preserved) with a list of deities and cities, which in their present form do not correspond. For example, Inšušinak is paired with Ekallāte (line 11). This list may be intended as humorous insofar as it is mixed up, but it may be a quite independent composition.<sup>13</sup>

In A. col. ii (Bi:22-24) the *aluzinnu's* self-prediction begins:

6. *ni-šu pa-lā<sup>2</sup> ḥa e-li-i*
  7. *a-na-ku na-pa-a-ša a-li-i*
  8. *ni-šu kun-zu-ba e-li-i*
  9. *a-na-ku nu-uz-zu\* za a-li-i*
  10. *ki-na-ku ki-i ma-ḥal-ti*
  11. *ri-da-a i-šu ki-i na-ḡ-bal-ti<sup>14</sup>*
  12. *za-am-me-ra-ku ki-i a-ta-ni*
  13. *šar-ra-qu ik-ki-bu-ú-a mim-mu-u a-ma-ru ul e-zib*
  14. *bu-bu-ta ra-ba-ku a-kal-la tá-ap-ša-ku*
  15. *I (bán) uš-tar-ra 3 (bán) a-pat-tan*
  16. *a-di KÁ 1 Pl ú-ma-al-lu-u ul a-ta-al*
  17. *i-na ku-re-e-ti i-na ar-ra-ka-a-ti*
  18. *i-na MUNUS.MEŠ šá ki-i ia-a-ti ul i-ba-aš-ši*
  19. *mi-na-a-ti ana pe-e-ri pa-ni ana bu-ši maš-la-ku*
  20. *la-a-na ki-i raq-qí še-ḥa!-ki ul am-ma-šal-ma*
  21. *ul-la-ma-a-ku bal-ta-ku-ma*
  22. *ki-i ma-ši ḥa-mi-ri i-ra-man-ni-ma-a-ku*
  23. *ki-i šá al-lu-ut-tu ḥa-zu*
  24. *a-na IGI-šú u EGIR-šú is-sa-na-ḥu-ra-ma-a-ku*
6. The lion can terrify;
  7. I can roar aloud (too).
  8. The lion can switch its tail;
  9. I can wag my tail too.
  10. I am trustworthy as a sieve,
  11. *Reliable as a pitfall.*<sup>15</sup>
  12. I sing like a jenny,
  13. Stealing is an abomination to me—  
Whatever I see doesn't stay where it was.
  14. I've waxed large from starvation and enormous from eating
  15. Ten quarts for breakfast and thirty for dinner,
  16. I don't rest till I've filled the "bushel" to the brim.<sup>16</sup>
  17. The long, the short of them

<sup>13</sup> Ebeling's attempt to rearrange the entries is not justified by the original, nor is his emendation of line 20, which should read *tar-ma-as<sup>k</sup>i*.

<sup>14</sup> These lines make unusual use of alliteration, avoided in serious Akkadian poetry; J. V. Kinnier-Wilson, "Desonance in Akkadian," *JSS* 13 (1968), 93-103.

<sup>15</sup> Literally, perhaps: "I hold my followers like a pitfall."

<sup>16</sup> No doubt a reference to his belly.

18. Among women there is none like me!<sup>17</sup>
19. My limbs are elephantine, my face a hyena's.
20. In stature tall as a tortoise, I have no equal.
21. I am vigorous and lively;
22. So much would my lover adore me
23. Like a snared crab
24. He would keep running around, backwards and forwards (from me).<sup>18</sup>

In A col. iii (= B ii, 1<sup>1</sup>-9<sup>1</sup>) the *aluzinnu* tells of his world-wide adventures:

5. Á ÍD GIŠ.MÁ.GURg x [            ]
  6. LUGAL DILMUN<sup>ki</sup> KI.LUH-šú iš-[            ]
  7. GI.MEŠ a-na e-pé-ši te- [            ]
  8. ia-a-ti GIŠ.MÁ.GURg qal-la-tam re-dam-ma [            ]
  9. a-na DILMUN<sup>ki</sup> a-na ni-bir-[            ]
  10. a-na gu-se-e a-na šu-li-[            ]
  11. a-na <sup>d</sup>iš-tar a-an-ni-bit [            ]
  12. a-na <sup>d</sup>ni-ga-na a-an-ni-gi-[iš            ]
  13. a-na ša-di-i ša pur-ru-[            ]
  14. a-na pa-ši-ri a-na pa-šá-a \*-lri            ]
  15. a-na iš-bar a-na hi-li-ba-[na            ]
  16. a-na hi-li-ba-na a-na-ku-ma i-[            ]
  17. a-na ti-li ha-as-ba-ti šá-qú-[            ]
  18. a-na šá-an-da-lip-pi a-na še?-[            ]
  19. ù ba-ši a-la-[ki            ]
  20. iš-tu tuk-riš e-ru-ba-[            ]
  21. ina tuk-riš UKKEN šá-ki-in-ma a-na-ku az-zi-iz
  22. be-el par-ši il-qu-ú te-re-e-ti
5. "On the river bank a boat . . .
  6. The king of Dilmun . . . -ed his pole (?)
  7. You . . . reeds to make [            ]
  8. Bring the little boat to me . . .
  9. To cross over to Dilmun,
  10. To go up to Gusi."
  11. I cried to Ištar,
  12. I implored Nigara
  13. to divide (?) the mountains,
  14. to the solver to solve . . .

17 Line 17 has given some the idea that the "Spasmacher" was a woman; von Soden, loc. cit; Böhl, *Opera Minora* (Groningen, 1953), 319; van Dijk, *Sagesse*, 99; though I would take it to mean just the opposite. The performer may have dressed as a woman for his first act, then appeared in different costume when he satirized the professions.

18 The use of "antithesis" in line 13 is the reason for my choice of 'starvation' for *bubūtu* rather than the expected 'sustenance', and for the suggestion that the ardent lover in lines 22-24 is actually frantic to avoid his mate. Analogous irony is used in the well-known American folk song: "It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry; the sun so hot I froze to death, Susanna don't you cry." E. von Schuler, *ZA* 53 (1959), 185-92 considers the ending *-maku* a barbarism that conveys a sense of irrealis. This is quite in harmony with the tone of the text and the simile here of a trapped crab scuttling vainly to avoid its captor.

15. To Išbar, to Hiliban,
16. To Hiliban I . . .
17. To the lofty mounds of shells,
18. To the *šandalippu*-trees, to the . . .
19. And the sandwaste to go . . .
20. When I reached Tukriš
21. The assembly was convened in Tukriš, I took my place;
22. The presider of fates took the oracles . . .

In A col. "i" rev. (=D iii, E iii) appears a series of remarkable "legal provisions," perhaps the *aluzinnu*'s address to the assembly. An example is E iii 4<sup>1</sup>-7<sup>1</sup> *šum-ma mu-ša-i-[ru] a-kil LÚ.DAM.GÀR [ ] at\*-tu-nu-ma DAM. [GÀR] [ ] x mu-ša-i-ra*, which perhaps might be rendered "If a frog is devouring a merchant, then you mer[chants should eat] a frog."

The *aluzinnu* extols his knowledge of the crafts:

(D ii)

7. *a-lu-zi-in mi-na-a te-le-e'-i*
  8. *a-ši-pu-ta ka-la-ma a-na ŠU<sup>II</sup>-ia-ma ul uš-ši*
  9. *a-lu-zi-in ki-i a-ši-pu-ut-ka*
  10. *um-ma É MAŠKIM ú-kal A.GUB.BA.A DU-an*
  11. *MÁŠ.HUL.DÜB.BI-e a-rak-kàs*
  12. *pa-ra-a a-kàs-ma ŠE.IN.NU ú-ma-al-la*
  13. *šip-pa-ta a-rak-kàs-ma i-šá-ta a-qad-ma ana ŠAG a-nam-di-na*
  14. *i-ta-at É ù sa-ḫi-ra-ti-šú e-zib*
  15. *MAŠKIM šá É šá-a-šú MUŠ ù GÍR.TAB-ma ul in-ne-zib*
7. *Aluzinnu, what can you do?*
  8. *Of the whole exorcist's craft nothing's beyond me!*
  9. *Aluzinnu, how do you exorcize?*
  10. *Here's how: I occupy the haunted house, set up the holy water;*
  11. *I tie up the scape goat,*
  12. *I skin a donkey and stuff it with straw;*
  13. *I make a bundle of reeds, light a fire, and throw it inside;*
  14. *I spare the boundaries of the house and its surroundings.*
  15. *But the demons in the house, the serpent, the scorpion, are not spared!<sup>19</sup>*

The next section of the preserved text is a parody of a menology where for each month the *aluzinnu* gives a menu, supposedly quoting a prescriptive original (A rev. "iii" + C).

- 4<sup>1</sup>. [IT1] DU<sub>6</sub>.KU *mi-nu-ú ú-kul\*-ta-ka*
- 5<sup>1</sup>. *i-ku-ku ina ka-ra-ši u bi-iq-na šá kur-ki-i*
- 6<sup>1</sup>. *ina pap-pa-si ta-pat-tan*

19 For a different rendering see A. L. Oppenheim, *JAOS* 61 (1941), 271. The *CAD*, s.v., saw that the *aluzinnu* burned down the house but regarded that as mere ineptitude. But the joke is that he burned the house down to get rid of its demon! He goes on to give his laundering technique, no doubt involving immersion in filth, when the text breaks off.

- 7<sup>1</sup>. ITI.APIN.DUG.A *mi-nu-ú u-kul\*-ta-ka*  
 8<sup>1</sup>. *su-un-gi-ra i-na lab-ti*  
 9<sup>1</sup>. *u šip-pa-ta ina KU.NU. LUH ta-pat-tan*

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- 10<sup>1</sup>. ITI.GAN.GAN.E *mi-nu-ú u-kul\*-ta-ka*  
 11<sup>1</sup>. *ka-bu-ut ANŠE.EDIN.NA ina a-za-an-ni*  
 12<sup>1</sup>. *ù IN.NU.RI šá ZIZ.A.AN ina ki\*-sim\*-mi ta-pat\*-tan*

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- 13<sup>1</sup>. ITI.AB.BA *mi-nu-ú u-kul\*-ta-ka*  
 14<sup>1</sup>. *bi-na-at UZ qa-bi-e šá ina ba\*-ši šu-nu-lu*  
 15<sup>1</sup>. *ù ra-bi-ik ka-mu-ši šá ID BURANUN*  
 16<sup>1</sup>. *Ì.NUN.NA ta-pat-tan*

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- 17<sup>1</sup>. ITI.ZÍZ.A.AN *mi-nu-ú u-kul\*-ta-ka\**  
 18<sup>1</sup>. *ša pu-uḫ-ri šu-uḫ-ḫu ša ANŠE zi-ka-ri*  
 19<sup>1</sup>. *ze-e UR.KU ze-e nam-ša-a-ti tu-ma-la?-ma ta-pat-tan*  
 20<sup>1</sup>. *ú-ul tag-da-mar šin-ni kil-zap-pi*  
 21<sup>1</sup>. [ r] *i-ka ú-šar-ri-pu*

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- 4<sup>1</sup>. In *Tašritu* what is your diet?  
 "Thou shalt eat spoiled oil on onions  
 And plucked chicken feathers in porridge."  
 7<sup>1</sup>. In *Araššamma* what is your diet?  
 "Thou shalt eat -weed in turnips  
 And . . . in . . ."  
 10<sup>1</sup>. In *Kislīmu* what is your diet?  
 "Thou shalt eat donkey dung in bitter garlic  
 And emmer chaff in sour milk."  
 13<sup>1</sup>. In *Tebitu* what is your diet?  
 "Thou shalt eat in butter eggs of a caged  
 Goose stored in sand and cumin infused  
 with Euphrates water."  
 17<sup>1</sup>. In *Šabat* what is your diet?  
 "Thou shalt eat whole a jackass' anus  
 Stuffed with dog turds and fly dirt.  
 You won't have worn out the teeth of a  
 Threshing board . . .

We can characterize the *aluzinnu* as a "prankster who is grossly erotic, insatiably hungry, inordinately vain, deceitful, and cunning toward friends and foes; a restless wanderer upon the face of the earth; and a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies."<sup>20</sup> This is the trickster, a figure well known to anthropologists and folklore specialists, who "is the embodiment of humor—all kinds of humor. He plays tricks on others, he ridicules sacred customs, he breaks taboos, he boasts when he should blush, he is the world's greatest

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20 M. L. Ricketts, "The North American Indian Trickster," *History of Religions* 5 (1966), 327.

clown, and he can laugh at himself.”<sup>21</sup> Among the American Indians the trickster was a mythological figure, and I find no suggestion that any person actually played such a role; but I feel safe in assuming the *aluzinnu* was a clown who performed the same function in Mesopotamian society, especially in ridiculing the cultic professions, and propose “trickster” as a translation of the word. At times the cult may have been sufficiently elastic to accommodate such a person in its own ranks.<sup>22</sup>

Another parody text is contained in a collection of love poems (K 6082). This compares the beloved’s complexion to that of a gecko and her skin to the surface of a cooking pot. She befouls the bridal bower with her flatulence.<sup>23</sup> A similar text (*LKA* 92 and 81-2-4, 294) alludes to the smell of her private parts, then the jealous lover goes on to say:

11. [ . . . ] *a-na šu-ri-ki šá tak-la-te kal-bi*  
*ú-še-er-re-eb KÁ a-rak-kas*
12. [ . . . ] *ú-še-er-r|e-eb KÁ a-rak-kas ha-aḫ-ḫu-ru*  
*ú-še-er-re-eb qin-na i-qan-na-an*
13. *it-ti a-še-ia it-ti e-re-bi-ia*
14. *ha-aḫ-ḫu-re-ti-ia ṭe-mu a-šak-kan*
15. *ad-da-ni-ka ha-aḫ-ḫur-ti-ia*
16. *ina MUH UZU.DIR la te-qer-ru-ub*

[ . . . ] into your body which you are so trusting with

I’ll bring a dog and fasten the door

[I’ll bring in a . . . ] and fasten the door, I’ll bring

in a “watchbird” and it will nest.

When I go out and come in

I’ll tell my watchbird

“Please my watchbird

“Don’t go near the fungus!”<sup>24</sup>

21 Ricketts, 347. For a collection of trickster anecdotes, see Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London, 1956), and from Africa E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford, 1967). I owe this last reference to Peter Michalowski. An excellent study of the whole subject has been made by L. Makarius, “Ritual Clowns and Symbolic Behaviour,” *Diogenes* 69 (1970), 44-73.

22 Is there a portrait of a trickster on the Woburn Abbey Slab (now in the British Museum), time of Tiglath-Pileser III? What appears to be a priest is dressed in a lion costume and grasps a switch (photo in H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* [rev. paperbound edition: Baltimore, 1970], 169).

23 W. G. Lambert, “Divine Love Lyrics from Babylon,” *JSS* 4 (1959), 1-15. To judge from the modern Arabic word for gecko, *abū burayṣ* ‘the leper’, her pallor was not becoming. The *diqāru*-pot was used for cooking over an open fire, hence was grimy and sooty; A. Salonen, *Die Hausgeräte der alten Mesopotamier* (Helsinki, 1966), 2:71f. Naturally washing was part of real “divine love lyrics,” as in Išme-Dagan 9, 180-81 (ed. W. Römer, *SKIZ*, 133, which should read: *n in -m u úr-k-ù-ge a m i-n i-n -tuṣ -tuṣ úr lugal-la-še a im -m a -tuṣ -tuṣ* “My lady washes her holy lap for him, for the lap of the king she washes herself.”

24 Lambert, *Love Lyrics*, 10-11. Fungus was often referred to in the house omens as appearing on the walls, though not necessarily as a sign of uncleanness. The *haḫḫurtu*-bird, recently identified with the raven (Freedman, *JANES* 5 (1973), 123f.), was occasionally used as a metaphor for ‘spy’ so there can be little doubt that the dog and bird were to keep watch in a “house” that was not very secure and none too clean.

No less explicit in the use of scurrilous language is a category of literature we may call "abuse texts," most of which are dialogues between two parties although a few are monologues in the third person. The dialogue has many uses in literature as it has the advantage of requiring a minimum of expository prose between ideas, and contrasting views can be set off concisely. Many of those in Sumerian are of serious intent, polished and witty in their style. Those of the abusive category are not really debates as there is no defense of a position and no reference to the opponent's argument. Each interlocutor confines himself to abusing the other with clever turns of phrase. Only a few of the debates and abuse texts are available in modern editions. Among the unedited texts is a composition "Disputation between Enkitu and Enki-Hegal," a debate "Old School Grad, Come let us Debate," a disputation between two women in Emesal, and a wrangle between two schoolboys who nearly come to blows at the end.<sup>25</sup> Examples of the third person abuse texts are "Engardu, the Fool" and "He is a good seed of a Dog," which latter opens:

He is spawn of a dog, seed of a wolf  
The stench of a mongoose, a *helpless* hyena's whelp  
A fox with a turtle shell, an addlepat mountain monkey  
Whose advice is nonsense.<sup>26</sup>

There are satirical texts in the third person which are more subtle and for the most part poke fun at the vanity and affectations of men, either by using animals in certain stereotyped roles, or referring to men directly, often in a specific walk of life. To consider first the animal genre, we can isolate among the very large corpus of literature centered around personified animals ("fables") a group of obviously humorous and satirical intent.<sup>27</sup> Some are simply jokes, like the one referring to the sang-froid of the mouse who blundered into a snake's hole, "A snake charmer sent me. Peace!"<sup>28</sup> Others of more caustic humorous intent have found their way into what are now called "Proverb Collections," even though most of the material in these collections seems hardly proverbial.<sup>29</sup> One group of jibes

25 S. N. Kramer, "Literary Texts from Ur VI, Part II," *Iraq* 25 (1963), 173f.; van Dijk, *Sagesse*, 89f.; V. Scheil, "Contraste féminin," *RA* 24 (1927), 34-37.

26 Paraphrasing A. W. Sjöberg, "'He is a Good Seed of a Dog', and 'Engardu, the Fool,'" *JCS* 24 (1972), 107-19. For the translation 'turtle shell' see M. Cohen, *JCS* 25 (1973), 206. The monkey figures as author of a plaintive scribal letter; F. Ali, *Sumerian Letters: Two Collections from the Old Babylonian Schools* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1964) and *Sumer* 26 (1970), 90.

27 Animal fables are best known in our own civilization through the twice-told tales of Aesop. For the Near East they form a vast range of material in virtually every language. There is a brief survey of the genre by R. J. Williams, "The Fable in the Ancient Near East," in E. C. Hobbs, ed., *A Stubborn Faith* (Dallas, 1956), 3-26; and for Sumerian by E. Gordon, "Animals as Presented in the Sumerian Proverbs and Fables: A Preliminary Study," *Drevnij Mir* (Moscow, 1962), 226-49.

28 W. G. Lambert, *BWL*, 217.

29 The basic work is Gordon, *Proverbs*, and for the same proverbs two studies by Maurice Lambert in *RSO* 42 (1967), 75-99 and *RSO* 45 (1970), 29-58. For the other proverb collections see Gordon in

centers on the fox: "The fox stepped on the ox's hoof, 'Didn't it hurt?' he said."<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere he brags that his puddle of urine makes up the whole ocean.<sup>31</sup> A few isolated sneers at the scribe occur, much in the spirit of the abuse texts and possibly derived from them, "So the valet's learned Sumerian"<sup>32</sup> or a remark to the effect he cannot even read an *a*-sign.<sup>33</sup> The others could be interpreted as an assault on the opponent's masculinity but are more probably a way of saying that despite his learning he is still a boor.<sup>34</sup> Another favorite target of jokes is the lamentation singer or *kalû*, who is compared to an undeveloped lot, a thwart (?), and of his voice they say, "If he doesn't sing sweetly he is one of the better ones!"<sup>35</sup> His absurd pietism is pilloried: if his boat sinks he wishes the river enjoyment of his cargo; if he slips and falls he is doubtful of the propriety of rising since his accident was a visitation from heaven.<sup>36</sup> The bilingual proverb collections edited by Lambert contain a number of genuine proverbs besides jokes, two of which at least are of a regional or ethnic character.<sup>37</sup> What I would guess to be an example of repartee is the exchange *ù-e-dè ná-dè-en*, to which the lady made reply *dingir zi-ga kú-e*, "Let me lie with you," "Give god the raise!", the functional equivalent of a modern reply to an importunate beggar "God give it to you."<sup>38</sup> Launderers are the butt of "Men say 'I'm dirty'. 'By god I'm dirty too!' says the launderer."<sup>39</sup>

The most subtle varieties of parody leave open the possibility the text should be taken seriously. By "taken seriously" I mean at face value, for satire can often have serious purpose and the humor in it be as bitter as any open denunciation. An elusive example of

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*Bi.Or.* 17 (1960), 150-51. It must be said that less than half of their contents seems to meet Gordon's own definition of a proverb as a "familiar saying, expressing some well-known truth or common fact of experience," *Proverbs*, p. 1. Many look more like excerpts, jokes, fables, or perhaps well-known quotations copied by beginning scribes for pedagogical purposes. For another group of "proverbs" that turned out to be a pretty scribal letter, see M. Civil, *JNES* 23 (1964), 1-11.

30 Gordon 2.65. His translation, like Lambert's in *BWL*, puts the last remark into the mouth of the ox, "it did not hurt." This is on the basis of a Greek parallel, which seems procrustean.

31 Gordon 2.67.

32 A sneer at the scribe's background or a reference to the academic pretensions of an illiterate?; Gordon 2.55.

33 Gordon 2.48.

34 Gordon 2.44 *dub-sar an-ta-me-en lú ki-ta-nu-me-en* "You may be a scribe on top but you are no man beneath"; 1.98 *šà-mà lú-lu7-me-en igi-mà lú-nu-me-en* "You're a humanist within but no human without."

35 Gordon 2.97, 2.98, 2.106: *gala-tu6-tu6-nu-du10-ga bád-gala-e-ne*.

36 Gordon 2.103, 2.180, following the interpretation of Jacobsen on pp. 483-84.

37 A jest on the supposed bisexuality of the bedouin (so Landsberger; *BWL*, 226:1-7) and the litigious habits of the Cutheans (*BWL*, 219:1-2).

38 *BWL*, 227:27-28, with a quite different interpretation. I assume a double-entendre on *zi-ga* is meant. For *zi-ga* in the sense of "sexual excitement" see R. Biggs, *TCS* II (1967), 9f.

39 Cited by Gadd, "At the Cleaners," 187. The saying cited by Gordon, *Proverbs*, on p. 135, "The man with tattered garments says 'mend!' but they are already mended!" looks more like a way of saying the best has been made of a bad job, rather than a criticism of the tailor: "you can't make a silk purse of a sow's ear."

this genre has been the “Dialogue of Pessimism,” which has had as many interpretations as it has had editors, the sure sign of a masterpiece.<sup>40</sup> The traditional title of the work expresses the view of earlier scholars that this was an example of “Oriental pessimism” or “Near Eastern fatalism.”<sup>41</sup> Böhl however saw in it a sort of saturnalia in the Roman sense: the yearly festival when master and servant switched roles. Speiser read the whole as a Plautian burlesque in which a fatuous master mouths clichés and his obliging servant echoes him until the climax of the piece, where first the servant misses his cue and second abandons decorum for a Parthian shot. Lambert saw the text as the musing of a brilliant and mercurial adolescent with suicidal tendencies. If this piece is indeed satire, as I believe it is, it is seriously meant. Speiser was right to draw attention to the parodying aspects of the text but went too far in seeing in it a burlesque, rather than a satire of serious intent. Lambert’s interpretation falls short in that he implies parody has only frivolous purpose. In either case the composition is an effective one.

Another text susceptible to interpretation as a parody is “The Rulers of Lagash.”<sup>42</sup> To quote Sollberger, to whose critical eye I owe this interpretation, “The satirical tone of the composition appears clearly in its deliberate parody of King-List phraseology: the attribution of an impossibly long reign to every single ruler, and the purely imaginary names of most of them; and perhaps also the detailed biographical notes as compared with the terse statements occasionally found in the King List.” We cannot be certain whether the text is a mere incidental item of humorous intent or whether some bitterness and inter-city rivalry lurk behind it. Parody texts may exist among the myths and epics, but so far they have not been identified.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, one may mention scholarly and scribal jokes, usually graphic, which have contributed so many whimsical signs to the lexical lists, picturesque writings that occasionally mislead,<sup>44</sup> and even facetious glosses and commentaries to exercises designed to help master

40 The text is edited by W. G. Lambert, *BWL*, 139-49 (with citation of earlier literature).

41 S. Langdon, *Babyl.* 7 (1913/23), 195-209; V. V. Struve, “*Dialog gospodina i raba o 'smysle žizni'*,” *Religia i Obščestvo* (Leningrad, 1926), 41-59. A study by A. Hofer-Heilsberg cited by A. L. Oppenheim in *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964), 373, which argues the text is a mime, is inaccessible to me. For the crucial last line besides Lambert’s rendering there is Ungnad, *Afo* 15 (1945/51), 74-75 who would have it “if he can outlive me (I’ll be damned)”; and Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 274 “[I wish] then that my lord survive me by only three days!”

42 E. Sollberger, “The Rulers of Lagash,” *JCS* 21 (1967), 279-91. On the other hand R. Jestin in *Annuaire de l’École Pratique des Hautes Études*, IV<sup>e</sup> Section (Paris, 1972), 65, sees it as “un mythe d’origine concernant l’agriculture et ses servants.”

43 The hymn to the pick-axe may be an example; cf. C. Wilcke in *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon*, col. 2141. For a possible joke in an Assyrian royal inscription, see A. K. Grayson in *Afo* 20 (1963), 95. A cuneiform catalogue of texts and authors mentions a text “[NN] wrote at the dictation of a horse” (*a-na pi-i ANŠE.KUR.RA iš-tur*); W. G. Lambert, *JCS* 16 (1962), 66, VI 17.

44 M. Civil, “The Anzu-Bird and Scribal Whimsies,” *JAOS* 92 (1972), 271. A particularly troublesome scribal pun was the writing of an Egyptian personal name Re’e as SIPA-’e in the annals of Sargon II, which was finally explained by Borger in *JNES* 19 (1960), 49-53.

the cuneiform syllabary. This last is perhaps an early example of the rarest and most difficult humorous genre of all: nonsense literature.<sup>45</sup> Some of the glosses (though nugatory) make sense (ab.ba.ni = *a-bu-šu*, but note *a-bu-ni!*). On the other hand ba.za was glossed as masculine and ba.za.za feminine, and tab.ni, theoretically "his doubling," was associated with the *mākisu* or tax assessor. Occasionally a third column could be added by way of "elucidation."<sup>46</sup> Practically any scribe with more than a smattering of Sumerian would have known most of the equivalents were nonsense. Allowance must be made, however, for some who had so much faith in the written word they took the texts as treatises and even incorporated their contents into the regular lexical lists. This confronts us with a difficult problem: how seriously did ancient scholars take these and other "pseudo-scholarly" texts, that is, was the gap between them and genuine scholarly work a matter of humor, even parody, or simply sophomorphism?

It appears that some were convinced these nonsense commentaries had deep significance and might even represent the primeval mutterings of mankind.<sup>47</sup> There is a tendency among Assyriologists to assume Mesopotamian scholars and professional men wasted their intellectual powers on "pseudo-scholarship," yet it seems fairer to suppose that then as now there were a few who built edifices of wisdom from trivia and read arcane significance into every scratch on a tablet.<sup>48</sup> What are we to make of a text like VAT 17115?<sup>49</sup> This is an analysis of é.sag.íl.la into every conceivable syllabic writing and lexical equivalent with an explanation given for each. One can dismiss this as "pseudo-scientific speculative theology" but should at least mention that from the Sumerological point of view it compares not unfavorably with the contributions of some modern orientalists whose names are still rightly revered. I prefer to see in it and other texts like it fanciful jottings and mock-scientific musings, scribal in-jokes, then as now sometimes treated with solemn respect rather than in the spirit in which they were composed. As the huge bibliography on *Alice in*

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45 B. Landsberger, *Die angebliche babylonische Notenschrift*, *Afo Beibef* 1, 170-78; "Zur Silbenalphabet B," in M. Čiğ and H. Kizilay, *Zwei altbabylonische Schulbücher* (Ankara, 1959), 97-116; E. Sollberger, "A Three-Column Silbenvokabular A," *AS* 16 (1965), 21-29; J. Nougayrol, "'Vocalisés' et 'syllabes en liberté' à Ugarit," *ibid.*, 29-39; "Nouveau 'Silbenvokabular A' d'Ugarit (RS 29.103)," *RA* 63 (1969), 83-84.

46 Examples are drawn from Nougayrol, "Vocalisés", 36, 38, and Sollberger, *Silbenvokabular A*, 23.

47 C. J. Gadd, "The Infancy of Man in a Sumerian Legend," *Iraq* 4 (1937), 33-34. A collection of ancient lore on this topic has been made by H. Lutz in "Speech Consciousness among Egyptians and Babylonians," *Osiris* II (1936), 1-27 and F. R. Kraus, *Lebensgefühl*, 123. Modern lore of the same type is collected by A. Sommerfelt, "The Origin of Language: Theories and Hypotheses," *Cahiers d'Histoire mondiale* I (1953/4), 885-902.

48 Tablets with a scribe's first attempts to make wedges have in modern times been thought inscribed in unknown languages, and attempts have been made to decipher these "wedges without words"; W. Eilers, "Keilschrift Curiosa und Entstehung Schriftarten," *An.Or.* 12, 74-81. For an attempt to read designs on cylinder seals, see E. Unger, "Altassyrische Siegelzylinder mit Keilschriftkommentar zur Erklärung von Dämonen," *Proc. 25 Int. Congress of Orientalists* (Moscow, 1960), 191-202.

49 F. Köcher, "Eine spätbabylonische Ausdeutung des Tempelnamens Esangila," *Afo* 17 (1954/6), 131-35.

*Wonderland* shows, nonsense literature is peculiarly susceptible to elaborate commentaries and explanations which one can only hope are themselves not serious in their intent.<sup>50</sup>

A much more obvious bit of academic humor is intended by inclusion of a precative paradigm of the verb 'to break wind' in the Old Babylonian grammatical texts, taking advantage of the ambiguity of the Sumerian original which normally would be understood as 'sit'.<sup>51</sup> More elaborate scribal fancy seems to be the preparation of a splendid marble tablet for a routine garment transfer. This may be compared to the handiwork of modern cranks and connoisseurs of the impractical who present checks to banks drawn on car doors or blankets or who pay their income tax in pennies.<sup>52</sup>

Merely by listing the texts we have not given an account of what the Mesopotamian scribes found amusing. It was suggested that humor exploits incongruity—the gap between what is and what ought to be. As such humor is most often to be found in contexts taboos or restrictions have been violated. Jokes making overt reference to portions of the anatomy or bodily functions not normally referred to in polite conversation were common. The humor was not so much the reference itself as the tone and context of the reference. For example, breaking wind when considered in texts dealing with the behavior of sacrificial animals was not a source of amusement, but the same was a favored subject of witty remarks.<sup>53</sup>

Ugliness and stupidity, and unwashed or dishevelled appearance could be the butt of jokes, as well as supposed regional habits and ways of life. Remarks on sexual practices were made mostly with respect to the *kalû*-singer and animals and include comments humorous because they were made in the midst of intercourse or because they made bald reference to sexual excitement or promiscuity. Sexual deviation seems in general to have been a taboo topic.<sup>54</sup> It is no surprise that the Akkadian verb 'laugh' occurs mostly in connection with the discomfiture of others (as when Anu laughs at Adapa) or in contexts of lasciviousness and flirtation (as when Nergal laughs at Ereshkigal).<sup>55</sup>

50 We face the same problems with the "Bird Call Text," edited by W. G. Lambert in *An.St.* 20 (1970), 111-17. He preferred to see in it serious religious purpose.

51 *MSL* IV, 109. It would be hard to identify downright obscene jokes in cuneiform when so little is known of ancient standards of decency; but *CT* 41.45.76487.10' f., cited in the *CAD*, s.v. *guruš-garaš*, may be an example.

52 The text was discussed by I. J. Gelb, "Hurrians at Nippur in the Sargonic Period," *Festschrift Johannes Friedrich* (Heidelberg, 1959), 183-94. Stone tablets were normally used for important land transactions. A comparable curiosity is Ashmolean 1922.10 (unpub.), a first millennium copy in stone of an Ur III archival text.

53 E.g., Gordon, *JAOS* 77 (1957), 78; *Proverbs*, 495f. The Sumerian equivalent for "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" goes "When the ox has diarrhoea, the trail of dung is a long one!" (Gordon 2.92). A tenth century catalogue of humorous works in Arabic mentions an item entitled "Book of Those Proficient in Breaking Wind," cited in Rosenthal, *Humor*, 6 note 3.

54 Possible exceptions may be *BWL*, 218, IV 3-5, following the interpretation of W. Röllig, *Das Bier im alten Mesopotamien* (Berlin, 1970), 56, a joke about a male prostitute and the self-predication of the *aluzimnu*.

55 B. Landsberger, "šāḫu = 'lachen,'" *ZA* 40 (1931), 297-98. The seeming disparity between

In a stratified society jokes will cluster around types of people who violate ethics or mores or who have an exaggerated sense of their own importance: the man who takes advantage of his position to make misery for others, who commits a gaff or oversteps the bounds of public decency or expected modesty, or who makes a fool of himself by a slip of the tongue or logic. In Mesopotamia cowardice, conceit, ambition, bad manners, deficient education, and inordinate desire provided the background for humorous remarks. Minor officials and low-grade professional men provided most of the *dramatis personae*. The king appeared only vaguely and benevolently, high religious or military dignitaries not at all. This would suggest a "common" milieu for many of the jokes we are discussing.

Yet such an interpretation is inadequate. The expression *ša pî mātīm* or *têltu* 'what the people say' expresses the scholarly view of humor. Humor represents a small portion of any literature and the least esteemed part of it in the eyes of the critics. Broad comic lines were for the groundlings and silly jokes the common man's condiment. The double meaning of "vulgar" applies to much of the humor considered here, and this is what gives us the clue to the scribal attitude towards humor. "Proverbs" were used for an elementary stage of scribal training. Their lowly place in the curriculum corresponded in part to their low reputation in comparison to the masterpieces which became the concern of more advanced students. Humor emphasizes the man as he is, not as he wants to be, and often seemed to cast aspersion on serious purpose and the very goals scribes and scholars had set for themselves. Pasquinades and abuse assault the man and parody the standards and constitution of the society he lives in. In Mesopotamia crude reference to sex, appetites, and emotions was not characteristic of the common man as a class so much as the common man within the individual—the chthonic underpinnings of his own character that an educated man had been "brought up" from and preferred to avoid disclosing. Occasionally the cultivated man took up the weapons of satire and humor that he may have used with abandon as a novice to produce mature and excellent work, but for most literate men dignity and self-esteem were too hard-won and precarious to be challenged or relinquished even in the interests of creativity. Their own "shame," or the base elements of their own natures, the literate saw as predominating characteristics of "common" folk—the ones who had not acquired the humanistic virtues. Thus they held up to scorn what they could not deny.

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laughter and coquetry led Schott (*OLZ* 36 [1933], 520) to argue for the existence of a separate verb in this meaning, but love and laughter alike entail pleasure in surrender of inhibition. Landsberger returned to the question in *ZA* 42 (1934), 163-65, with the same conclusions. Sumerian for 'laugh', *zú-liq-liq*, has been treated most recently by Alster, *RA* 67 (1973), 110. Simple joy and merry-making was *hidûtu* (Sumerian *húl*) which was normally not at the expense of anyone but expressed delight in or satisfaction with merit, beauty, religious concerns, or achievements. Sumerian *i-si-iš-lá* (-lá) meant 'break down', 'give away' to tears or laughter (simply *MSL* XIII, 162).