"Only in Dress?" Methodological Concerns Regarding Non-Binary Gender

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Among the textual sources from the cuneiform cultures of the ancient Near East, evidence can be found of social groups whose gender identity seems to have fallen outside of a female-male binary, though their identity, profession, social status, sexuality, and religious role have all been hotly debated.[2] The most important point of agreement among scholars today is that these groups were closely associated with the cult of the goddess Inana (Sumerian) or Ishtar (Akkadian)—a goddess whose paradoxical character and complex personality are, however, themselves contentious issues.[3]

One of the most striking aspects of gender in cuneiform cultures is the very number of different terms apparently denoting non-binary identities. These include but are not limited to kur-ĝara / *kurgarrû*, *assinnu*, saĝ-ursaĝ, gala / *kalû*, pilipili and *kulu'u*.[4] However, this list quickly pales in comparison with the abundance of words that have been used to describe one or more of these groups in contemporary scholarship: "homosexual," "cross dresser," "bisexuals," "transvestites," "hermaphrodite," "eunuch," "male cult prostitute," "effeminate," "catamite," "berdache," "corybants," "man-woman," "castrated choirboy," "impotent creatures," "erotic specialists," "sexually abnormal creature," "a sexless, probably self-castrated, being"—and so on.[5]

Aside from their occasionally disparaging tone, it is worth noting that these modern terms cut across the various ancient groups. Each new term is most often applied to all the ancient categories, as there is a

2. Taking just a few examples from the last ten years, see Gabbay 2008; Assante 2009; Zsolnay 2013; Nissinen and Svärd 2018; and Peled 2017.

3. See e.g. Harris 1991 and Bahrani 2001, ch. 7.

4. It is debated whether the saĝ-ursaĝ's were the Sumerian equivalent of the Akkadian *assinnu*'s. In this article, the two are provisionally treated as separate categories.

5. See, respectively, Gabbay 2008: 50, ibid., Assante 2009: 44, Harris 1991: 276, ibid., ibid., *CDA* s.v. *assinnu*, George 2006: 175, ibid., Sasson 1994: 301, Fales and Postgate 1992: 24, Parpola 1997: civ, Dalley 2000: 161, Parpola 1997: xcvi, Roscoe 1996: 213, Sladek 1974: 89, and Parpola 1997: xcii.

marked tendency to gloss over the differences between them. Consider the following statement by Andrew George, commenting on a king being referred to as a *kulu'u*: "The insult becomes sharper when one considers that a *kulu'u*, if he was like an *assinnu*, took the female role in homosexual intercourse."[6] Apart from the view of the "female" role in homosexual intercourse as naturally insulting, which George seems not to question, the statement shows how a perceived sameness between the ancient terms can be used to stretch the evidence from one to the other.

This same tendency towards seamless equations applies equally well to the modern terms. That a gala can generally be regarded as "a eunuch, an impotent man, a homosexual, or a cross dresser,"[7] reveals a frame of thought in which these identities are seen as somehow the same. For example, Gwendolyn Leick states that "[o]ne factor which speaks in favour of the social integration of asexuals, homosexuals, etc. is the very range of terminology to describe them."[8] But that range is clearly not present in Leick's own argument. The list "asexuals, homosexuals, etc." is rendered bizarre both by its juxtaposition and by its abruptness: exactly what propinquity is there between asexuals and homosexuals? and what other identities does this "etc." hide? The repeated slippage in modern scholarship between homosexuality and transgender, effeminacy and impotence, non-normative sexuality and castration shows an alarming lack of concern for different non-cisgendered, non-heterosexual identities, even as these are exactly what is being investigated.

Given such a mess of contradictory interpretations, it seems that there is no clear sense in the scholarship of how this group of ancient identities is to be approached, as the answers to what the ancient terms might denote proceed in the most different directions possible. Crucially, behind this proliferation of modern "translations" lies the search for a single truth beneath the ancient terms. Despite their differences of opinion, scholars have generally been united in their quest to uncover a single sexual identity that may account for what *assinnu*'s, *kurgarrû*'s and *kulu'u*'s "really" were. But despite the insistence of this search for the true identity marked by the ancient terms, it has produced no clear answers, only a multitude of incompatible proposals.

1. *Male Sex and Ambiguous Gender*

I would like to suggest that part of this confusion arises from an unshakeable assumption, across most of the secondary literature, of a binary division between sex and gender. Of course, a distinction between cultural gender and biological sex is not in itself an unwarranted assumption, and may indeed constitute a useful methodological precaution in many cases. But in the context of ancient Near Eastern non-binary identities, the dichotomy has been applied to the textual evidence *in such a way* that it has blurred some crucial distinctions and covered over some important nuances. The underlying assumption that whatever non-binary behavior is evinced by ancient individuals is nothing but a cultural surface beneath which hides a "true", knowable, biological, *male* sex, has distorted the readings of the ancient

6. George 2006: 176.
7. Gabbay 2008: 50. See e.g. Gelb 1975: 74 (emphasis added): "The sphere of possibilities for the meaning of gala can be *narrowed down* to pederast, homosexual, transvestite, eunuch, *or the like*. There is a clear connection *of course* between the first three terms."
8. Leick 1994: 161.

texts in a number of ways. Consider, for example, the following statements about Ishtar's followers (all emphases added):

> "it seems nevertheless unmistakable that the sex of the *kurgarrû*'s and *assinnu*'s has indeed been changed, *at least on the surface*",
> "Some scholars speculate that it was *simply* a matter of cross-dressing, but some claim that the devotees were *actually* castrated",
> "The exact way of transforming masculinity into femininity is not known, and it is debated whether it was *simply* a matter of a transvestite *role-play* or whether the new gender status was enforced also physically",
> "male to female, if *only* in dress."[9]

In each quote, biological sex is treated as an unchanging essence and cultural gender as a mere surface. Sex is reality, gender is appearance, and accordingly any movement across genders is repeatedly reduced to a "simply," an "only", a temporary "role-play". It is, in the end, of no consequence, because what really matters is the underlying biological reality. This division serves both to obfuscate the effects of gender transitivity, and to set it apart from an ahistorical sex that is supposedly stable and non-negotiable.

Exactly because it is reduced to a superficial "simply," gender transitivity often seems to be denied in advance. For example, when Daniel Fleming discusses "the *assinnum*, a man with ambiguous gender identity,"[10] one is led to wonder—just how ambiguous? After all, Fleming seems to have no trouble categorizing the *assinnu* as a man, at the very moment that he is calling gender into question. Likewise Uri Gabbay writes that "[*h*]*is* physical features and gender identity have been widely discussed in Assyriological literature",[11] but how can that discussion truly be said to take place, if the matter has always been decided in advance by the grammar?

I am of course aware that the words *assinnu*, *kurgarrû*, and *kulu'u* are masculine in Akkadian, though it should be noted that the feminine form *assinnatu* is also attested,[12] and that in Sumerian words are marked not as masculine and feminine but as person and non-person. Either way, this is not the issue. Contemporary English offers possibilities that Akkadian does not, and vice versa. If one considers *assinnu*'s to be transgender, third gender, or gender ambiguous, one should use the appropriate pronouns in the language one employs. A scholar might well make an informed decision to follow the Akkadian texts and use masculine pronouns, but the crux of the matter is the complete lack of justification of that decision, automatizing the gender that is being investigated and thereby preemptively disallowing any actual discussion.[13]

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9. Respectively, Assante 2009: 45; Teppo 2008: 86; Nissinen 1998: 31; Huffmon 2004: 244.
10. Fleming 2004: 75.
11. Gabbay 2008: 49, emphasis added.
12. See *Malku* I 135.
13. Furthermore, the contemporary situation offers a warning against relying too heavily on grammar for our assumptions about gender. In his summary of theoretical approaches to gender, for example, Ilan Peled (2017) refers throughout to the gender theorist Raewyn Connell with male pronouns, despite the fact that she is a transgender woman. If this sort of transphobic

Even aside from pronouns, it is a question of which genders are assumed in advance to be "real" and which genders are always regarded as "social". The key point of gender constructivism is that *all* gender is to be regarded as constructed, and that transgender and third gender are not somehow "more constructed" than binary genders. Yet, some gender identities are made to bear the weight of constructivism more than others. For example, commenting on Simo Parpola's view of certain Assyrian prophets as transgender, Jonathan Stökl concludes that "[w]hile that interpretation remains a remote possibility, the evidence is not strong enough to support it and in view of that, it is better not to impose Western conceptions of gender on to the data. Issār-lā-taššīyaṭ is, therefore, a male prophet of Issār of Arbela."[14] While I agree with Stökl's conclusion regarding this specific prophet, I find it problematic to imply that maleness itself is not also subject to Western conceptions, only transgender is.

Stökl thereby reintroduces a distinctly Western division between the cultural variability of transgender and the cross-cultural stability of the male sex, exactly as he criticizes the imposition of Western categories. Yet the male gender is not a uniform, ahistorical category, it is always constructed and subdivided differently in different cultural contexts. Consider for example the argument proposed by Joan Goodnick Westenholz and Ilona Zsolnay that in Sumerian culture there was no generic category "male human", since maleness was always qualified according to other social parameters.[15] Instead of a universal unmarked maleness, one finds a set of gendered social constructions of class and age: male servant, male elite, male youth, male elder, and so on. As this example shows, maleness is every bit as socially constructed and as subject to "Western conceptions" as transgender is.

Against the automated distinction between male sex and ambiguous gender, which reduces all gender transitivity to surface ripples on the bedrock of biology, I would claim that the distinction is neither theoretically tenable, methodologically justified, nor philologically practical.

On the theoretical side, one might consider the arguments of Judith Butler. While Butler has often been labelled a constructivist, her argument in *Gender Trouble* is better understood as the deconstruction of a dichotomy that would counterpose biological sex and cultural gender.[16] Neither sex nor gender as such are constructions, according to Butler, rather the sex-gender divide itself is. Butler argues that on the one hand, gender is just as material as sex is, and on the other, that we cannot access biology outside of a cultural frame. The way we view our bodies is throughout filtered by discursive norms and historically specific conceptions. As cultural beings, we do not have access to a pre-cultural sex, for gender and sex are always bound up with one another.

But the issue here is not only, and not even primarily, a theoretical one. It is also fundamentally a practical problem, a methodological issue. The evidence at our disposal, meaning the cuneiform texts and the artistic representations with which we study gender, reveal nothing about biology. They may, if properly read, inform us about cultural norms, prevailing perceptions, and the ideology of gender, but not

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misrepresentation skews our discourse even today, why should we then base our interpretations of the identity of *assinnu*'s, for example, on the fact that they are referred to with male pronouns? What solidity of fact do we expect to find in ancient grammar, if its modern counterpart misleads us so?

14. Stökl 2009: 98.
15. Westenholz and Zsolnay 2017.
16. Butler 1990.

about the so-called reality that is supposed to lurk behind gender. Until philologists can show otherwise, there remains no methodologically sound way to progress from historical figurations of gender to the supposed reality of sex.

We should not underestimate the extent to which our knowledge of historical reality is philological in nature. Or, differently put, we should not allow ourselves to believe that, if we are forced to rely on textual evidence as our only source for reconstructing ancient reality, then the textual evidence will of necessity accurately represent that reality. That is simply not the case. Miguel Civil made the same point almost forty years ago, arguing for a recognition of what he termed the "limits of textual information"—a limit to what we can allow ourselves to deduce from textual evidence.[17] We should not forget that the relation between language and reality is not one of straightforward transposition from things to words, because the social norms built into language mean that texts necessarily present us with a *cultural* reality. A similar point is made by Nils Heeßel in connection with the translation of Babylonian medical texts.[18] Heeßel shows that translating ancient terms referring to bodily conditions with modern biological classifications risks severing the connection of the ancient term with the sets of connotations, moral valuations and background beliefs that undergirded the ancient understanding of the body. In place of simple equations between ancient and modern medical categories, Heeßel advocates for an attentiveness to the cultural schemes that rendered the ancient terminology meaningful in the first place.

Simply put, we do not have any kind of access to a pre-cultural body. Theoretical, methodological, and philological concerns conjoined bar us from assuming that, with nothing but cultural sources to go on, we may speak confidently of non-cultural bodies. Apart from anything else, maintaining that gender is "simply a surface" while sex is "actual reality" misconstrues the kind of reality we actually have at our disposal. Whether the *assinnu*'s, for example, were biologically men, women, transgender, hermaphrodites, or eunuchs, is a question we cannot answer with the evidence at hand. Ann Guinan's contribution to this volume is a timely reminder that, even if a recourse from textual to biological reality were possible, one could not expect to necessarily find, beneath the ambiguities of cultural terms, a stable, univocal and binary biological state. Guinan points to the gamut of possible biological complexities that render questions such as "What sex were the *kulu'u*'s really?" even more difficult to answer than was already the case.

My question is then whether we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics at play in cuneiform cultures by moving away from this binary of sex and gender, and away from the hunt for an underlying "truth" that the binary engenders. In what remains of this chapter, I will argue that the gender performance of Ishtar's followers was far more than "mere role-play".

2. *The Reversibility of Cultural Signs*

Take, for example, the parade sequence described in *Iddin-Dagan A*, which mentions a group of people walking before Inana who are dressed on their right side with men's clothing and on their left side

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17. Civil 1980.
18. Heeßel 2010: 177–182.

with women's clothing.[19] Commenting on this passage, Julia Assante notes that "[i]t is unlikely that half-transgendered participants in public ceremonies mark an underlying biological hermaphroditism."[20] One sees here again the division between biology as truth and gender as mere appearance. Either these participants are "half-transgendered" in the sense that one side of their body is dressed according to their true, underlying sex and the other is not, or else they are hermaphrodites, with both sides being dressed according to their "true" sex.

But taking a different view of gender, there is no true and false side. The effect of this "gender performance" does not lie in one side of the body presented as other than what it truly is, but in the doubt that both sides produce as to what is appearance and what is reality. There is no way of determining which is which—not for us today, and not for the ancient audience of the parade. It brings us in doubt, and that is the key effect of this performance. We are made to understand the reversibility of gendered signs such as "male" and "female" clothing. The swapping of these cultural markers reveals the extent to which we rely on straightforward correspondences between body and dress when assigning genders to individuals, but there is no inherent stability to be found in these cultural markers. They can be effortlessly reversed. Rather than searching for a biological truth beneath the performance, we should accept the doubt it engenders as a core statement about how gender is constructed.

Another instance of this dynamic is the contrast between weapons and weaving instruments, the most frequently cited examples of gender signs in cuneiform cultures. Traditionally, they are understood as highly stable signifiers: men carry weapons and women spindles. In birth incantations, for example, baby boys are presented with axes and baby girls with pins and spindles.[21] So because *kurgarrû*'s and *assinnu*'s are referred to as carriers of both spindles and weapons, scholars have argued that they were therefore hermaphrodites, the duality of cultural symbols supposedly representing a duality of biological sex.[22]

However, once again the matter is not so straightforward, for as all cultural symbols, signifiers like the spindle are fundamentally reversible. If weapons signify maleness, for example, then maleness will be understood as residing in the cultural sign and not in the male body, and maleness can therefore be separated from that body. As a result, the construction of gender through cultural symbols will inevitably open up for the possibility of those symbols being subverted. For example, in *Ishme-Dagan K*, Inana is given the ability

> "to turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man,
> to change one into the other (šu bala ba-AK),
> to dress young women in clothes for men on their right side,
> to dress young men in clothes for women on their left side,
> to put spindles into[?] the hands (bala šu-ba[?]) of [men…],
> and to give weapons to women."[23]

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19. L. 60–63. Reisman 1973: 187. On this text, see also Römer 1965: 128–208.
20. Assante 2009: 46.
21. E.g. Stol 2000: 63.
22. E.g. Henshaw 1994: 301.
23. L. 21–23 and edge. Römer 1988: 32.

Far from being evidence of the true sex of the persons thus changed by Inana's will, the text points to the symbolic nature of gender itself. If spindles consistently connote femininity, these lines reveal that this connotation is all that there is to gender: spindles may be separated from women and put into the hands of men, upsetting any easy equation between body and sign. In other words, cultural signs of gender tell us nothing about their wielders' "true" sex except the ease with which the signs may be reversed.

But we may go further. Note also that the word for spindle is the same as the word for changing genders: bala. In both cases, the word refers to a spinning movement, the reversal of genders and the twisting of the thread. As such, the spindle becomes a sign of the female at the very moment that it is involved in a swapping of genders, and it is difficult to take one bala as distinct from the other in this passage. Otherwise a relatively stable signifier of femininity, the spindle is here identified with the very reversal of gender signifiers; in short, it is made to refer to its own subversion.

In an article on Mesopotamian masculinity, Jerrold Cooper cites an example from *Enki and the World Order* where Enki tells Inana that she has the power to transform male warriors into women and to put spindles into their hands. The passage, according to Cooper, points to a straightforward, cross-cultural identification of weapons with masculinity and spindles with femininity: "The similarity of distinct basic gender roles in the vast majority of known cultures must to a large extent be determined by biological universals: (…) men are, on average, somewhat larger and more muscular than women, giving them significant advantages in wielding weapons for the hunt and war."[24] Cooper's statement may well be statistically correct, but as an interpretation of the evidence he cites, it is wildly misleading. If the example from *Enki and the World Order* tells us anything, it is that cultural signs such as spindles are not tied to a specific biology, but may be effortlessly swapped to call into doubt existing constructions of gender. The supposed stability of biological universals is a poor explanation for the mobility of ancient gender signifiers, and Cooper therefore ends up claiming more or less the opposite of the evidence he is interpreting: while he points to biological inevitability, *Enki and the World Order* points to the radical possibility that Inana may at any time reverse the genders of her subjects.

Accordingly, when we encounter the spindle and the weapon as cultural symbols of gender in a different setting, we must be alert to the fundamental reversibility of those symbols. While they are generally employed as unambiguous signs of masculinity or femininity, any simple equation of "biological universals" with cultural signs will in turn allow for those signs to be subverted and separated from the biological body they were supposed to identify.

3. *At the Threshold*

But what then? Where does that leave those wishing to study non-binary gender in ancient cultures? If we have no access to pre-cultural bodies, and if the cultural symbols we do have at our disposal are so unpredictably reversible, what can we do, methodologically, to study the ancient evidence in systematic ways? Deconstruction is all well and good, but what can we actually say about ancient identities such as those of *assinnu*'s, *kurgarrû*'s or *kulu'u*'s?

24. Cooper 2017: 113.

The answer must lie, at least in part, in the study of culturally conditioned patterns, that is, consistently recurring associations in our texts between a given gendered identity and a set of cultural images, figurative positions, and social roles. This is, in a nutshell, the study of discourse, relying on the notion that cultural practices are shaped by a 'historical *a priori*': underlying, historically changing regularities that determine what is culturally meaningful at any given time.[25] In the context of gender Thomas Laqueur, for example, has demonstrated a discursive shift in European culture from sex being viewed as a difference in degree to it being viewed as a difference in kind.[26] Crucially, Laqueur's analysis shows that this pattern is not only evident from texts dealing directly with gender, but that the same conceptual structure pervades notions of physiology, psychology, and legal codifications of the relations between genders. In a similar vein, I would argue that there is a consistent association in cuneiform texts between Ishtar's followers and a position at the threshold—both literal thresholds and figurative borders between binaries. This association recurs across genres and periods, and besides shaping how the gender of these individuals is portrayed, it also applies to their social status, ritual role, and cultural significance.

The most famous association of gala's, kur-ĝara's, *assinnu*'s, and *kulu'u*'s with thresholds is the story of their goddess' descent to the Netherworld. Known in both a Sumerian version and two slightly different Akkadian translations, the story tells of Inana's failed attempt at a coup of the Netherworld, which is ruled by her sister Ereshkigal.[27] When Inana becomes trapped in Ereshkigal's realm, the god Enki decides to rescue her. In the Sumerian version he creates a kur-ĝara and a gala, in one Akkadian version a *kulu'u* named As-namir, and in the other an *assinnu* named Asushu-namir. In all versions their mission is to enter the Netherworld unhindered. In the Sumerian version, Enki instructs them to "fly past the door like flies, slip past the door pivot like ghosts", while in the Akkadian he exclaims: "Let the seven gates of the Netherworld be open before you!"[28] They are thus able to slip past the gates, rescue the goddess and bring her back from the dead. When Ereshkigal discovers that she has been tricked, she curses the *assinnu* Asushu-namir. Because this does not happen in the original Sumerian version, it may reflect a fall in the social status of *assinnu*'s during the intervening centuries, but either way, the content of the curse is crucial: Asushu-namir is cursed specifically to stand in the shade of a wall and sleep on thresholds.[29]

The tale of Ishtar's descent provides an etiological account for her followers, who are here twice associated with thresholds. But the tale associates them also with a liminal position in a broader sense: they are placed at the metaphorical threshold between life and death, causing as they do the return of Inana from the Netherworld. In their everyday reality, they were also associated with the same transformative potential, though in a more prosaic sense. *Kurgarrû*'s, *assinnu*'s, and *kulu'u*'s appear in ritual texts as agents that reverse ill fortune. One example concerns a lunar eclipse, generally considered a calamitous portent for the ruling king. One text divides the apotropaic rituals against the eclipse into apposite months, and should it take place in the month Ayyaru, the king is to look at a *kurgarrû* who will then bless the king, and so "the evil will pass." Likewise for the month Addaru, the king will "touch the

25. Foucault 1969.
26. Laqueur 1990.
27. See respectively Sladek 1974 and Borger 1979, chapter 8.
28. L. 228–89 and 94, respectively.
29. L. 106–107.

head of an *assinnu*, and he will slay his enemy, his land will abide by his word."[30] The *assinnu*'s and the *kurgarrû*'s are thus associated with a powerful inversion of omens. Their very presence, their being touched and seen, ensures the reversal of a bad fate.[31]

Similarly, a ritual addressed to Ishtar and Dumuzi involves an *assinnu* sitting by the patient to be healed and singing so-called *inḫu*-songs. Then the patient recites an incantation to Ishtar, saying: "May your *assinnu* stand by me, may s/he take away my sickness, may the illness that has seized me leave by the window!" The *assinnu* leaves the house by the door with the scale and some cakes employed in the ritual.[32] The focus on the liminal zones of the window and the door, and on an *assinnu* carrying something away, indicate the ritual potential of their association with symbolic thresholds. To be positioned at an intersection between opposites implies the ability to manipulate that intersection, to turn sickness into health. Likewise, in a ritual intended to increase the profits of a tavern, Ishtar is invited to enter the tavern with the words: "Come, enter our house! With you, may the sweet one who sleeps with you enter, your seducer and your *kulu'u*!"[33] Once again a *kulu'u* is shown standing on a threshold, reversing fates.

In sum, the followers of Ishtar are repeatedly associated with a literal or metaphorical threshold between cultural binaries: inside and outside, life and death, omen and release, sickness and health, profit and poverty. Time and again they occupy a middle position where they manipulate a distinction between opposites.

One such binary blurred by the *assinnu*'s and *kurgarrû*'s is that between battle and play. The roles they played in rituals often poignantly juxtapose combat and games. For example, in a cultic commentary the *kurgarrû*'s are referred to as those "who play battlefield," and likewise in the so-called "Love Lyrics" a *kurgarrû* sings the song "Battle is my game, warfare is my game," whereupon an *assinnu* "goes down to battle and [performs] a whirling dance."[34] Mortal seriousness and lighthearted games are here folded into one another, and the ritual performance of *assinnu*'s and *kurgarrû*'s plays with the resulting suspense, balancing on the knife's edge that separates dance from danger. Likewise, the aforementioned *Iddin-Dagan A* describes a festive parade that mingles sword and daggers with skipping ropes and colourful rags, and the splattering of blood with the resounding of drums.[35] This mixture of music and martiality, of violence and games celebrates the blurring of categorical differences.

The most important binary these ritual practitioners traverse is that between humanity and divinity. Associated as they are with the goddess Ishtar, their role is to mediate between humans and gods. In *Iddin-Dagan A*, for example, the saĝ-ursaĝ's are described as having "the skin of divinity on their bodies,"[36] and Stefan Maul concludes that a *kurgarrû* "in einem Ritual mythische Wesen verkörpern konnte", and that "zwischen Mythos und der babylonischen Alltagswirklichkeit sind der *assinnu* und die

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30. L. 10 and r. 14. Koch 2001: 76–77.
31. See Maul 1992.
32. L. 19, 36, and 50–51. Farber 1977: 64–69.
33. L. 28–29. Panayotov 2013: 294–295.
34. Respectively, l. 29', Livingstone 1989: 94, and l. iii 12–17, Lambert 1975: 104–105. For the song "Battle is my game," see also Menzel 1981: 82, l. 9'-10'.
35. L. 35–79. Reisman 1973: 187–188.
36. L. 49.

anderen soeben gennanten Gestalten das Bindeglied."[37] As physical embodiments of abstract divinity, they were thus a concrete presence of the divine within the human sphere.

4. *Whose Maleness Ishtar Turned Female*

That the recurrent association between Ishtar's followers and transitions across opposites also shaped the gender identity of *assinnu*'s and *kurgarrû*'s is evident from a line in the *Epic of Erra*, where they are called those "whose maleness Ishtar turned fe[male] for the awe of the people; carriers of swords, carriers of razors, scalpels, and blades, who break [taboos?] to Ishtar's delight!"[38] The gender of *kurgarrû*'s and *assinnu*'s is here described not as either male or female, as such, but as residing in the very transition between the two. The two groups are not identified through either category in itself, but through their position at the threshold, that is, through their association with the reversal of categories.

That reversal is unstable—it works to create uncertainty. Ishtar turns maleness female for the awe of the people, and that awe is precisely the result of uncertainty. The *kurgarrû*'s and *assinnu*'s are an embodiment of the goddess' ability to change people as she wishes, and anyone could be next: the line relies on a synecdoche progressing from *kurgarrû*'s and *assinnu*'s to "the people" in general, from those who have been changed to those who might be changed, by establishing the possibility and thus the unpredictability of gender transitivity. It is by Ishtar's mercy alone that the genders female and male are even allowed to exist as separable entities, and gender thus emerges as a structural difference staving off a constant threat of categorical collapse.

At the same time, just as maleness is turned female, the *kurgarrû*'s and *assinnu*'s become carriers of swords and knives, which are traditionally male gender symbols. There is then also a displacement of the expected gender signifiers in this line, a purposeful mismatch between the two things attributed to them: swords and femininity. This mismatch reminds us once more that we cannot take the significance of cultural signs at face value, and that the signifiers of gender remain ever caught up in an unpredictable play of reversals.

With such considerations in mind, it becomes untenable to claim that this passage from *Erra* reveals a specific biological state of one kind or the other beneath the cultural signifiers. If one were to claim that, for example, this line shows the *kurgarrû*'s to have been hermaphrodites, one would quickly be faced with a dilemma, for we simply have no methodologically sound way of assessing whether such a claim is correct or not. What we can do, however, is to show that the statement of the ancient text makes sense within a specific discursive framework that repeatedly associates the identity of *assinnu*'s and *kurgarrû*'s with transformations and with the reversal of expected gender signifiers. That is the kind of analysis our material allows us.[39]

37. Maul 1992: 162.
38. L. IV 56–58. Cagni 1969: 110.
39. Peled (2014: 288–290) has claimed that the ambiguity of the passage may be "solved" by taking the first clause (the gender reversal) to refer only to *assinnu*'s, and the second clause (the carrying of weapons) to refer only to *kurgarrû*'s. This would yield a straightforward contrast between effeminate *assinnu*'s and warrior-like *kurgarrû*'s. However, the interpretation is untenable. Peled highlights several supposed parallels to this construction in the *Epic of Erra*, but none of them are truly similar in structure to the one proposed for this passage. The parallels all have the chiastic structure A (noun) a (predicate) >< b

In conclusion, if we wish to systematically study non-binary gender and gender ambiguity in the ancient world, we must look to the ways in which gender is shaped by its discursive context, and track regular patterns across cultural products of various kinds—not search in vain for the truth that gender supposedly hides. This alternative approach has the significant methodological advantage of relying, not on leaps from literary tropes to biology, but on the evidence actually at hand, which is cultural in nature. However, the approach is only possible if we give up on the quest for a single, simple reality beneath the ancient identities, and instead study those identities on their own terms.

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(predicate) B (noun), or the like, but the proposed reading of the line would yield the structure A (noun) B (noun) >< b (predicate) a (predicate), which to my knowledge has no parallels either in the *Epic of Erra* or in any other Akkadian sentence. Once more, the search for a simple, unambiguous gender identity founders on the complexity of literary signifiers. There is no way around it: we must accept the cultural complexity of gender.

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