

The Shape of Stories

Narrative Structures in Cuneiform Literature

Edited by

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Tablets as Narrative Episodes in Babylonian Poetry

Sophus Helle

1 Introduction

Perhaps the best-known fact about Babylonian epics is that they were told on clay tablets, but the narratological consequences of that fact remain unstudied. If a story is to be told on more than one Tablet, it must be divided into parts, which will often acquire their own structure and progression: each Tablet may thus come to function as a self-contained episode in the overall narrative.¹ However, the literary significance of the Tablets has been obscured by the medium through which we study them today. When philologists read Babylonian epics—as translations, transliterations, hand copies, or photographs—they mostly appear on the pages of a book; so that when we reach the end of one Tablet, we turn the page and another begins.² As a result, we often treat the epics' arrangement into Tablets as a largely inconsequential subdivision of a coherent narrative, like the chapters in a novel.³ But the material quality of cuneiform tablets invites a different perspective. Each tablet is its own physical object, a separate piece of clay, and as such, a far more independent entity than a chapter would be.

The way ancient scholars treated the Tablets further illustrates their relative independence. Ancient catalogues refer to the Akkadian epics not as epics, but as “series” (*iškāru*), meaning compositions that spanned more than one Tablet: “the series of Gilgamesh,” “the series of Etana,” and so on.⁴ The divisibility of the poems into Tablets was thus reflected in the very name they were given. Further, ancient libraries did not always hold entire series, but often contained only select Tablets from each composition. Ancient scribes must therefore have regarded the Tablets as meaningful literary entities that it would make sense to

1 Following Assyriological convention, I use “tablets” to refer to the physical objects and “Tablet” for the subdivisions of the narrative.

2 Inter-Tablet boundaries are arguably erased even more fully in online presentations of the text, where the continuous scroll hardly registers the transition from one Tablet to the next.

3 See e.g., Leichty, 1964, 148, who likens tablets to “chapters in a book.”

4 See e.g., the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, section 6, l. 10–14; Lambert, 1962, 66–67.

copy, store, and study on their own.⁵ I would thus argue that we should understand the Tablets of Babylonian epics as *episodes in a series*, each of which can be and once was studied individually. A similar point was already made by Anne Kilmer, who, when discussing the visual emplacement of specific verses on their respective Tablets, referred to the ancient scribes as “tablet designers”; and by Herman Vanstiphout, who noted in 1990 that, when a new edition of *Gilgamesh* would become available, “[i]t will be fascinating to work out in detail how every tablet, and consequently every song, also presents its own structure, or, in other words, how every tablet is a structured whole in itself.”⁶

I do not deny that Tablets were grouped into stories, or that those stories evince patterns and internal references that cut across individual Tablets. Especially when it comes to well-known compositions such as those examined below, *Gilgamesh* and *Enuma Elish*, the ancient scribes almost certainly approached the individual Tablets with at least a basic and possibly an extensive knowledge of the entire story. There is some evidence that literary texts were copied from memory, indicating that the scribes were not reliant on the clay tablets in front of them for their understanding of the poem as a whole.⁷ But that does not invalidate the claim that tablets could be structured as separate episodes to be slotted into that narrative whole. Episodes in modern TV series, for example, typically function as both self-standing stories and parts of an overall arc; when rewatching a series, knowledge of the overall plot need not detract from one’s appreciation of the individual episode’s storyline. The difference I am proposing is thus one of degree, not kind: of course, the Tablets were not entirely independent of the compositions to which they belonged, but I would suggest they were *relatively* more independent than what modern scholars have generally assumed.

In other words, there is no reason to abandon the study of composition-wide narrative structures in Akkadian poetry, but these studies should be supplemented by analyses of what the Tablets are also doing on their own. As narrative episodes, Tablets are both parts and wholes, both elements in a series and self-standing entities. The latter role is not necessarily the most important of the two, but it is the one to which least attention has been paid so far, meaning that we can now fruitfully consider what happens when we temporarily isolate single Tablets for closer inspection. What new aspects of the narrative come

5 Robson, 2011, 570. On the storage of literary tablets, see the essays collected in Barjamovic and Ryholt, 2019.

6 Kilmer, 2006, 209; Vanstiphout, 1990, 48, fn. 14.

7 See e.g., Delnero, 2012; Robson and Stevens, 2019, 343–347.

to the foreground? Does the structure of the part seamlessly reflect that of the whole, or can a single Tablet undermine the message of the composition to which it belongs?

In the following, I examine two examples of Standard Babylonian poetry whose division into Tablets is far from coincidental: *Gilgamesh*, the story of the king of Uruk who searched in vain for eternal life; and *Enuma Elish*, the story of how Marduk became king of the gods and defeated the primordial goddess Tiamat. I first show that *Gilgamesh* highlights the borders between Tablets by mapping them onto physical borders in the story itself, and then turn to Tablet 1 of *Enuma Elish*, showing that the relation between this Tablet and its epic is anything but straightforward. Finally, I consider a series of complicating factors that lend nuance to my argument, but my overall conclusion will be unchanged: When we consider the Tablets of Akkadian series as self-standing entities, new narrative structures are brought into relief.

As will become clear from the discussion below, the perspective proposed here is best applied to the Standard Babylonian versions of literary texts, whose composition can be dated to the late second or early first millennium BCE. The structure of Old Babylonian works (that is, works from c. 1900–1600 BCE) can be much messier and more varied than their Standard Babylonian successors. For example, some Sumerian compositions from the Old Babylonian period are preserved on both a multi-column tablet and on several single-column tablets, known as *imgiddas*, complicating the argument for the Tablets' independence. It is therefore possible that the narrative structures uncovered in this essay emerged from—or were at least reinforced by—the editorial rearrangement of cuneiform literature that took place towards the end of the second millennium BCE. As argued by Nils Heeßel, this process is best understood as a *serialization* of an existing corpus, in which older compositions were reshuffled, reorganized, and made into series whose Tablet boundaries were, unlike those of Old Babylonian works, relatively fixed.⁸ Recurrent and meaningful Tablet divisions may have existed before this time, but I suspect that the role of Tablets as narrative episodes became stronger, more consistent, and more poetically effective during the literary serialization of the late second millennium.

8 Heeßel, 2011.

2 *Gilgamesh*

The Standard Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* tells the story of the eponymous king of the city of Uruk, who in the first half of the story meets and befriends the wild man Enkidu, and with him kills the monster Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. In the second half of story, Enkidu dies, throwing Gilgamesh into a profound grief that eventually leads him to seek out the immortal sage Uta-napishti, and demand that Uta-napishti reveal to him the secret of eternal life. But the sage disappoints him, and instead tells him the story of the Deluge, which Gilgamesh then brings back to Uruk.⁹

Like many cuneiform compositions, the literary history of *Gilgamesh* is outstandingly long.¹⁰ The earliest preserved version of the story date to the Ur III period (21st century BCE) and took the form of a cycle of interconnected poems about the hero.¹¹ In the Old Babylonian period, the stories about Gilgamesh were crafted into a single epic, comprising an unknown number of Tablets. Over the next millennium, the Akkadian epic was reshaped as it circulated across the “cuneiform cosmopolis” of the wider ancient Near East, from Hattusha through Ugarit to Megiddo, before being revised and edited into the Standard Babylonian version of the epic that is today the best known and best preserved version.¹² The Standard Babylonian version—whose creation has traditionally been attributed to the incantation priest Sîn-leqi-unnenni¹³—consists of eleven Tablets, with a twelfth Tablet serving as an appendix. The twelfth Tablet, which consists of one of the older Sumerian poems abbreviated and translated into Akkadian, is clearly distinct in both storyline and style from the preceding eleven, but its inclusion throws new light on some of the same themes treated in the main narrative, including death and the afterlife.¹⁴

9 The original text of *Gilgamesh* is quoted from the edition by George, 2003; the translation is my own.

10 On the literary history of the epic, see Tigay, 1982; George, 2003, chap. 1; and Helle, 2021, chap. 1. On the Old Babylonian epic, see also the dissenting voice in Fleming and Milstein, 2010; and the response in George, 2010.

11 For the narrative structure of the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* cycle, see Alhena Gadotti in this volume.

12 I have adapted the term “cuneiform cosmopolis” from the “Babylonian cosmopolis,” in van de Mieroop, 2016; who in turn bases it on the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” described by Pollock, 2006.

13 On Sîn-leqi-unnenni as the editor of the Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh*, see George, 2003, 28–33; see also the caveat in Helle, 2022.

14 On the status of the twelfth tablet as an appendix, see George 47–54, with references to previous literature.

One of the most remarkable features of the Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* is its circular structure, which is made clear by the appearance of the Walls of Uruk at both the beginning and the end of the story, effectively encircling the text just as the Walls encircle the city.¹⁵ When we reach the end of the epic, we find the same description of the Walls we had read in the prologue, inviting us to return to the beginning and read the story anew. The literary borders of the text are thus mapped onto physical borders within the story, in an effective conflation of content and form. But crucially, this conflation is found not only in the epic, but also in its individual Tablets.

Take Tablet v. It begins with Gilgamesh and Enkidu standing at the entrance of the Cedar Forest, entranced by both its allure and its dangers. The Tablet ends with the heroes leaving the Cedar Forest as they sail down the Euphrates, meaning that the entire plot of Tablet v unfolds within the forest. When Gilgamesh enters the forest, we enter the Tablet; when he leaves the forest, we leave the Tablet. A similar structure is found in Tablet x, which begins with the phrase “Shiduri was an innkeeper who lived by the seashore” (x1).¹⁶ When we reach the end of Tablet x, we find ourselves on another seashore, that of Uta-napishti’s island. The story of the Tablet unfolds between those beaches, as Gilgamesh struggles to cross the Waters of Death that lies between them: the edges of the sea are the edges of the text.

The same conflation of content and form applies to Tablets iv and ix, both of which begin with Gilgamesh leaving Uruk and end with him arriving at a forest: the Cedar Forest in Tablet iv and the garden of Jeweled Trees in Tablet ix. Conversely, in Tablet vi, we begin in the Cedar Forest and end back in Uruk. In these cases, the spatial borders are not symmetrical, as they were in Tablets v and x, but the Tablets are still clearly delineated on either side by spatial boundaries. But spatial borders are not the epic’s only way of marking the division into Tablets. Tablet iii begins with the advice spoken by the elders of Uruk to the intrepid hero as he sets out on his quest (iii 1–12), and ends with that same advice repeated verbatim (iii 215–227), just as the epic as a whole begins and ends with the repeated description of the Walls of Uruk.¹⁷ Arguably, Tablet viii is marked not by spatial but by temporal borders. The Tablet describes Gilgamesh’s grief for his friend Enkidu and the latter’s burial, and we are later told that it took Gilgamesh six nights and seven days to allow for the

15 See e.g., Zgoll, 2010.

16 *dšī-du-ri sa-bi-tum ša₂ ina sa-pan tam-ti aš₂-bat*; George, 2003, 678.

17 On the role of repetition in *Gilgamesh*, see Selena Wisnom in this volume.

burial to take place. It is possible, though not certain, that the Tablet should be understood as comprising one full week of grief.¹⁸

In short, rather than letting the story flow smoothly from one Tablet to the next, the structure of the epic invites us to pause at each transition and consider the Tablets as delimited episodes with their own narrative boundaries. These boundaries can be marked in several ways, including:

- the depiction of space, as in Tablet IV (from Uruk to a magical forest), Tablet V (inside the forest), Tablet VI (from the forest to Uruk), Tablet IX (from Uruk to another magical forest), and Tablet X (across the ocean);
- speech, as in Tablet III (the repeated speech of the elders that brackets the Tablet); and
- time, as in Tablet VIII (the week of grief).

This leaves five Tablets unaccounted for. Two of these, Tablets II and VII, have large lacunae in both their opening and closing sections, making it difficult to say precisely how their stories were delimited. However, both are clearly focused on one pivotal narrative arc: the encounter between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and Enkidu's death, respectively. Further, Tablet XII easily stands apart from the others; as noted above, it is a sort of appendix that is narratively disjunct from the main epic. We are left with just two Tablets: I and XI, the first and last Tablets of the epic proper. It is not surprising that the narrative structure of these two Tablets is less clear than the others, since they must also bracket the entire epic: as noted above, they are connected by the repeated description of the Walls of Uruk at the beginning of Tablet I and the end of Tablet XI. But that is not to say that they are entirely without narrative structures of their own.¹⁹

18 See the discussion in George, 2003, 486. On the literary importance of the six nights and seven days in the epic, including their transformative effect on the main characters, see Moran, 1995.

19 Note that the description of the Walls of Uruk is spoken by the narrator in tablet I and by Gilgamesh himself in tablet XI. Since Walker, 1981, 194, most scholars have assumed that Gilgamesh is to be understood as the narrator of his own story, though he tells it in the third person—a shift marked by Gilgamesh's repetition of the narrator's words at the end of the text. According to Michalowski, 1999, 80, this self-narration is something that Gilgamesh learns from the story Uta-napishti tells about himself in tablet XI: by listening to Uta-napishti's account of his role in the Flood, Gilgamesh realizes the power of storytelling and sets about using that same power for himself, by composing "an autobiography that mimics the one told to Gilgamesh by Utanapishtim"—that is, the epic itself. Note also that XI begins with Gilgamesh commenting on how similar Uta-napishti is to him: "I look at you, Uta-napishti, and your body is no different, you are just like me!" (XI 2–3); *a-na-at-ta-la-kum₂-ma ūta-napišti* (׳׳UD-ZI) | *mi-na-tu-ka ul ša₂-na-a ki-i ia-ti-ma at-ta*; George, 2003, 702. Accordingly, one could see the plot of tablet XI as revolving around the likeness and differences between the two characters: it begins by explicit noting their similarity, reveals

Notably, the ending of Tablet I is the clearest available evidence that *Gilgamesh's* division into Tablets changed between its Old Babylonian and Standard Babylonian versions. Though the Old Babylonian *Gilgamesh* is much less fully preserved than its later recension, enough about it is known that we can show that it draws the dividing lines between the Tablets differently. Towards the beginning of the epic, Gilgamesh has two ominous dreams that foreshadow Enkidu's imminent arrival: this scene appears at the beginning of Tablet II in the Old Babylonian version, but at the end of Tablet I in the Standard Babylonian version.²⁰ The difference is not vast, but it is significant. It suggests that, in reshaping older narrative material, the editor of the Standard Babylonian version—who, as noted above, has traditionally been identified as *Sîn-leqi-unnenni*—deliberately divided that material according to new principles, like pre-prepared cookie dough being cut into new shapes.²¹

What, then, is the import of this rearrangement? George argues that overall, *Sîn-leqi-unnenni's* editorial interventions and especially the addition of the prologue “changed the thrust of the entire poem, placing emphasis on the hero's acquisition of wisdom and self-knowledge.”²² To take but one telling example, the opening couplet of the later recension declares that Gilgamesh “knew the ways and learned all things.”²³ But that is not the impression one is left with from the description of the hero that follows the prologue: here, he appears to be a thoughtless tyrant abusing his subjects, a far cry from the wise and all-knowing ruler we were led to expect. Karen Sonik has recently argue that the epic conceives of kingship as a dangerous force to be moderated by the advice of wise councilors: without such advisers, the emotional excess of kings like Gilgamesh would be allowed to run rampant, with devastating consequences for their subjects.²⁴ And indeed, the necessity of councilors is precisely what Gilgamesh himself highlights after the dreams that presage Enkidu's arrival: “I'll have a friend and adviser, a friend and adviser I'll have” (1 296–297).²⁵ These words are spoken at the very end of the Tablet; only three lines follow them,

their difference as Gilgamesh fails to achieve immortality, and ends with their similarity reinforced again as Gilgamesh mimics Uta-napishti's autobiography.

20 On this sequence of events in both the Old Babylonian and Standard Babylonian version, see now George, 2018.

21 For other studies of how Gilgamesh was reshaped between the Old Babylonian and Standard Babylonian version, see Tigay, 1982; Cooper, 1977; Abusch, 2015, chap. 3; Fleming and Milstein, 2010; and George, 2018.

22 George, 2003, 32; a similar sentiment is found in Beaulieu, 2007.

23 *al-ka-ka-ti i-du-u₂ ka-la-mu ḥa-as-su*, George, 2003, 538, and 2007, 239.

24 Sonik, 2020.

25 *ib-ri ma-li-ku a-na-ku lu-ur-ši* / [*lu-u*]r-ši-ma ib-ri ma-li-ku a-na-ku; George, 2003, 556.

rounding off the episode. By placing the scene at the end of Tablet I (rather than the beginning of Tablet II), the editor of Standard Babylonian version highlighted the narrative arc that unfolds across this Tablet: because he has no advisers to keep him in check, Gilgamesh's abuses his subjects, making them pray for relief to their gods, who create Enkidu, the adviser whose arrival is announced to Gilgamesh at the Tablet's end.

Ultimately, we cannot know whether this and the other changes that shaped the Standard Babylonian version of *Gilgamesh* were carried out by one brilliant redactor or by several scholars working together, or perhaps building on each other's contributions across generations.²⁶ Later Babylonian scribes would attribute the serialization of Akkadian literature to a small set of celebrated scholars, such as Sin-leqi-unneni, Esagil-kin-apli, and Sidu; but these may well have been figures of myth.²⁷ But whoever he, she, or they were, the narrative structure examined above suggests that the editor(s) of the Standard Babylonian *Gilgamesh* knew from the outset that the text would be written on a series of Tablets, and so made deliberate use of that material constraint: the story was consciously planned so that it could be divided into episodes.

3 *Enuma Elish*

The relation of a Tablet to its series is, fundamentally, that of part to whole, but things are not always that simple. Famously, a whole can be more than the sum of its parts, but a single part can also resist its integration into the whole. This is the case with Tablet I in *Enuma Elish*. Focusing on the entire epic and focusing only on Tablet I yields two strikingly different readings of the same events. In this section, I argue the structures unfolding across an entire epic and those unfolding within each of its Tablets do not overwrite one another: they exist side by side and can fruitfully be read against each other.

The story of *Enuma Elish* concerns the elevation of Marduk, god of Babylon, to universal kingship.²⁸ It begins by describing how the two primordial seas Tiamat and Apsû create the gods by mixing their waters together. But soon, the young gods disturb their cosmic progenitors with their loud noise, leading

26 As noted by van de Mieroop, 2016, we should not underplay the possible contributions to Babylonian literature by scholars and scribes working outside the Babylonian heartland, that is, in the wider cuneiform cosmopolis that stretched across the ancient Near East. See also Sasson, 2013.

27 See Helle, 2022, with references to previous literature.

28 The original text of *Enuma Elish* is quoted from Lambert, 2013; the translation is my own.

Apsû to resolve on murdering them all. However, Ea, the god of wisdom, manages to incapacitate and kill him, and uses Apsû's body to create his own watery dwelling. In this dwelling, Ea fathers the god Marduk, whose childish play again disturbs Tiamat with its noise. Following in Apsû's footsteps, Tiamat decides to destroy the gods, and raises an army of monsters to do so. One by one, the senior gods attempt to stop her, but they all fail. Marduk then proposes to subdue her but demands universal kingship in return—which the desperate gods readily grant him. Marduk promptly defeats Tiamat and uses her body to create the universe, shaping her limbs into mountains, rivers, and plains. He then creates humankind to be the gods' servants and establishes the city of Babylon at the center of the new world order. The text ends with an enumeration of the fifty names that the gods bestow on Marduk in appreciation, each of which represents a new cosmic function and divine destiny. The seventh and final Tablet of *Enuma Elish* ends with an epilogue celebrating the composition of the epic itself.

Enuma Elish draws on a wealth of older compositions, including *Anzu*, god lists, and the Ugaritic myth of the god Baal's combat against a cosmic sea.²⁹ The epic's date of composition is a matter of debate, but it is most often placed at the end of the second millennium BCE, coinciding with the ascendancy of Marduk in the Babylonian pantheon.³⁰ The elevation of Marduk among the gods explicitly mirrors the political elevation of the state of Babylon in the human realm, and every element of the text is carefully constructed to highlight Marduk's greatness. It is, therefore, all the more striking that the first Tablet of the epic—if considered on its own—seems to do the opposite.

The opening scene of *Enuma Elish* describes a world in which names and destinies did not yet exist: "When heaven on high had not been named, and the earth below not given a name ... when none of the gods had been brought forth, had not been given names and had not decreed destinies ..." (I 1–2, 7–8).³¹ At the end of the epic, this namelessness will be replaced by the fifty names and fifty destinies that are assigned to Marduk; the beginning and end of the epic are thus linked by a narrative reversal that leads from an initial absence of names and destinies to a superabundance of them.³² A similar reversal also

29 Seri, 2014; Wisnom, 2019, chaps. 2–4.

30 Lambert, 2013, 248–277.

31 *e-nu-ma e-liš la na-bu-u₂ ša₂-ma-mu | šap-liš am-mat-tum su-ma la zak-rat ... e-nu-ma ili* (DINGIR^{meš}) *la šu-pu-u ma-na-ma*; Lambert, 2013, 50.

32 This is one of several reversals that unfold across the epic: another leads from an initial state of unbounded fluidity, as Tiamat and Apsû intermingle their waters, to the highly structured and hierarchical universe that Marduk creates.

unfolds within Tablet I, but here, it is much more menacing in tone. At the end of the Tablet, the primordial goddess Tiamat creates a horde of monsters and assigns the Tablet of Destinies to their leader Qingu, who then uses the Tablet of Destinies to fix the fate of the monsters, as expressed in the Tablet's last lines: "He decreed destinies for the gods her sons: 'May the working of your words quench fire and your amassed poison subdue the strong.'" (I 160–162).³³ The opening scene is thus linked to both the end of Tablet I and the end of the epic by the same reversal, from the absence to the ascription of fates. Both part and whole chart a similar progression, yielding a minor narrative arc enclosed in a much larger one. Crucially, in the epic as a whole, this arc leads to a positive result, as it makes Marduk the supreme deity of the universe, but if we limit our perspective to Tablet I, it leads to an undeniably negative outcome: an army of unstoppable monsters is unleashed against the gods.

The division of the Akkadian epics into Tablets means that two sets of narrative structures, those pertaining to the whole and those pertaining to the part, will coexist at any given time, and an event can thus have both a negative and a positive significance at the same time, depending on whether it is contextualized in one or the other frame. A crucial example is Marduk's birth. In the larger scheme of things, Marduk's birth is certainly a good thing; if anything, for a Babylonian audience it was *the* good thing, leading as it did to the creation of cosmic order and the supremacy of Babylon. But taking the first Tablet of *Enuma Elish* on its own, Marduk's birth reads differently: it is because of his birth and the chaos he causes that Tiamat becomes the main antagonist of the story. The youthful Marduk plays with the winds given to him by his grandfather Anu, disturbing Tiamat and so driving her to evil.³⁴ A direct line of causality leads from Marduk's birth to Tiamat's murderous intentions. Lines 105–108 describe Marduk whirling the winds that Anu gave him: he lets them carry dust and make waves, and so "roils Tiamat" (I 108).³⁵ The very next lines describe Tiamat's confusion and consternation, after which an unidentified group of deities seize on her frustration and convince her to kill the older gods, avenge Apsû, and put an end to Marduk's burdensome behavior (I 109–124).³⁶

33 *an ilī* (DINGIR^{meš}) *mārišu* (DUMU^{meš}-šu) *ši-ma-[ta] iš-ti-ma* | *ep-ša pi-i-ku-nu girra* (dGIBIL₆) *l[i-n]i-ḫa* | *in-tuk-nu kit-mu-ru ma-ag-ša-ru liš-rab-bi-ib*; Lambert, 2013, 58.

34 Based on an analysis of the metrical structure, Johannes Haubold likewise argues that the scene of Marduk's birth contains discordant notes, indicating that his birth will lead to disaster before it leads to triumph (personal communication).

35 *u₂-dal-laḫ₃ ti-amat*; Lambert, 2013, 56.

36 On the theme of noise as a motivation for violence, see Michalowski, 1999; and Heffron, 2014.

Consider the development of Tiamat's character in Tablet 1. At the beginning of the Tablet, she is identified as a creative force (*mummu*) and as the primordial mother who gave birth to the gods (1 4); but at the end of the Tablet, she has become a danger to the cosmos, birthing monsters and equipping them with poisoned fangs, magic spells, and terrifying armor. Before Marduk's birth, Tiamat resists her husband Apsû's call for violence, chiding him for his wicked plans (1 41–46); but after Marduk's birth, she herself turns to violence, harboring precisely the murderous thoughts that she had previously opposed. In other words, if we isolate the narrative of Tablet 1, it charts a progression that is unmistakably negative. A creative Tiamat is replaced by a cruel Tiamat, a dearth of destinies is replaced by monsters destined for triumph, and a peaceful mixing of waters is replaced by opposing armies. And at the precise midpoint of this narrative, we find Marduk's birth, which takes place in l. 80–82 of the Tablet's 162 lines:³⁷ this, in short, is the turning point of the Tablet's etiology of chaos and cruelty.

In *Enuma Elish* as a whole, the order of the gods eventually triumphs, and the monsters are defeated. Whereas Marduk is born midway through Tablet 1, Tiamat is killed midway through the epic, in the fourth of its seven Tablets: the battle between Marduk and Tiamat begins with Tiamat's challenge, which is spoken in l. 73–74 of the Tablet's 146 lines. Tablet 1 and the epic thus use Marduk's birth to tell two entirely different stories. In Tablet 1, it is a cause for distress; in the epic, it is a cause for celebration. I propose that we understand this kind of ambiguity as a *narrative counterpoint*, meaning that the various narrative structures coexisting in any one passage come into a dynamic relation with one another, sometimes clashing and sometimes coinciding.

The most important lesson to be drawn from this example is that focusing on a single Tablet does not preclude an understanding of the series as a whole: both levels of analysis should be kept in mind at the same time, since a Babylonian scribe would undoubtedly have been conscious both of the entire series and of the single tablet in front of them. But why would *Enuma Elish*, a text that seems thoroughly intent on celebrating Marduk's greatness from start to finish, undermine that message in its very first Tablet? I would suggest three possible reasons.

The first is dramatic effect. As Gina Konstantopoulos argues in this volume, a key element of narrative craftsmanship is the emotional structure of the story—the ups and downs through which readers and characters are made to move—

37 See Kilmer, 2006, 209.

and ancient Near Eastern literature is no exception.³⁸ The emotional “dip” at the heart of Tablet I serves as a counterpoint to Marduk’s later rise to power: the disorder he stirs makes the universal order he establishes at the end of the epic all the more impressive. This structure is not unlike what Konstantopoulos, drawing on Kurt Vonnegut, would term the “man in hole” pattern, in which an initial stasis is followed by adversity but ultimately results in triumph. The contrast between the narrative arc of Tablet I and that of *Enuma Elish* would thus reinforce, through poetic contrast, the scope of Marduk’s eventual success.

The second reason pertains to the many allusions to the god Enlil that are scattered across *Enuma Elish*.³⁹ In proclaiming Marduk king of the gods, *Enuma Elish* was contending with the previous head of the pantheon, Enlil. Among the many ways in which the epic subtly dethrones Enlil is the naming of Marduk: he is given fifty names, because fifty was the divine number associated with Enlil. By receiving fifty names, Marduk implicitly receives Enlil’s power too. It is possible that Marduk’s negative characterization in Tablet I was meant to suggest a comparison with Enlil, specifically his appearance in the Flood myth—an intertextual connection explored by Selena Wisnom.⁴⁰ In the Flood myth as told in *Atra-hasis* and *Gilgamesh*, it is Enlil who causes the Deluge, but the catastrophic flood soon grows out of his control and becomes a threat to the entire cosmos, and the other gods later chide him for his thoughtless behavior. Marduk’s toying with winds and waves in Tablet I of *Enuma Elish*, which results in a monstrous threat to the cosmos in the form of Tiamat’s army, is structurally similar. But unlike Enlil, Marduk is able to reassert control of the threat he created, by defeating Tiamat. One possible reading of this scene is to take Marduk’s behavior in Tablet I as an allusion to Enlil—setting the stage for Marduk to outdo Enlil on every possible count through the rest of the story.

The third possible reason is that the criticism of Marduk was intentional: that Marduk’s negatively inflected position in Tablet I was consciously devised by the author(s) of *Enuma Elish* to reflect badly on the god they were otherwise exalting. This is the most difficult of the three possibilities, but it would have numerous cross-cultural parallels across literary history. In “The Two Voices of Virgil’s *Aeneid*,” Adam Parry argued that Virgil wove a dissenting voice into his otherwise programmatic exaltation of Augustus’s rule.⁴¹ The two voices of the text reflect, respectively, a “public” laudatory and a “private” critical view of the emperor for whom the epic was composed; unsurprisingly, the critical

38 See Konstantopoulos in this volume.

39 See Wisnom, 2019, chap. 3, with references to previous literature.

40 Wisnom, 2019, chap. 3.

41 Parry, 1963.

voice is much more subtly and indirectly expressed than the laudatory one. Likewise, Stephen Greenblatt proposes an ongoing dynamic of *subversion and containment* in Shakespeare's political plays and in many other texts: according to Greenblatt, hegemonic discourse generates its own subversive, critical dissent in order to suppress them all the more forcefully.⁴² It is possible—far from certain, but at least possible—that the author(s) of *Enuma Elish* integrated a subversive perspective on Marduk into the arc of Tablet I, if only to then contain, suppress, and invalidate that perspective through the narrative force of the following events. Finally, Jennifer Finn has suggested that stories about Marduk were used by first-millennium scholars to express critical views of royal power: negative literary portrayals of Marduk, the king of the gods, could serve as coded critiques of the human king.⁴³ Might such counter-discursive tensions be found already in *Enuma Elish*?

4 General Considerations

In this essay, I have argued that we should always consider the shape of Tablets in our study of Babylonian poetry. Tablets constitute self-standing narrative units and are often well-delimited entities in the overall plot, and we can therefore analyze the compositional principles of each episode in relative isolation, studying the Tablets as works of literature in their own right. None of this is meant to deny that Tablets were also parts of a broader whole. The division into Tablets is a formal literary device on par with the division of a poem into verses, couplets, and stanzas; just as ancient composers thought about how a poem could be fitted into verses, so did they think about how a narrative could be fitted into Tablets. In *Gilgamesh*, for example, the thresholds encountered in the plot were made to coincide with the thresholds between Tablets. Likewise, just as ancient composers could bring out poetic contrasts and parallels when they combined verses into couplets, so could they arrange Tablets to highlight tensions between part and whole, as in Tablet I of *Enuma Elish*. These conclusions apply not just to *Gilgamesh* and *Enuma Elish*, but to any Akkadian poem that is told on more than one Tablet.⁴⁴ A telling example is *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi*, the story of a pious man who suffers undeserved hardship before Marduk bestows his

42 Greenblatt, 1988.

43 Finn, 2017.

44 The following notes reflect the discussion at the workshop on which this volume is based. I thank all the participants for their insightful comments.

grace on him: the four Tablets of the poem describe, respectively, the sufferer's social expulsion, his physical suffering, his physical recovery, and his social reintegration, in a neat symmetrical structure.⁴⁵

However, in trying to correct the general tendency to underestimate Tablets, one risks overstating their importance. There is no doubt that the epics were also conceptualized as meaningful wholes: to take just one example, series tend to comprise a number of Tablets that is somehow significant in the sexagesimal system—twelve in Standard Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, seven in *Enuma Elish*, five in *Erra*, three in the Old Babylonian versions of *Anzu*, *Etana* and *Atra-hasis*—suggesting that they were seen as a “rounded” entity. This is the case also for non-literary compositions, such as the medical treatise *Sagig*, which consists of 40 Tablets (40 being the divine number of its alleged author, the god Ea). Nonetheless, each Tablet in a series can have different lengths—Tablet vi in *Gilgamesh* runs to 183 lines, Tablet xi to 328 lines—so clearly, there was also significantly flexibility to structure each of them individually.⁴⁶

Further, the division between Tablets was not immutable, and it could vary greatly between different recensions of the same series. The story of *Atra-hasis* was told on three Tablets in the Old Babylonian version, but on as many as twelve Tablets in its Late Babylonian version.⁴⁷ However, as the example of *Gilgamesh*'s dreams shows, this kind of adaptation does not negate the importance of Tablets: on the contrary, it should make us even more alert to which aspects of the text were highlighted by the rearrangement. Though the first-millennium version of *Atra-hasis* is poorly preserved, the broad narrative strokes that we can reconstruct at present do show that the series began by alternating between conflict and resolution.⁴⁸ Tablet I takes us from the initial creation of world order to the revolt of the Igigi gods; tellingly, its last line begins with the word “battle” (*qablu*).⁴⁹ Tablet II presents the solution to that conflict, namely the creation of humankind. Tablet III traces how that solution in turn becomes a problem, as humanity grows to unsustainable numbers, and Tablet IV opens with Enlil gathering the gods to address the issue. The narrat-

45 I thank Eli Tadmor for reminding me of *Ludlul*'s tabular structure.

46 I thank Eckart Frahm for bringing these points to my attention.

47 George and al-Rawi, 1996, 147, estimate that there were “at least ten or eleven” tablets in the first-millennium version of *Atra-hasis* as it was copied at Sippar. Given the aforementioned preference for sexagesimally “round” numbers, twelve seems to me a likelier candidate.

48 The following reconstruction of the plot is based on George and al-Rawi, 1996. A new edition of *Atra-hasis* is being prepared by Nathan Wasserman and Michael Streck.

49 *qa₂-ab-lu i-ru-ša ab-ba-a-ba* ^d*En-lil₂*, “battle came up to the gate of Enlil,” I 117'; George and al-Rawi, 1996, 160.

ive of *Atra-hasis* was thus arranged to emphasize its almost Hegelian structure, with conflicts leading to resolutions that lead to new conflicts.

The recurrent connection between Tablet boundaries and narrative structures is unlikely to be coincidental, or even just the result of the material constraints of clay tablets. We must assume that cuneiform authors and editors were inspired by one another, adapting the clever use of Tablets found in existing compositions when making new ones. I suggested above that the narrative significance of Tablets became an especially widespread feature of Akkadian poetry during the serialization of Standard Babylonian literature in the late second millennium BCE: after that time, new stories (and new versions of old stories) likely had to abide by this principle if they were to meet the literary expectations of the time.

It should be kept in mind, however, that while the transitions between Tablets would have been clear when they were read as separate objects, they may have been less apparent when the epics were performed orally, as most probably were.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, we know little about the performance of Akkadian poetry, so we cannot tell whether the texts were always recited in their entirety or also in episodic sections, as was the case with the Homeric epics.⁵¹ Our only clue is a late, unusual, and probably unrepresentative source, namely a Seleucid text claiming that *Enuma Elish* was recited during the *akitu* or “New Year’s Festival” in Babylon. On the fourth day after the spring equinox, a priest would recite the poem before Marduk’s statue, “[from] beginning to end.”⁵² This specification suggests—but certainly does not prove—that it was not always the case that texts were recited from beginning to end, and that they could also be recited in shorter excerpts. But whether those excerpts would have corresponded to the Tablets, or whether the text would have been split up differently in oral performance, we do not know.

A final complication concerns the intended audience of the epics.⁵³ If we assume the audience to be human, then they could only read or listen to one Tablet at a time. But several Akkadian epics are explicitly addressed to the gods, who in their omniscience could contemplate all Tablets at once. In *Enuma Elish*, the anonymous author, who refers to himself only as “the first one” (*maḥrû*) recites the text to Marduk before he presents it to the human public

50 See the references collected by Selena Wisnom in this volume.

51 For the narrative consequences of the delimited recitation of the Homeric epics, see Ford, 1997.

52 [*iš-tu re-š*]i-*šū*₂ *adi qītišu* (TIL-*šū*₂); quoted in Lambert, 2013, 6. I thank Gösta Gabriel for this point.

53 I thank Gösta Gabriel for raising this point.

(v 157–158).⁵⁴ Of course, the limited, sequential understanding of the narrative imposed on the human mind does not apply to the all-knowing gods, whom Babylonian authors may well have regarded as their primary audience.

5 A Cliffhanger

I end my essay with one last example, from the end of Tablet VI in *Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh and Enkidu have returned to Uruk, triumphant after their killing of the Bull of Heaven. They have held a party with the other young men and have then gone to sleep. The very last lines of the Tablet read: “Enkidu got up to interpret (his) dream and said to his friend:” (VI 182–183). And then the Tablet ends. The following catchline gives us the first line of the next Tablet: “Why, my friend, were the great gods in counsel?” (VII 1).⁵⁵ If modern readers want to know the answer to Enkidu’s anxious question, they can simply turn the page and keep reading. The ancient scribes, however, would have had to procure the next Tablet: perhaps it was on their shelf, but since ancient tablet collections did not always include the entire series, they may have had to look in their neighbor’s library, or perhaps in another city. Breaking the plot mid-sentence turns the transition between Tablets into the ancient equivalent of a cliffhanger, an extreme form of *enjambement* that leaves the audience suspended in uncertainty, yearning for more. If we treat Tablets as random subdivisions of a story that was chopped up without consequence, we miss the force, allure, and poetic courage of such a moment of suspense.

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54 A similar scene is found in *Erra*, where the author Kabti-ili-Marduk first recites the epic to the god Erra, who had revealed the story to him (v 42–43). Erra then blesses those who will listen to and circulate his epic, and the first members of this imagined audience are other gods (v 49–50), followed by human kings, singers, scribes, and scholars (v 51–56).

55 *it-be₂-e-ma* ^d*En-ki-du₃* *šu-na-ta i-pa-šar* | *iz-zak-ka-ra a-na ib-ri-šu₂* | *ib-ri aš₂-šu₂ me-na-ma-a im-tal-li-ku ilū* (DINGIR^{meš}) *rabūtu* (GAL^{meš}); George, 2013, 630.

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