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*Rivkah Harris*

INANNA-ISHTAR  
AS PARADOX AND  
A COINCIDENCE  
OF OPPOSITES

The god: day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger.<sup>1</sup>

Inanna-Ishtar frequently has been described by ancient Near Eastern scholars as a complex, multifaceted goddess.<sup>2</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen concludes his sensitive discussion of the goddess by saying that Inanna has

This is a revised and expanded version of a paper that was presented at the American Oriental Society meeting held in Los Angeles in March 1987 and at the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in July 1988 in Philadelphia. Much has been written about Inanna-Ishtar by people outside of the field of ancient Near Eastern studies. The tendency in these writings is to flatten and level the distinctively Mesopotamian features of the goddess. For example, Joan O'Brien, in reviewing D. Wolkstein and S. N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) in *Classical World* 79 (1985): 60, states that "Inanna's resemblances to various Greek deities and to the Aegean nature deities of the Bronze Age [is] currently being resurrected by archaeologists and students of Greek religion." See also the observation by Marvin Pope, *Song of Songs*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), p. 562: "The combination of beauty and terror which distinguishes the Lady of the Canticle also characterizes the goddess of Love and War throughout the ancient world, from Mesopotamia to Rome, particularly the goddess Inanna or Ishtar of Mesopotamia, Anat of the West Semites, Athena or Victoria of the Greeks and Romans, Britannia, and most striking of all, Kali of India." The telling comments by Jo Ann Hackett, "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern 'Fertility' Goddess," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 65-76, serve as a corrective. She notes (p. 75) that "the fullness and breadth of the power of these goddesses represented in the ancient world is boiled down to one or two aspects." I will therefore largely bypass the works by nonspecialists and focus on the primary sources and the studies by specialists.

<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> The history of the syncretism and fusion of the Sumerian Inanna with the Akkadian Ishtar is complex and problematic. Scholars have attempted to resolve the problem in different ways. See the study by W. Heimpel, "A Catalog of Near Eastern Venus Deities,"

“become truly all woman and of infinite variety.”<sup>3</sup> Samuel N. Kramer has taken note of “the contrasting strands in Inanna’s multi-faceted character.” Leo Oppenheim was of the view that Ishtar possessed “divine qualities which are extremely difficult to characterize.”<sup>4</sup> In his thoroughgoing article on Inanna-Ishtar, C. Wilcke comments that although all possible epithets are attributed to the goddess, there is little within the scope of human life that falls within her domain.<sup>5</sup> That Inanna “represents the irrational notions within Sumerian society” is the suggestion of B. Alster.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, the French Assyriologist J. Bottéro has emphasized the bipolarity and marginality of the goddess that he believes derives from her association with the prostitute.<sup>7</sup> Of special interest too is the stimulating article by H. I. J. Vanstiphout where he stresses the goddess’s “variety of features, her constant movement, her unabating struggle for domination.” He concludes that the Mesopotamians “so to speak eliminated strife as an abstract principle by incorporating it into the psychology of Inanna.”<sup>8</sup>

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*Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 4 (1982): 9–22. See also Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 135–43. For the purposes of this article I will treat the two goddesses as one, ignore the numerous historical issues and problems, and instead focus on presenting a theoretical framework for understanding the special features of the goddess. The Sumerian Inanna already incorporates many of the distinctive aspects of the Akkadian Ishtar.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, p. 143. In his article “Mesopotamian Religion: An Overview,” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 9:459, Thorkild Jacobsen suggests that the fact that “the offices attributed to her show little unity or coherent pattern” may be due to “the syncretistic image of Inanna.” I hope to show that, on the contrary, there does exist a coherency in her attributes.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel N. Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), p. 77; Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> C. Wilcke, “Inanna-Ishtar,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, ed. D. O. Edzard (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 5:74–87, esp. 81. See also D. O. Edzard, “Mesopotamien: Die Mythologie der Sumerer und Akkader,” in *Wörterbuch der Mythologie*, ed. H. W. Haussig (Stuttgart: Klett, 1962), 1:86–89, esp. 81, who states that the goddess “ist die hervorragendste und wegen ihrer vielfältigen und vielschichtigen Gestalt am schwierigsten zu erfassende Göttin des sum. und akk. Pantheons.”

<sup>6</sup> B. Alster, “An Aspect of ‘Enmerkar and the Lord of Arrata,’” *Revue d’Assyriologie* 67 (1973): 101–9, quote on 109.

<sup>7</sup> J. Bottéro, “La femme, l’amour et la guerre en Mesopotamie ancienne,” *Poikilia Études offertes à Jean-Pierre Vernant* (Paris: EHESS, 1987), pp. 165–83. Bottéro suggests various possible explanations for the special character of the goddess, which include ethnographical, historical, and psychological factors. For him, since the gods are man writ large, the human model for the deity is the prostitute, advocate of free love, a marginal person in society, “incapable de s’intégrer directement à la vie sociale des autres, et . . . génératrice de conflits, incapable de résoudre ces heurts inévitable et quotidiens en se pliant aux usages et aux convenances” (p. 177). Bottéro’s views certainly merit consideration. But there is, in my opinion, much more to the goddess.

<sup>8</sup> H. I. J. Vanstiphout, “Inanna/Ishtar as a Figure of Controversy,” *Struggles of the Gods: Papers of the Groningen Work Group for the Study of the History of Religions*,

These scholars and others all touch on a highly elusive yet essential aspect of the goddess's configuration, one that was at the core of her awesomeness and the source of her abiding fascination for the Mesopotamians and their neighbors.<sup>9</sup> It is this baffling yet basic quality of the goddess on which I will focus and which I will attempt to define and describe.

Stated succinctly, I would say that Inanna-Ishtar was a paradox; that is, she embodied within herself polarities and contraries, and thereby she transcended them. She was, to put it somewhat differently, a deity who incorporated fundamental and irreducible paradoxes. She represented both order and disorder, structure and antistructure. In her psychological traits and behavior she confounded and confused normative categories and boundaries and thereby defined and protected the norms and underlying structure of Mesopotamian civilization.

Prayers, hymns, myths, festivals, and cultic personnel reveal the contours of this distinctive aspect of the goddess who was far more than simply the goddess of fertility, of love and war, and the Venus star. I might add that in Mesopotamia it could only be a goddess and not a god who would incorporate anomalies and antinomies. As Sherry Ortner suggests, it is the female who is usually assigned "completely polarized and apparently contradictory meanings, since extremes, as we say, meet."<sup>10</sup>

Although the oxymoronic aspect of Inanna-Ishtar's personality may well be rooted in historical events, it had, I think, profound theological significance for the ancients.<sup>11</sup> The contraries that led to disorder added a dimension that should not be quickly dismissed or denigrated. Inanna-Ishtar was far more than "truly all woman and of infinite variety."<sup>12</sup>

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ed. H. G. Kippenberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), pp. 225–37, esp. p. 233. Vanstiphout discusses the various scholarly interpretations suggested down the years to account for her manifoldness.

<sup>9</sup> There are, e.g., many parallels between Ishtar and the Hurrian goddess Ishtar-Shawushka. For these see I. Wegner, *Gestalt und Kult des Ishtar-Shawuska Kleinasien. Hurritologische Studien* (Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Zerker, 1981), 3:1–9.

<sup>10</sup> Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Women, Culture and Society*, ed. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, p. 135, observes that her many different aspects (which make for the ambiguities) incline one "to wonder whether several, originally different deities, have not here coalesced in one, the many faceted goddess Inanna." See also the study by Heimpel (n. 1 above) for an historical reconstruction of the fusion of Inanna and Ishtar.

<sup>12</sup> As Jacobsen concludes his discussion of the goddess (*The Treasures of Darkness*, p. 143). So, too, Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer* (n. 3 above), p. 96, misses the menacing complexity of the goddess when he says that "Inanna is the very epitome of the liberated woman, the ideal divine patroness for the current women's lib movement. Bright, brave and desirable, nonetheless she allowed no one, neither man nor god, to stand in her way."

The texts reveal both the benign and the horrific sides of the goddess's personality. All too often, as others have noted,<sup>13</sup> her myths reveal her capriciousness.<sup>14</sup> Inanna-Ishtar frequently acts in ways that disrupt the social order. She can be wild and savage, excessive in her sexuality and love of war. Her sexual encounters mingle eroticism with violence.

In the Gilgamesh Epic she is depicted, on one hand, as a compassionate, maternal goddess, distraught at the destruction of mankind by flood: "Ishtar cries out like a woman in travail."<sup>15</sup> At the same time she is described in the scene where she proposes marriage to Gilgamesh as a lusty, aggressive goddess, vindictive and vengeful when rejected by the hero.<sup>16</sup> The composer of the so-called standard version of the Gilgamesh Epic incorporated the originally separate flood story into his version, surely aware of the contradictory depictions of the goddess. They apparently presented no problem to him.

The goddess's hypersexuality is frequently noted in the texts, especially in the Gilgamesh Epic. But it comes as no surprise that a recently published myth emphasizes her sexual innocence: "I am one who knows not that which is womanly—copulating. I am one who knows not that which is womanly—kissing."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Especially Kramer and Jacobsen.

<sup>14</sup> The study of her myths is still in its infancy. But see G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), pp. 103–5, 108–15. For an analysis by one of the few scholars in the field with interest in and knowledge of the study of mythology, see B. Alster, "On the Interpretation of the Sumerian Myth 'Inanna and Enki,'" *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 4 (1975): 20–34. For valid criticism of historical interpretations of her myths, see J. S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 9–10. For folkloristic methodology being applied to Inanna's myths, see n. 36 below. For surveys of the goddess's myths, see S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 153–63; and Edzard, "Mesopotamien" (n. 5 above), pp. 86–89.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 94 xi:116. This is not to say that Inanna-Ishtar is a mother goddess. She is not. Although the mother of sons (see Wilcke [n. 5 above], p. 80), her maternity is of no consequence in her myths.

<sup>16</sup> Pritchard, ed., p. 84 vi:1–79. For another interpretation of the encounter of Ishtar and Gilgamesh, see Tzvi Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of *The Gilgamesh Epic* Tablet 6, Lines 1–79," *History of Religions* 26, no. 2 (1986): 143–87. It is important to note that the mother-goddess, Mami, of the earlier flood story in the Old Babylonian *Atrahasis* was replaced by Ishtar. For this, see J. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), pp. 224–25. Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer*, p. 74, comments on the positive relationship between Gilgamesh and Inanna in the Sumerian Gilgamesh episodes in contrast to the Akkadian epic.

<sup>17</sup> S. N. Kramer, "BM 23631: Bread for Enlil, Sex for Inanna (Tab. II–IV)," *Orientalia* 54, nos. 1–2 (1985): 117–32, esp. 127, lines 138–39.

Inanna-Ishtar is a liminal figure; she is androgynous, marginal, ambiguous. She is neither here nor there. She is betwixt and between. And as Victor Turner observed, “ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols.”<sup>18</sup>

The powerful hymn of the *entu* priestess Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon, ruler of Akkad (2370–2316 B.C.E.) to Inanna highlights the anomalies of the goddess: she is the “Lady (who) soothes the reins, the lady (who) gladdens the heart,” but also: “Like a dragon you have deposited venom on the land.”<sup>19</sup> She is both a loving spouse to Dumuzi and a hostile wife.<sup>20</sup>

The most vivid expressions of the goddess’s innate contradictions appear in the following passage:

To run, to escape, to quiet and to pacify are yours, Inanna. . . .  
 To destroy, to build up, to tear up and to settle are yours, Inanna. . . .  
 To turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man are yours, Inanna. . . .  
 Business, great winning, financial loss, deficit are yours, Inanna. . . .  
 Neglect, careful preparation, to raise the head and to subdue are yours, Inanna. . . .  
 Slander, untruthful words, to speak inimical (words) (and) to add hostile words are yours, Inanna. . . .  
 To initiate a quarrel, to joke, to cause smiling, to be base and to be important are yours, Inanna.<sup>21</sup>

Even more pointed are the following lines: “You have thrown into confusion those threads which have been ordered. . . . You organize those threads which bring confusion. . . . Inanna, you have destroyed what should not have been destroyed, you have made what should not have been made.”<sup>22</sup>

Inanna-Ishtar as the source of human conflict and destruction is frequently underlined in prayers: “Star of the battle-cry, who can make brothers who have lived together in harmony fight each other.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> W. W. Hallo and J. J. A. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 19 v:40, 15 ii:9.

<sup>20</sup> See the moving laments of the bereaved young widow Inanna after the death of her husband Dumuzi in Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, pp. 49–52. And yet the goddess is responsible for his seizure in her stead by the demons of the netherworld in the Sumerian myth, “Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld.”

<sup>21</sup> A. W. Sjöberg, “in-nin šà-gur-ra: A Hymn to the Goddess Inanna,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 65, no. 2 (1976): 161–253, quote on 189–95.

<sup>22</sup> Alster, “An Aspect of ‘Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta’” (n. 6 above), p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> E. Reiner and H. G. Güterbock, “The Great Prayer to Ishtar and Its Two Versions from Boğazköy,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 21 (1967): 255–66, quote on 259.

“When you put clean festive garments on them / You soil one, / and another you neglect even though his is clean(!) . . . “You, Ishtar, thus always finish men off.”<sup>24</sup>

Inanna-Ishtar is ambiguity incarnate. She is, to quote Susan Stewart’s definition of ambiguous, “that which cannot be defined in terms of any given category [she] threatens the integrity of individual categories being ‘either this or that something else.’ [She] belongs to more than one domain at a time and will not fix [her] identity in any one member of this set of domains. [She] is both this and that.”<sup>25</sup>

Two myths seem to imply the great vulnerability of the goddess to madness, the enormous potential of her raw power for incalculable destructiveness if uncurbed. Her wildness and unpredictability, they suggest, are dangerous to both humans and gods. She cannot in her marginality be a symbol of unchecked power. The Sumerian myth several times repeats the refrain, “How you (Inanna) torment heaven and earth.”<sup>26</sup> It is the wily Sumerian trickster god Enki who comes to the aid of gods and men by fashioning the *gala*, the lamentation priest, providing him with prayers and laments as well as with musical instruments. With their aid, the *gala* soothes the fierce and angry goddess.

More curious is the Akkadian myth incorporated into a hymn in praise of Ishtar.<sup>27</sup> It relates the creation by the Akkadian counterpart of Enki, Ea, of the goddess’s double, Şaltu, literally, Strife.<sup>28</sup> He creates her from the dirt of his fingernails, as he does the sexless creatures in the Sumerian version of the goddess’s descent to the

<sup>24</sup> H. G. Güterbock, “A Hurro-Hittite Hymn to Ishtar,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 1 (1983): 157–58. Though other gods also act in cruel and unpredictable fashion, none seems to do so as characteristically as this goddess.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> S. N. Kramer, “BM 29616: The Fashioning of the *gala*,” *Acta Sumerologica* 3 (1981): 1–9. This is an instance, then, of music as therapy as it is in an episode of the biblical David and Saul story (1 Sam. 16:23). I. J. Gelb, “Homo Ludens in Early Mesopotamia,” *Studia Orientalia* 46 (1975): 73, comments, “It also seems quite clear that the *gala*, while men, had certain feminine characteristics which connect them with women.” This is especially interesting in light of the sexual ambiguity of the goddess’s cultic personnel.

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent treatment of this myth and references to studies of the text, see B. R. Foster, “Ea and Şaltu,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of J. J. Finkelstein*, ed. M. de J. Ellis (Hamden, Conn.: Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1977), pp. 79–84.

<sup>28</sup> I don’t think there are any grounds for assuming that the Mesopotamians had a view of two kinds of strife, as one finds, e.g., among the Greeks. See J.-P. Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1983), pp. 40–41. So, too, in the Middle Ages there is a good Venus and a bad Venus (G. D. Economou, “The Two Venuses and Courtly Love,” in *In Pursuit of Perfection*, ed. J. M. Ferrante and G. D. Economou [Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1975], pp. 17 ff.).



Netherworld.<sup>29</sup> (That strife is personified may indicate the high value the Mesopotamians placed on it and the importance of the role attributed to it.) Šaltu is formed to do battle with the ferocious Ishtar and so to tame her. But this proves unnecessary. The sight of Šaltu, “a gross travesty of Ishtar herself” is sufficient to curb the goddess.<sup>30</sup> The hymn ends with Ea conciliating Ishtar by instituting an annual whirling dance in her honor, a dance associated with men.<sup>31</sup>

W. W. Hallo has noted: “Ishtar’s preoccupation with the *me*’s may almost be said to approach the character of an obsession in Sumerian literature. In ‘Inanna and Enki’ we have one version of the manner in which with a good deal of deviousness, the goddess acquired the *me*’s from Enki.”<sup>32</sup> The *mes* are especially important in Enheduanna’s hymn to the goddess.

The meaning of the term *me* basic to civilization has long been discussed and debated.<sup>33</sup> What is significant for us is the intimate relationship between the goddess and the *mes*, for both embody antitheses. Among other things, the *mes* include: “The setting up of lamentations . . . the art of lovemaking . . . the art of prostitution . . . the art of forthright speech . . . the art of power . . . the art of treachery . . . the art of straightforwardness . . . the plundering of cities . . . deceit . . . the art of kindness . . . fear . . . consternation . . . the kindling of strife . . . counseling . . . heart-soothing.”<sup>34</sup>

Central then to the Mesopotamian perspective is the existence of antitheses and contradictions, the delicate balancing of order and disorder.

<sup>29</sup> Pritchard, ed. (n. 15 above), p. 56:219. These creatures, like Inanna-Ishtar, are liminal, being neither male nor female. In the Akkadian Descent Ea creates an *assinnu*, who is a cultic member of the goddess’s temple.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, “Ea and Šaltu,” p. 84. See Hallo and van Dijk (n. 19 above), p. 52, for mention of Inanna’s “untamable anger.” And for the passage, “Who can temper your raging heart. Your malevalent heart is beyond tempering,” see Hallo and van Dijk, p. 19:38–39.

<sup>31</sup> The Akkadian word for this whirling dance is *guštu*, a pun on Ishtar’s name, Gušea. In this hymn Ishtar is described as “dancing the whirl as a man does.”

<sup>32</sup> Hallo and van Dijk, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of *me*, see *ibid.*, pp. 49–50. Hallo and van Dijk translate the *mes* as “divine attributes.” For a full analysis of the *mes*, see G. Farber-Flügge, *Der Mythos Inanna und Enki unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Liste der me*, Studia Pohl, no. 10 (Rome: Päpstliches Bibelinstitut, 1973), pp. 116–64. I find that the translation by Alster, “the cultural norms,” is the most fitting. See his “On the Interpretation of the Sumerian Myth ‘Inanna and Enki’” (n. 14 above), pp. 20–34, esp. p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> D. Wolkstein and S. N. Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 15–18. For the Sumerian and somewhat different translation (in German), see Farber-Flügge, pp. 56–59.



The observation by Froma Zeitlin on the personality of the Greek god Dionysus seems particularly appropriate to Inanna-Ishtar: in her own person she “attests to the *coincidentia oppositorum* that challenge the hierarchies and rules of the public masculine world, reintroducing into it confusions, conflicts, tensions, and ambiguities, insisting always on the more complex nature of life than masculine aspirations would allow.”<sup>35</sup>

Central to the goddess as paradox is her well-attested psychological and more rarely evidenced physiological androgyny.<sup>36</sup> Inanna-Ishtar is both female and male. Over and over again the texts juxtapose the masculine and feminine traits and behavior of the goddess. She can be both compassionate, supportive, and nurturing and assertive, aggressive, and strong-willed. In short, she breaks the boundaries between the sexes by embodying both femaleness and maleness.

To illustrate briefly from the primary sources:

<sup>35</sup> Froma Zeitlin, “Playing the Other: Theatre, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama,” *Representations* 11 (Summer 1985): 63–94, quote on 79. I find that Dionysus in the deepest sense approaches the very special and elusive quality of Inanna-Ishtar far more than does any goddess in any other tradition.

<sup>36</sup> Heimpel (n. 1 above), disagrees with the view that a case can be made for Inanna-Ishtar’s androgyny. But see now the thorough and excellent article by B. Groneberg, “Die sumerische-akkadische Inanna/Ištar: Hermaphroditos?” *Die Welt des Orients* 17 (1986): 25–46, who criticizes Heimpel’s view (pp. 30–33). She concludes, “Die Tatsache ist ein weiter Hinweis darauf, dass auch in Mesopotamien die bi-sexuelle Idee nicht in konkreter, sondern in mythologischer Sprache, verstanden werden will.” Groneberg finds the male warlike aspects of the goddess attested from ca. 2500–ca. 700 B.C.E. Iconographically, Inanna-Ishtar is frequently represented as a woman-in-arms. On her iconography with bibliography, see U. Seidel, “Inanna-Ishtar,” in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, ed. D. O. Edzard (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), 5:87–89. J. Ochshorn, “Ishtar and Her Cult,” in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present*, ed. C. Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 20, errs when she speaks of “the startlingly androgynous vision of ancient Near Eastern polytheism.” Apart from Inanna-Ishtar (and Hurrian Ishtar-Shawushka) the gender boundaries are strictly adhered to in Mesopotamia. So, too, is she mistaken when she suggests that “victory in war was not viewed as an essentially feminine or masculine trait” (Ochshorn, p. 20). War was a masculine occupation and preoccupation. Although Mesopotamian society was not the sexually dimorphic society of classical Athens, the public sphere, with the exception of very limited functions, was closed to women. For this, see I. J. Winter, “Women in Public: The Disk of Enheduanna, the Beginning of the Office of En-priestess and the Weight of Visual Evidence,” in *La femme dans le Proche-Orient Antique*, ed. J.-M. Durand (Paris: Éditions recherche sur les civilisations, 1987), pp. 189–201. It is noteworthy that C. Fontaine, “The Deceptive Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Myth: Inanna and Inaras,” in *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*, ed. J. C. Exum and J. W. H. Bos, Semeia, no. 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), p. 91, applying folkloristic methodology to the Sumerian myths of Inanna, comments that “Inanna fills with ease the typical action roles ascribed to male characters in traditional compositions. . . . At the same time, Inanna resists total ‘masculinization’ and retains her feminine nature” (emphasis mine). In short, the goddess is both masculine and feminine.

Though I am a woman I am a noble young man,<sup>37</sup>

Her coming forth is that of a hero . . . lordship and kingship he placed in her hand.<sup>38</sup>

When I take my stand at the rear of battle, verily I am the woman who comes and draws near. When I sit in the ale-house, I am a woman (but) verily I am an exuberant man,

When I am present at a place of quarreling, verily I am a woman, a perfect pillar.

When I sit by the door of the tavern, verily I am a prostitute who knows *the penis*. The friend of a man, the girl-friend of a woman.<sup>39</sup>

Though Inanna-Ishtar is a wife and mother, neither is of great significance in her mythology.<sup>40</sup> She is not involved with the normal feminine pursuits of weaving and child care. The goddess's roles as prostitute and warrior place her outside of the female domestic domain and in the extradomestic world of the former and in the public arena of men who quest for power and fame.<sup>41</sup> Over and over again the texts stress her bloodthirstiness, her love of war and carnage: "Battle is a feast for her."<sup>42</sup> "She washes the tools in the blood of battle. She opens the 'door of battle.'"<sup>43</sup> "Inanna, you pile up heads like dust, you sow heads like seeds."<sup>44</sup>

And at the same time, the maternal solicitous love of Inanna for Mesopotamian kings is noted again and again: "She (Ishtar) held you

<sup>37</sup> See the lexical section of *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of Chicago*, vol. M/2, p. 306.

<sup>38</sup> D. D. Reisman, "Two Neo-Sumerian Royal Hymns" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1969), p. 167:18, 24.

<sup>39</sup> M. E. Cohen, "The Incantation Hymn: Incantation or Hymn," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 4 (1975): 606:14-22.

<sup>40</sup> The father of the children is not Dumuzi, and her sons play no role in her mythology or worship.

<sup>41</sup> The analogical link between love and war is not uncommon in ancient Near Eastern texts. See C. Meyers, "Gender Imagery in the Song of Songs," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1987): 209-23, for "the military structures set forth in relation to the woman" (p. 221). Of interest is the comment by B. Eichler, "Of Slings, Shields, Throw Sticks and Javelins," in *Studies in Literature from the Ancient Near East Dedicated to Samuel Noah Kramer*, ed. J. M. Sasson, American Oriental Series, no. 65 (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1984), p. 99, n. 1, on the passage in the exordium of Inanna and Ebih, describing Inanna as "the one who darts forth in the great battles pressing the siege shield upon the ground." The Sumerian term for "darting forth" occurs elsewhere in association with prostitution.

<sup>42</sup> Just as "to go to war is a festival for young men." See *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. I/J, p. 197.

<sup>43</sup> A. W. Sjöberg and E. Bergmann, *The Collection of Sumerian Temple Hymns*, Texts from Cuneiform Series, no. 3 (Locust Valley, N.Y.: Augustin, 1969), p. 47, no. 40:515.

<sup>44</sup> Cooper (n. 14 above), p. 251:188-89.

in her kind arm (like a child)."<sup>45</sup> "In her loving bosom she embraced you and protected your whole figure."<sup>46</sup>

The significance of Ishtar-Inanna's androgyny is aptly described by B. Groneberg: "Wohl infolge ihres bi-polaren Wesens ist vor allem Dingen die Göttin Inanna/Ishtar, die bestehende Ordnungen umkehren und doch als negativen und positiven Pol eines geordneten Ganzen in sich vereinen kann."<sup>47</sup> Her androgyny also manifests itself ritually in the transvestism of her cultic personnel. The awesome power of the goddess shows itself in the shattering of the human boundary between the sexes: "She (Ishtar) [changes] the right side (male) into the left side (female), she [changes] the left side into the right side, she [turns] a man into a woman, she [turns] a woman into a man, she ador[ns] a man as a woman, she ador[ns] a woman as a man."<sup>48</sup>

Mesopotamians believed that the transforming of men into women and women into men through the frightening power of the goddess was done "in order to teach the people religious fear."<sup>49</sup>

Inanna-Ishtar combines male aggressiveness with the force of a superabundance of female sexuality. She encompasses the two forms of potential disorder and violence—sex and war.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. K, p. 406, for *kirimmu* "as a characteristic and functional position of a mother's arm assumed in order to hold a child safely."

<sup>46</sup> Pritchard, ed. (n. 15 above), p. 451. The maternal love and concern of Ishtar of Arbela for Esarhaddon and his son Ashurbanipal are especially prominent in the messages sent by the goddess to these rulers via a "prophet" who might be either male or female. On these, see Pritchard, ed., pp. 449–51.

<sup>47</sup> Groneberg (n. 36 above), pp. 42–43.

<sup>48</sup> Sjöberg, "in-nin šà-gur-ra" (n. 21 above), p. 225. Sjöberg gives references and discusses the meaning of the transformation implied here. In his opinion, the passage does not suggest "a changing of sexes when referring to the Inanna-Ishtar cult. The passages refer only to the changing roles of women and men in the cult ceremonies." In the reference (p. 225) to Ishtar changing Esarhaddon's enemy from a man into a woman, in my view, the hope is that the enemy will become powerless like a woman. Note the association in Mesopotamia, as elsewhere, of the left side with the female and the right side with the male. On the "pure right" hand and the "impure left" hand, see M. Civil, "Enlil and Ninlil: The Marriage of Sud," in *Studies in Literature from the Ancient Near East Dedicated to Samuel Noah Kramer*, ed. J. M. Sasson, American Oriental Series, no. 65 (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1984), esp. pp. 46–47.

<sup>49</sup> L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra*, Sources from the Ancient Near East 1, no. 3 (Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1977), p. 52 iv:56: "*ana šupluḥ niši*". The well-attested sexuality and femininity of Inanna-Ishtar, and her powers of fertility for humans and animals as well as the land, are vividly depicted in the rich poetry of the sacred marriage rites. For these, see S. N. Kramer, *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth and Ritual in Ancient Sumer* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969). What I want to emphasize here is the paradoxical juxtaposition of her manliness/maleness alongside her femininity/femaleness, the bipolarity which is the special character of the goddess.

<sup>50</sup> See the very relevant observation by S. Macdonald, "Drawing the Lines—Gender, Peace, and War: An Introduction," in *Images of Women in Peace and War: Cross-cultural and Historical Perspectives*, ed. S. Macdonald et al. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), p. 6: "Where war is defined as a male activity and where highly

The goddess also confounds the boundaries of status, of high and low. Her very special relationship with kings extends from early times down to Ashurbanipal, the last Assyrian king (see n. 46). Of notable prominence is her relationship with Sargon of Akkad, the Semitic ruler who “laid the basis for the new departure in Mesopotamian political organization and ushered in a complex of social, religious, and artistic innovation that deserve[s] to be regarded as a kind of cultural explosion.”<sup>51</sup> The term “dynasty of Ishtar” is, as B. Foster describes it, “a tantalizing late sobriquet” for the Old Akkadian dynasty of Sargon and his successors. He makes the provocative comment that “the way of Ishtar points to something in the early Mesopotamian view of warfare . . . a paradox neatly drawn in an Old Babylonian Sargon epic where the undulating lines of battle are compared to two women in the act of giving birth, gushing blood in their climactic agony.”<sup>52</sup> When Ishtar turns away from her dynasty, ruin and devastation inevitably follow.

At the same time that the goddess is associated with the most powerful in the land, with those who wield the greatest human power, she is also the patroness of prostitutes, those who belong to the fringes of society, to its marginal members.<sup>53</sup> In the Gilgamesh Epic, Ishtar assembles her devotees to mourn the killing of the Bull of Heaven by Gilgamesh and Enkidu: “(Thereupon) Ishtar assembled courtesans, hierodules and prostitutes.”<sup>54</sup> She is herself as the *harimtu*, the harlot of Heaven, the role model for her votaries: “O harlot, you set out for the alehouse / O Inanna, you are bent on going into your (usual) window (namely to solicit) for a lover . . . / You, my lady, dress like one of no repute in a single garment / The beads (the sign) of a harlot

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valued masculine characteristics are often associated with war, a female warrior must be seen as inherently unsettling to the social order.” War, contra Ochshorn (n. 36 above), is a masculine activity in Mesopotamia. See now the provocative but problematic comments of B. R. Foster, “Women in Sargonic Society,” in *La femme dans le Proche-Orient Antique*, ed. J.-M. Durand (Paris: Éditions recherche sur les civilisations, 1987), pp. 55–56, where he speaks of “the feminine aspect of war.” Crucial is the very significant role that Ishtar plays in the Akkad dynasty, a period of transition and ideological transformations in Mesopotamian society.

<sup>51</sup> W. W. Hallo and W. K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 54. Hallo and van Dijk (n. 19 above), pp. 6–7, suggest that the linking of Ishtar with the Sumerian Inanna which persists in all the traditions about Sargon may reflect his association (sexual?) with a priestess of the goddess.

<sup>52</sup> Foster, “Women in Sargonic Society,” pp. 55–56. On the much later analogy between war and childbirth, see M. Huston, “The Matrix of War: Mothers and Heroes,” in *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. S. R. Suleiman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 131–35.

<sup>53</sup> For comments on prostitution in Mesopotamia, see my “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic” (in press).

<sup>54</sup> Tigay (n. 16 above), p. 135.

you put around your neck.”<sup>55</sup> Inanna-Ishtar thus breaks down the category of status as noted quite explicitly in the proverb: “At Ishtar’s command the noble’s wife gets a bad name.”<sup>56</sup>

Inanna-Ishtar shatters the boundaries that differentiate the species, those between divine and human, divine and animal, human and animal. But evidence for this is harder to come by than her confusion of the sexual categories. An episode in the Gilgamesh Epic is perhaps the most telling. She becomes enamored with the hero and proposes marriage to him—thereby assuming the masculine role.<sup>57</sup> Gilgamesh, in a long, devastatingly critical speech, rejects her proposal. (She will subsequently retaliate in typically male fashion.) He enumerates her past sordid affairs, her previous lovers and their fates. They were Dumuzi, a bird, a lion, a war-horse, a shepherd, and a gardener. All came to grief. The shepherd she turned into a wolf. Ishtar thus confused the boundaries in her choice of lovers between divine and human, divine and animal (and bird); and in the transformation of a human into a wolf, the boundary between human and animal, the divisions then between the species.<sup>58</sup>

Lions especially are associated with Ishtar.<sup>59</sup> She is the only goddess to have the epithet of lionness (*labbatu*),<sup>60</sup> and with her fierceness and raging power it is indeed a fitting epithet, even more befitting the maleness of the goddess.

Relevant here is the new interpretation by Thorkild Jacobsen of the well-known Burney Relief.<sup>61</sup> The winged goddess of the plaque with

<sup>55</sup> Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (n. 1 above), p. 140. See below Jacobsen’s new interpretation of the Burney Relief as an Ishtar icon that may have been on display in a brothel.

<sup>56</sup> W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), p. 218:7. Note that this proverb is immediately preceded by proverbs concerning prostitutes, male and female, the goddess’s devotees.

<sup>57</sup> Her proposal is very brief in contrast to Gilgamesh’s lengthy rejection. In “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic,” borrowing from W. D. O’Flaherty’s discussion on “Banalization and Derision of Gods” in her *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 72–76, I suggest that in this episode Ishtar is at the bottom, not on the top, as one would expect a goddess to be. This is an instance, one of several in the epic, of status inversion.

<sup>58</sup> See Abusch (n. 16 above), pp. 165–73, for a stimulating discussion of the space/time structure of Gilgamesh’s speech.

<sup>59</sup> See Seidel (n. 36 above), vol. 5, p. 88, and vol. 7/1–2, p. 81, for “Löwen in Verbindung mit Göttern.” See also V. W. Fauth, “Istar als Löwengöttin und die löwen köpfige Lamaštu,” *Die Welt des Orients* 12 (1981): 21–36.

<sup>60</sup> *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. L, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, “Pictures and Pictorial Language (The Burney Relief),” *Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Mindlin et al. (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987), pp. 1–11. For the earlier interpretation, see H. Frankfort, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1955), pp. 110–12.

bird's claws, flanked by owls and standing on two lions couchant, he believes, is Inanna as "Lady Owl" who, when named Kilili, "denotes the harlot who like the owl comes out at dusk." He suggests that the Burney Relief may have "served as a cult-relief at the house altar of an ancient bordello." If so, and Jacobsen makes a convincing case, then the very depiction of the goddess breaks down the boundary between species, between the divine and the ornithic.

There is the strong possibility that the cultic celebrations<sup>62</sup> enacted in worship of the goddess shattered and confused the boundaries that separated the generations, for on these occasions adults played at children's games. The festivals of the goddess were the time for disorder and antistructure, when reversals in categories of age, species, status, and sex all came into play.

Inanna-Ishtar's cultic celebrations and cultic personnel above all reflect her anomalousness and liminality. She is, one might say, externalized into unordered, carnivalesque celebration that demonstrates a reaching beyond the normal order of things and the breakdown of norms. The goddess's festivals are institutionalized license. They celebrate and tolerate disorder. They are occasions when social rules are in abeyance and deviance from norms is articulated. Through symbolic inversion they attack the basic categorical differences between male and female, human and animal, young and old. Crucial in contributing to our understanding of the underlying elements of Ishtar's festivals is a very difficult text that was long thought to be a list of children's games. Anne Kilmer has convincingly demonstrated through painstaking analysis that this text "is at home, so to speak, among the Inanna/Ishtar cultic texts."<sup>63</sup>

That it was long thought to be a list of children's games is not surprising. It does mention children's games: "jumprope," "disappear," "hide and seek-seek," to name a few. It is striking to find that the types of games mentioned here fit very well into the classification of games set up by Roger Caillois: competition (races, combat), chance (dice), pretense (masks, costumes, theater), and vertigo (swings, merry-go-round[?], dancing [?]).<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> It is not my intention to give here the details of these festivals but, rather, to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of the festivals, which in turn shed light on the distinctive nature of the goddess. To date, no theologico-historical study of these festivals has been made.

<sup>63</sup> I am most grateful to Anne D. Kilmer of the University of California, Berkeley, for very generously putting her important manuscript "An Oration on Babylon" at my disposal. It will be appearing in the near future.

<sup>64</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. M. Barash (New York: Free Press, 1961), p. 36.

Play (*mēlulu*) is an integral part of Inanna-Ishtar's personality.<sup>65</sup> She is "the player (*mummiltu*) par excellence."<sup>66</sup> The semantic range of the Akkadian word for play includes dancing and acting and, not surprisingly when we think of the goddess, involves the arena of war, for her playground was the battleground: "Goddess of fights, let the battle proceed like a play of puppets." "Do not turn away in battle (literally, in the play of Ishtar)." "Ishtar, whose play is fighting."<sup>67</sup>

The interrelationship between play and ritual has been the subject of much interdisciplinary study since J. Huizinga's pioneering *Homo Ludens*.<sup>68</sup> "During carnivalesque occasions the indeterminacy of play serves as a mediating prelude to the transcendence of a social collective preparing it to be recast as a religious community."<sup>69</sup> As U. Eco observes, "Comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions; on the contrary they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They remind us of the existence of rule."<sup>70</sup> Play in Ishtar's festivals is related to the carnivalesque. They "embodied the essential carnival spirit, strongly characterized by the transgression of daily conventions and excesses of behavior."<sup>71</sup>

In what must have been boisterous, noisy entertainment, disorder was celebrated in honor of the goddess of disorder. In the "Games Text," reference is made to "improper speech," obscenity, in other words. Mockery, abuse, and hostile words were very much part of the goddess's repertory. They form part of the *mes* with which the goddess was obsessed.<sup>72</sup> Pornographic language characterizes the so-called love lyrics that were recited in the cultic performances of her celebrations. These texts are described by their editor, W. G. Lambert: "Imagery of the boldest kind is commonplace, and the eroticism is the most explicit for Mesopotamia. . . . How should we take it? As factual record merely,

<sup>65</sup> For references to play in relationship to Inanna-Ishtar, see simply *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. M/2, p. 16. On the symbolic association of war and sports (games), see K. Blanchard and A. Cheska, *The Anthropology of Sport: An Introduction* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), pp. 57–58.

<sup>66</sup> *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. M/2, p. 196.

<sup>67</sup> See the lexical section and *b* under *mēlultu*, *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> On the history of theories of play, see Stewart (n. 25 above), p. 44, n. 91. See also the excellent article by D. Handelman, "Play," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 11:363–68.

<sup>69</sup> Handelman, p. 366.

<sup>70</sup> U. Eco, "The Frames of Comic Freedom," in *Carnival!* ed. U. Eco et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> M. J. Goldwasser, "Carnival," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 3:98–99.

<sup>72</sup> Farber-Flügge (n. 33 above), pp. 108–9, discusses the terminology for abusive language.



as jest, as innuendo or as something else?"<sup>73</sup> In a recent article, D. O. Edzard suggests that Inanna-Ishtar's cultic personnel were people "mit festgeschriebenen Rollen vermutlich von bestimmten Aussenhen, besonderer Redeweise, bei denen das vorausgesetzende Publikum ganz bestimmte Handlungen erwartete-sowie etwa über zweitausand Jahre später die Charactere der Comedia dell' arte."<sup>74</sup> Bawdy theater was very much a part of the celebration in which the goddess's personnel enacted (probably with appropriate costumes and masks) the roles of their goddess (paramour of the god Marduk in the "love lyrics") and other deities (e.g., Marduk and his spouse Šarpanitum). The "Games Text" also seems to be formulated as a dialogue. The "improper speech" of the text suggests that scatological jokes were part of the entertainment, the scatological that "is the explosive flaunting of . . . taboos" along with "a foisting off of the terror of breaking the taboos."<sup>75</sup> Ritual obscenity thus also attacked the conventional limits. Through farce and bawdy songs the goddess's celebrants would find temporary release from societal restrictions.

There are suggestions in the "Games Text" and tantalizing hints from cylinder seals that masked men (and women?) may have worn lion masks and special cloaks during the festivities honoring "the lioness," thus shattering the boundaries between human and animal.<sup>76</sup>

Dancing too was part of the celebration for the goddess who danced "the whirl like a man."<sup>77</sup> Dance suggests the power of movement as opposed to stasis and limitation.

Inanna-Ishtar's celebrations were then "creative negation" that reminded her devotees "of the need to reinvest the clean with the filthy, the rational with the animalistic, the ceremonial with the carnivalesque

<sup>73</sup> W. G. Lambert, "The Problem of the Love Lyrics," in *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Hans Goedicke and J. J. Roberts (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> D. O. Edzard, "Zur Ritualtafel der sog. Love Lyrics," in *Language, Literature, and History: Philosophical and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reiner*, ed. F. Rochberg-Halton (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1987), pp. 57-69. See esp. p. 68.

<sup>75</sup> G. Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke* (New York: Grove, 1968), p. 14. Kilmer also notes that sounds such as "chirping" and "twittering" were made by the goddess's personnel, which also suggests a departure from conventional patterns of speech. There may well have been a sacred clown(s) in her personnel, but to date there is no firm data on such a person or persons.

<sup>76</sup> See R. S. Ellis, "Lion-Men in Assyria," in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of J. J. Finkelstein*, ed. M. de J. Ellis (Hamden, Conn.: Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1977), p. 75, who tentatively suggests a link between the lion men on cylinder seals and the Ishtar cult.

<sup>77</sup> See n. 31 above.

in order to maintain cultural vitality. And they confirm the endless potentiality of dirt and the pure possibility of liminality.”<sup>78</sup>

The chief participants and actors in the goddess’s cult are well known by name: *assinnu*, *habbūbu*, *kurgarrū*, *kulu’u*, *pilpilu*. What is uncertain is how best to describe them.<sup>79</sup> There is even ambiguity about their sexuality—whether they were eunuchs, hermaphrodites, or simply transvestites. *The Assyrian Dictionary* describes the *assinnu* as seeming “to have functioned mainly in the cult of Ishtar, to have sung specific songs and dressed in distinctive garments. There is no specific evidence that he was a eunuch or a homosexual.”<sup>80</sup> The *kurgarrū* (as well as *assinnu* and *kulu’u*) are described as “performing games, plays, dances and music as part of the ritual (of the great festivals). There is no evidence that they were eunuchs or homosexuals. However, in the Descent of Ishtar the reference to the *kurgarrū* as neither male nor female may indicate they were transvestites performing in female apparel. On the other hand, the mention of daggers seems to suggest that they were devotees of Ishtar’s performing some sword dance.”<sup>81</sup> Groneberg appropriately describes the *kurgarrū* and *assinnu* in the following way: “So tanzen sie und spielen den Kampf. Das ‘Kampfspielen’ . . . und ‘Tanzenlassen des Feindes’ . . . sind aber Eigenschaften der Kriegerischen Ishtar.”<sup>82</sup> And self-mutilation may well have been part of their ritual:

The male prostitutes comb their hair before her . . .  
 They decorate the napes of their necks with colored bands . . .  
 They gird themselves with the sword belt, the “arm of battle” . . .  
 Their right side they adorn with women’s clothing . . .  
 Their left side they cover with men’s clothing . . .  
 With jump ropes and colored cords they compete before her . . .  
 The young men, carrying hoops, sing to her . . .  
 The ascending *kurgarra* priests grasped the sword . . .

<sup>78</sup> Barbara Babcock, “Introduction,” *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. B. Babcock (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 32.

<sup>79</sup> See Wilcke (n. 5 above), pp. 85–86; and the excellent discussion with references by Groneberg (n. 36 above), pp. 33–39.

<sup>80</sup> *The Assyrian Dictionary*, vol. A/2, pp. 341–42.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. K, pp. 558–59. This brings to mind the *bissu* priests of Java who “possess both male and female attributes. . . . At annual dances . . . the *bissu* become possessed, enter a trance and plunge daggers into their larynxes.” For the *bissu*, see J. L. Peacock, “Symbolic Reversal and Social History: Transvestites and Clowns of Java,” in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. B. Babcock (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 209–10.

<sup>82</sup> Groneberg, p. 39.

The one who covers the sword with blood, he sprinkles blood . . .  
He pours out blood on the dais of the throne room.<sup>83</sup>

Their transvestism simulated the androgyny of Inanna-Ishtar. It was perhaps the inversion of the male/female binary opposition that thereby neutralized this opposition. By emulating their goddess who was both female and male, they shattered the boundary between the sexes. Thus at her festival time the full range of human emotions might be freely manifested without regard to the stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity. The function of transvestism, as Eliade observed, was “a coming out of one’s self, a transcending of one’s own historically controlled situation . . . a paradoxical situation impossible to maintain in profane time, in an historical epoch, but which is important to reconstitute periodically in order to restore, if only for a brief moment, the initial completeness, the intact source of holiness and power.”<sup>84</sup> The cultic personnel of the goddess in their costumes, words, and acts had but one goal: “to delight Ishtar’s heart, give themselves up to (otherwise) for[bidden] actions.”<sup>85</sup>

Inanna-Ishtar cuts across socioeconomic and gender distinctions: “Be it slave, unattached girl, [Ishtar] preserves her. Women and men indeed revere her.”<sup>86</sup>

<sup>83</sup> D. D. Reisman, “Iddin-Dagan’s Sacred Marriage Hymn,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 25 (1973): 187:45–64. For a different translation, see now Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once . . . : Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 115–17. He translates *sag-ursag* as “guardsmen” rather than “male prostitutes,” and suggests (p. 115, n. 8) that they were “a class of cult personnel in the service of Inanna. Originally apparently a corps of warriors, they developed into actors in ritual performance.” The text suggests that the *sag-ursag* wore partly male and partly female clothing. Jacobsen understands the clothing passage differently (p. 116, n. 10). But he too interprets it as signifying “a reversal of normal usage.” Recently, A. W. Sjöberg, “A Hymn to Inanna and Her Self-Praise,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 40, no. 2 (1988): 177–78, also opts for the warrior status of the *sag-ursag*, who is equated with the *assinnu*. This points up how much remains to be known about the goddess’s personnel.

<sup>84</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 113.

<sup>85</sup> Cagni (n. 49 above), p. 52. On p. 53, n. 133, he states that “in other contexts (where the Akkadian idiom *akālu asakka* ‘eat a taboo item’ is used) all refer to non-authorized people.” Only in the case of Ishtar’s devotees is the breaking of taboos permitted and even welcomed.

<sup>86</sup> Pritchard, ed. (n. 15 above), p. 383. E. M. Yamuchi, “The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia and the Jewish Roots of Gnosticism,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 143–75, esp. 145–50, critically discusses and disputes the view that traces the powerful Gnostic text *The Thunder, Perfect Mind* (*The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. J. M. Robinson [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], pp. 103–4), in which “a female revealer, probably Sophia, expresses herself in all kinds of paradoxes and contradictions,” back to Mesopotamian origins, specifically, the Akkadian Descent of Ishtar.

Perhaps Clifford Geertz's words best explain her enormous and abiding popularity: "The strange opacity of certain empirical events, the dumb senselessness of intense or inexorable pain, and the enigmatic unaccountability of gross inequity all raise the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world, and hence man's life in the world, has no genuine order at all—no empirical regularity, no form, no moral coherence. And the religious response is the same: the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order which will account for and even celebrate the perceived ambiguities, puzzles and paradoxes in human experience."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, ed. W. A. Lessa and E. Z. Vogt, 3d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 173.