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Erra's Human Form

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Abstract In *Erra and Išum* IV 3, the god Išum tells Erra, a deity of war and disease, "you changed your divinity and seemed like a man" (*ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš*). Scholars have interpreted the line in two different ways. The first is that Erra came to resemble mortals in his behavior. The second is that he became human-like in his physical form. This article weighs the two positions while drawing on (1) parallel passages in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and *Enūma eliš*; (2) a revealing metaphor Išum uses elsewhere in *Erra* IV to describe Erra's slaughter of Babylon's inhabitants; and (3) a re-analysis on the meanings and uses of the word *ilūtu* (divinity), and argues that Erra is not said by Išum to have behaved like a mortal, but rather to have assumed human form. It then proposes, albeit tentatively and speculatively, that Erra's human form is implied to be that of a usurper king who rose against the Babylonian king Adad-apla-iddina, with him then being Erra's human avatar – the god of violence in mortal guise.

Keywords Erra and Išum. Babylonian literature. Babylonian mythology. Mesopotamian conceptions of divinity. Historical background of myths.

Next came Fraud, and he had on,
Like Eldon, an ermined gown;
His big tears, for he wept well,
Turned to mill-stones as they fell.
And the little children, who
Round his feet played to and fro,
Thinking every tear a gem,
Had their brains knocked out by them.
(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Mask of Anarchy*)

1 Introduction

Erra and Išum tells how Erra, a god of war and pestilence, became incensed at the contempt he felt to be directed against him by humans, and nearly killed them all in blind and egotistical fury.[1] At the start of

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1 For a score edition of *Erra and Išum* with philological commentary, see Taylor 2017, 338-554. An updated edition of the poem is currently being prepared by the *eBL* (*electronic Babylonian Library*) project, and an edition of the first tablet of the text can already be found on the site (see `www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/1/5/SB/I`).

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the fourth tablet of the poem, the god Išum – Erra's advisor and vanguard,[2] a benevolent and protective deity who, later in the text, would manage to calm Erra down and thus save the world – speaks to Erra of how Erra had earlier entered the city of Babylon to wreak havoc upon it:

IV 1 *qurādu erra ša rubê marduk zikiršu lā tašḫut*
IV 2 *ša dimkurkurra āl šar ilānī rikis mātāti taptaṭar rikissu*
IV 3 *ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš*
IV 4 *kakkīka tannediqma tēterub qerebšu*
IV 5 *ina qereb bābili kī ša ṣabāt āli taqtabi ḫabinniš*

IV 1 "O warrior-Erra! You were not afraid of sovereign Marduk's name.
IV 2 "Dimkurkurra, city of the king of the gods, the bond of the lands – you have undone its bond.
IV 3 "You changed your divinity and seemed like a man,
IV 4 "You girded on your weapons, and entered Babylon.
IV 5 "In Babylon's midst, as if to seize the city, you spoke *like an agitator*".[3]

This article concerns *Erra* IV 3, *ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš*, translated above as "You changed your divinity and seemed like a man". The grammar of the line is clear enough, yet its sense is less straightforward. What does it mean for Erra to 'change his divinity', and in what way did he 'become like a man'?

The scholars who have commented on this question can be split into two interpretive camps. According to the first, Erra came to resemble mortals in his behavior. According to the second, he became human-like in his physical form. In the first camp are Luigi Cagni, Benjamin Foster, and Selena Wisnom. Cagni translated IV 3 as "You changed your divine nature and made yourself like a man" (1977, 48), and understood the statement as a rebuke by Išum of Erra "for having behaved like an insensate mortal" (1977, 49). Foster has "You changed your divine nature and made yourself like a mortal", and comments "That is, by ravaging sanctuaries?" (2005, 901). And Wisnom, who has "You have changed your divine nature and become like a human" (2019, 210), proposes to understand IV 3 in light of the opening line of the poem *Atraḫasīs*, *enūma ilū awīlum* "when the gods were (like) man", writing,

> Erra has regressed to the divine equivalent of a primitive state, a state that the gods were in only before the flood […]. The human-like behavior is probably twofold: the irresponsibility of such an act, and the act of rebellion itself. (Wisnom 2019, 210)

The scholars of the latter camp are Michael Roberts and Kynthia Taylor, the latter of whom translates *Erra* IV 3 as "You changed your divinity and became like a human" (2017, 227). Both of them make it clear in their summary of Erra's actions in Babylon that they take the line to mean that Erra became like a man in that he assumed human form.[4]

These two positions have not been brought into dialogue, for in advocating for one of them scholars have not acknowledged the other. Nor has evidence from elsewhere in *Erra*, or from the broader Mesopotamian textual record (apart from *Atraḫasīs*), been brought to bear on this dilemma. This article seeks to do so, and thereby shed light on the meaning of *Erra* IV 3 and indicate which of the two interpretations is the correct one. It starts by asking what it would mean for Erra to behave like a human (§ 2). It then asks how Erra's human form would differ from his divine one (§ 3). This is followed by a discussion of a key question: What specifically does the phrase *ilūtka tušannīma* mean in this context? To attempt to answer that question, the meanings of *ilūtu* 'divinity' are re-delineated (§§ 4-4.5). The implications Sections 2-4.5 may have for the question of Erra's transformation in *Erra* IV 3 are then outlined (§ 4.6), and a new interpretation of the historical significance of *Erra* IV 3 in light of these implications is proposed (§ 5).

2 On Išum, see George 2015.

3 On *ḫabinniš*, see Durand 2009.

4 "Erra takes on human form" (Roberts 1971, 15); "Erra […] assumes a human form" (Taylor 2017, 227).

2 Human Behaviour

As the divergence between the opinions of Cagni, Foster, and Wisnom indicates, it is far from evident what, exactly, about Erra's behavior would be characterized as human-like by Išum. I am aware of only two other Mesopotamian sources that may shed explicit light on this question: *Atraḫasīs* and *Enūma eliš*.[5] *Atraḫasīs*, referenced by Wisnom in her analysis of *Erra* IV 3, begins in its Old Babylonian version with the line *inūma ilū awīlum* "When the gods were (like) men".[6] Two versions of the opening line are known from the first millennium: *inū*[*ma*] *ilū kī amīlī* "When the gods like men", which opened an edition from Ashurbanipal's library;[7] and, matching the OB edition, *inūma ilū amēlu*, the first line of a manuscript of *Atraḫasīs* I from Neo-Babylonian Sippar.[8] Importantly for the present discussion, the humanity of the gods in the opening line of *Atraḫasīs* seems to lie specifically in their toil. This is indicated by the very next line, whether in its Old Babylonian version (*ublū dulla izbilū šupš*[*i*]*kka* "They did labor and bore drud[g]ery") or the Standard Babylonian one from the Sippar Library (*ilū nīra ibnû tupšikka* "The gods made the yoke, the carrying basket"). *Atraḫasīs* makes no explicit connection between human-like behavior and rebelliousness, nor with irresponsibility; it is only in these lines, which speak specifically of labor and drudgery, that deities are compared to (or equated with) mortals. That humanness is here connected to labor is in keeping with the later events of *Atraḫasīs*, for in this poem humans are created for one purpose only: to do the hard work required to sustain the gods and thus enable them to live in perfect leisure.[9] The very same explanation for the existence of humankind is given in the sixth tablet of *Enūma eliš*.[10] Yet Erra performs no drudgery in Babylon, and the human-like aspect of his behavior would not be the same as in *Atraḫasīs* or in *Enūma eliš*. The 'key' to Erra's humanness should therefore be sought elsewhere.

The second passage that may bear on the question of what may constitute human-like behavior on the part of Erra is found earlier in *Enūma eliš*. In that poem's first tablet, the god Ea kills Apsû, the universal progenitor, thereby saving Apsû's children from their sire's wrath (I 59-72). Ea later convinces his father Anšar that this was a good thing to do, despite Apsû's murder having led to Tiamat herself deciding to kill her children (II 65-70). After being convinced of the wisdom of Ea's previous actions, Anšar tells Ea that they were worthy of a god (II 73-5: *mārī epšētūka iliš naṭ*[*âm*]*a* "My son, your deeds are f[i]t for a god"). This statement suggests that, as one would imagine, gods were expected to do wise and great things. Could *ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš*, then, mean that Erra's subsequent actions were not worthy of a god? Perhaps, yet the phrasing of *Erra* IV 3 seems a highly ambiguous and vague way for Išum to indicate that Erra behaved less well than was normally expected of a deity. In any case, without knowing more about how the poet of *Erra* conceived of human-like behavior, it is difficult to have much of an idea as to what specifically human-like, as opposed to god-like, behavior Erra might have engaged in in tablet IV.

3 Divine Appearance

The question of whether and how human-like behavior differs from god-like behavior is by no means easy to get at, yet that of gods possibly looking different from humans, and what the differences may be, seems more straightforward. If one were to go by some Mesopotamian sources, one would conclude that there would be no noticeable difference between the forms of deities and mortals, for in these texts the very gods ask their addressees, point-blank, whether they are mortal or divine.[11] But in other

5 For an edition of *Atraḫasīs*, see Lambert, Millard 1999. For an edition of *Enūma eliš*, see Heinrich 2021.

6 For a summary of scholarly opinions concerning the interpretation of *inūma ilū awīlum*, see note on OB *Atraḫasīs* I 1 in Jiménez, Rozzi 202.

7 K.10604 rev. 3' (Lambert 1969, 534).

8 IM.124646 (Al-Rawi, George 1996, 184).

9 See OB *Atraḫasīs* I 182-93, paralleled almost verbatim in SB II 69-80. That the purpose of humans is to bear the gods' toil is explicit in Ea's (OB) and Anu's (SB) commissioning of their creation: *šupšik ilim awīlum lišši* "Let man bear the toil of god" (OB I 186-93), *tupšikk*(*i*) *ili a*[*m*]*ēlu lišši* "May M[a]n bear the drudgery of god" (SB II 170-80).

10 Marduk, in announcing his intent to create humankind, declares, *lubnīma lullâ amēla* / *lū emdū dulli ilīma šunu lū pašḫū* "I shall create humans (lit. the human being) / let the load of the gods be imposed on them, so that they (the gods) may rest" (*Enūma eliš* VI 7-8).

11 For example, in *Inanna's Descent to the Underworld* (ETCSL c.1.4.1) ll. 240-4, Ereškigal asks the kur-ĝar-ra and gala-tur-ra whether they are human or divine, specifying the different boons she would grant them in each case.

texts the opposite is implied, namely that the appearance of the gods was different in the extreme from that of mortals. One example of such a text is *Gilgamesh*, in whose Old Babylonian version Šamhat says to Enkidu, *anaṭṭalka enkidu kīma ilim tabašši* "I regard you, Enkidu, you are like a god" (II 53).[12] In the Standard Babylonian version, she similarly tells him, [*dam*]*qāta enkidu kīma ili tabašši* "You are [beauti]ful, Enkidu, you are like a god" (I 207).[13] Also in SB *Gilgamesh*, the scorpionman stationed at the gate of the twin mountains can tell from afar that Gilgamesh is more than mortal, and then the scorpionwoman does one better by ascertaining the exact shares of humanity and divinity in Gilgamesh merely from the sight of him (IX 48-51).[14] That the scorpion-man announces the (partial) divinity of the approaching Gilgamesh by saying *ša illikannâši šīr ilāni zumuršu* "He who has come to us – his body is the flesh of the gods", suggests that what gave Gilgamesh's godliness away was the god-like splendor of his physique.

Another Akkadian composition in which divinity is said to manifest visually is the poem *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*,[15] whose protagonist, Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, describes a dream in this way:

> *ištêt ardatu banû zīmūša*
> *nesîš lā ṭuḫḫât iliš mašlat*
> *šarrat nišī kabitti māti*
>
> There was a young woman – her features were fair,
> While still at a distance, not having come near, she seemed like a god,
> A queen of the people, honored in the land.
> (*Ludlul* III 31-3)

The phrase *iliš mašlat* "She seemed like a god", is strikingly similar to *tamtašal amēliš* "You seemed like a mortal". Notably for the present discussion, it is clear in the context of the *Ludlul* passage that the young woman's semblance of divinity lies in her appearance rather than her behavior. Another passage of Standard Babylonian literature containing a phrase combining *iliš* 'like a god' and *mašālu* 'to seem like' (though in the D-stem) is *Enūma eliš* I 138: *melammī uštaššâ iliš umtaššil* "She (Tiamat) armed them (the monsters) with auras, making them like a god". The word *melammu*, of which *melammī*, translated here as 'auras', is a plural, refers to a sublime and terrifying radiance that was thought to surround divine beings.[16] Tiamat is thus said to make the monsters seem like gods by endowing them with this visual attribute.

The *melammu* can emanate not only from gods, but also from mortals favored by them (the Assyrian king,[17] for example), and even inanimate objects. It can overwhelm (*saḫāpu*) men, subduing them without need for battle.[18] This is the case in the Assyrian *Underworld Vision* (SAA 3 32), in which the Assyrian prince Kummâya, a figure whose historical referent remains mysterious,[19] beholds none other than Nergal – that is, Erra himself:

> *nāya kī adkû qurādu nergal ina kussê šarrūti ašib agê šarrūti apir* [*… ina*] *abūsātīya iṣbatannīma ana maḫrīšu ú-qar-*[*ri*]*-*ʳ*ban*ʔ¹*-ni* [*ā*]*muršu itarrurā išdāya melammūšu ezzūti isḫupûnni šepī ilūtīšu* [*rabī*]*ti aššiqma akmis azziz*
>
> When I raised my eyes: Warrior Nergal, sitting on a kingly throne, wearing a kingly crown! […] He seized me [by] my forelock, and *dr*[*e*]*w* me towards him. When [I] saw him, my legs (lit. foundations) quaked, his furious radiance overwhelmed me. I kissed the feet of his [gre]at divinity, then came to a kneel and stood up. (SAA 3 32: rev. 11-14)

12 For an edition of OB *Gilgamesh* II, see George 2022a.

13 For an edition of SB *Gilgamesh* I, see George 2022b.

14 For an edition of SB *Gilgamesh* IX, see George 2022.

15 Edition Hätinen 2022.

16 On *melammu*, see Cassin 1968 and Winter 1994, among others.

17 On the Assyrian king's *melammu*, see Oshima 2018.

18 The (quite literally) overwhelming power of *melammu* is a recurring motif in Assyrian royal inscriptions, appearing, for instance, in Sennacherib's narrative of his third campaign, in which he narrates that the terror induced by his *melammu* overwhelms Hezekiah into delivering vast tribute (RINAP 3/1 4: 55-8).

19 For the identity of Kummâya with references to previous literature, see Frahm 2023.

If, like the young woman in Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan's dream, Erra quite literally looks divine; if, like Tiamat's fearsome monsters and Nergal in the *Underworld Vision*, he is surrounded by divine radiance, then he could conceivably conceal his divinity by changing his appearance. For much as Tiamat makes the monsters godlike by clothing them with *melammu*, Erra may have made himself human-like by obscuring it, as well as other visible indications of his sublime nature. That this is not only possible but likely is indicated by the fact that the phrases *iliš mašlat* and *iliš umtaššil* unambiguously concern visual markers of divinity, for this points to the similarly worded *tamtašal amēliš* likewise indicating a visual transformation, though in the opposite direction. This lends support to the interpretation of Roberts and Taylor.

A second argument in favor of their position draws on the specific metaphor Išum uses to describe Erra's attack on Babylon. Išum tells Erra of how, after Erra entered Babylon and started speaking within it, Babylon's citizens flocked around him, armed themselves, rushed to battle, cursed their (i.e. Babylon's) 'governor' (*šakkanak bābili*),[20] barred the city gate, and set Babylon's temples aflame (IV 6-14). Išum then says the following:

IV 15 *atta ālik maḫrimma pānuššunu ṣabtāta*
IV 16 *ša imgur-ellil uṣṣa elīšu tummidma ū'a libbī iqabbi*
IV 17 *muḫra rābiṣ abullīšu ina damī eṭli u ardati tattadi šubassu*
IV 18 *āšib bābili šunūti šunu iṣṣūrumma arrašunu attama*
IV 19 *ana šēti takmissunūtīma tabīr tātabat qurādu erra*

IV 15 You were the vanguard, seizing their lead!
IV 16 As for Imgur-Enlil – you aimed an arrow at it, "Woe, my heart!" it cried.
IV 17 Muḫra, the guardian of its gate – you cast his seat into the blood of youth and maiden.
IV 18 Those inhabitants of Babylon – they were the bird, and you their decoy:
IV 19 You caught them in a net, trapped, destroyed them, warrior Erra!

Išum then tells of how Erra travelled to the royal palace (IV 20); how the soldiers, upon seeing him, girded on their weapons (IV 21); and how the 'governor' became enraged (IV 22) and ordered his general to massacre Babylon's people mercilessly and plunder the city (IV 23-30). The royal army assembled, entered Babylon, and massacred its protected citizens (*ṣabē kidinni*), whom Erra, pitting men against each other like a boy smashing his toys together in mock battle, had just caused to bear arms against the invading army (IV 31-9).

In IV 18, as part of Išum's metaphorical description, cited above, of Erra's attack on Babylon, he likens Erra to a 'decoy' (*arru*), likely a live and immobilized bird used to attract others of its kind so they could be hunted. Here an excursus is required: the translation 'Lockvogel', 'decoy-bird', for *arru* (argued for in Landsberger 1933, 227) may seem conspicuously and dubiously specific, and therefore bears justifying. A prayer to Marduk and the gods of Esagil declares: *kī šuškalli ša bā'iri kalû saḫpa*[*nni*] / *kī arri ša usandî kalâku ina šē*[*ti*] "Like *confining* (*by*) the net of a hunter, it has overwhelmed [me] / like the *arru* of a fowler, I am confined in a ne[t]" (KAR 312 [Oshima 2011, P 7]: 13'-14'). From this couplet we can infer two things about the *arru*: that it was used by the fowler (*usandû*) as the hunter (*bā'iru*) uses a net (*šuškallu*), and that it was confined (*kalû*) in a net (*šētu*). That the *arru* was a living being we know from a Middle Babylonian administrative text, which records the disbursement of *kurummat iṣṣūri* 'bird-fodder' along with *kurummat arri* '*arru*-fodder' (PBS 2/2 34: 20). The distinction made here between bird and *arru* may lead one to conclude that the *arru* was not itself a bird. Yet another text, an administrative document written in Uruk in 606 BCE, indicates otherwise. It records a sale of *sumaktarātu*$^{\text{mušen}}$ *ana arrūti ina pān marduk-erība u erībšu usandî* "ten *sumaktarātu*-birds for *arru*-ship to Marduk-erība and Erībšu, fowlers" (GCCI 2 23: 1-4). This demonstrates that the distinction between *iṣṣūru* and *arru* is not that the latter is not a bird, but that it is a bird set apart for a specific purpose. From these attestations, we can infer that the *arru* was a living bird used as a hunting tool by the fowler and confined by him. The translation 'Lockvogel' therefore appears likely.

Išum, then, likely compares Erra to a decoy-bird, and then to a hunter snaring the citizens of Babylon in his net and slaughtering them. These images would perfectly describe a situation in which Erra assumes human form to lure other mortals and then orchestrates their demise: the birds alight to join one who looks alike to them, unaware of the trap set by the hunter; and the Babylonians gather around

20 As *šakkanak bābili* was one of the titles of the Babylonian kings – e.g. of Itti-Marduk-balāṭu (1135-1128; see RIMB 2 B.2.2.1: 7) and Nebuchadnezzar I (1121-1100 BCE; see RIMB 2 B.2.4.11: 3) – it is likely a king of Babylon who is referred to here.

the human-seeming Erra (IV 5), not knowing that he is, in fact, the god of violence, and that his hateful speeches are nothing more than a means to incite them against their 'governor', and thus bring about their death. The metaphor chosen by Išum is thus perfectly fitted to the scenario outlined by Roberts and Taylor, in which Erra disguises his divinity, assuming human form.

Erra changing his appearance immediately before entering Babylon would, moreover, be paralleled and echoed by an episode shortly later in tablet IV. After inciting a rebellion by Babylon's citizens against their 'governor' (*šakkanakku*), he travels to the palace and galvanizes the very same 'governor' and the royal army to massacre the same Babylonian citizens he incited to rebel. Importantly, we learn from Išum's words that, immediately before entering the palace, Erra put on a lion's face (or, understood less literally, a lion-like aspect).[21] This makes it seem more probable that Erra likewise affected a visual, as opposed to behavioral, transformation before entering Babylon itself.

4 The Nature of *ilūtu*

The third argument for *Erra* IV 3 referring to Erra taking human form has to do specifically with the first half of the line, *ilūtka tušannīma*. The clause, whose literal sense is "You changed your divinity", does not have any obvious sense to the modern English-speaking reader. This suggests that the Akk. *ilūtu* denotes something different than Eng. 'divinity'. And indeed, the CAD's definition of *ilūtu* (I/J: 104) – (1) divine power, divine nature (2) status of divinity, divine rank – is subtly different, and more expansive, from that of 'divinity'. To assess the accuracy of the CAD's definition of *ilūtu*, an analysis, drawing on citations of the word found in the CAD itself as well as *eBL*'s "Library", was carried out. It led to the following, alternative delineation, which attempts to be both more comprehensive and more specific than that of the CAD. It proposes five meanings for *ilūtu* (listed as A-E), given below with attestations for each.

4.1 *ilūtu* Meaning A: Being Divine

At times *ilūtu* appears to refer, as does English 'divinity', to the quality of being divine:

(1) *ultu ūme annî šimātīka ana* ***ilūti*** *limmanûma*
From this day let your (the cult image's) destiny be reckoned for **divinity**. (Walker, Dick 2001, "Nineveh Ritual Tablet", 167)

(2) *girra šitraḫ ṣīru nāš šalummat* ***ilūti***
Girra the resplendent, the sublime, bearer of the radiance of **divinity**. (Walker, Dick 2001, "Incantation Tablet I/2", 16)

4.2 *ilūtu* Meaning B: Deity

At other times, *ilūtu* seems to have another sense conveyed by English 'divinity', 'deity':

(1) *kakki aššur bēlīya ana* ***ilūtīšun*** *aškun*
I set up the weapon of Aššur, my lord, as **their divinity**. (RINAP 2 1: 99)

(2) *ana* ***ilūtīya*** *rabīte ina kalḫi lū amnūšu*
I reckoned it (a divine image of Ninurta) as **my** great **divinity** in Kalḫu. (RIMA 2 A.0.101.1: 132-4)

4.3 *ilūtu* Meaning C: Anaphoric

Judging by the sources, *ilūtu* can convey at least three additional senses, all of which the English 'divinity' is not generally used for. When used with the first of these senses, it is appended with a possessive suffix and used to refer, via anaphora, to an aforementioned god: Much as the English

21 IV 21: *zīm labbi tašakkanma tetērub ana ekalli* "You put on a lion's face and entered the palace".

'majesty' can refer to the person of the monarch, rather than the quality of being a monarch, when in the possessive (e.g. 'Her Majesty'), when *ilūtu* is appended with a possessive suffix it appears to refer to the deity itself. This usage of *ilūtu*, found in diverse sources, is well illustrated in the following excerpt from an inscription of Ashurbanipal:

> *tayyārat bēlūtīša tušadgila pānūya umma aššurbanipal ultu qereb elamti lemneti ušēṣânnīma ušērabanni qereb eanna amāt qibīt* ***ilūtīša*** *ša ultu ūmê ruqûti taqbû enenna tukallim nišī arkâti qāt* ***ilūtīša*** *rabīti atmuḫ ḫarrānu iširtu ša ulluṣ libbi taṣbata ana eanna ina qereb uruk ušēribši*
>
> She (Nanāya) assigned the return of Her Lordship to me, (saying) thus: "Ashurbanipal will take me out of the evil land of Elam and bring me into the midst of Eanna". The word spoken by **Her** Great **Divinity**, which she spoke in (lit. from) distant days, she has now manifested (lit. revealed) to later people: I took the hand of **Her** Great **Divinity**, she took a straight road of joy, and I brought her into Eanna in the midst of Uruk. (RINAP 5/1 9: vi 3-9)

4.4 *ilūtu* Meaning D: Divine Power/Nature/Form

At times, and in line with the CAD's first definition of *ilūtu*, quoted above, the word seems to refer to divine power:

(1) *ištar mārtam nāramtāšu bēltum ša* ***ilūssa*** *lā išannanū*
Ishtar, his beloved daughter, the lady **whose divinity** none can match. (RIME 4 E4.3.7.7: 22-5)

(2) *anāku asalluḫi ša ina pāṭ gimri šurbât* ***ilūssu***
I am Asalluḫi, **whose divinity** is supreme everywhere. (*Marduk's Address to the Demons* 89)[22]

At other times *ilūtu* seems to denote what may be termed, likewise going along with the CAD's first meaning of *ilūtu*, as a god's 'divine nature', but here more specifically defined as a divinity's individual qualities – that is, his or her form, attributes, and powers. This is the sense in which it appears to be used in the description of the Seven (*sebettu*), Seven gods of war and death,[23] in *Erra*'s first tablet:

(3) *ša sebetti qarrād lā šanān šunnât* ***ilūssun***
ilittašunu aḫâtma malû pulḫāti
āmiršunu uštaḫḫatma napīssunu mūtumma
nišū šaḫṭūma ul irrû ana šâšu
As for the Seven, warrior(s) unrivaled, **their divinity** is quite another:
Their origin is strange indeed, they are full of terrors,
(Any)one who sees them is struck with fear, their very breath is death,
The people are afraid so they do not approach them (lit. him).
(*Erra* I 23-6)

This passage is of special importance for our discussion of *Erra* IV 3, because the phrase *šunnât ilūssun* (*Erra* I 23), whose literal meaning is "Their divinity is changed" and is translated above as "Their divinity is quite another", uses language almost identical to *ilūtka tušannīma* "You changed your divinity". It may be indicative of the poet's understanding of such language that, to judge by the lines following *šunnâta ilūssun*, the Seven's unique divinity manifests in their very being – in their strange origins, the terror that fills them, their breath being death, and the people staying away in view of all these.

As noted by Cagni (1969, 150) and Taylor (2017, 403 fn. 25), a nearly identical phrase to *šunnât ilūssun* occurs in *Enūma eliš*:

(4) *uštāṣbīšumma šunnât* ***ilūssu***
šušqû ma'diš elīšunu atar mimmûšu

22 Edition Peterson 2020.

23 On the *Sebettu*, see Konstantopoulos 2023 and Renzi-Sepe 2023.

lā lamdāma nukkulā minâtūšu
ḫasāsiš lā naṭâ amāriš pašqā
He (Anu) perfected him (Marduk): **his divinity** quite another:
He is far superior, he surpasses them (the other gods) in every way,
His form is something too ingenious to understand,
Impossible to conceive, difficult to look upon.
(*Enūma eliš* I 91-4)

The parallelism between *ilūssu* and *mimmûšu* "all of him (lit. his everything)" indicates that *ilūtu* refers to Marduk's whole being, and as with the Seven, Marduk's unique *ilūtu* seems to manifest in his extraordinary innate characteristics – specifically his incomprehensibly fine physical features. Marduk's resplendent form also appears to be the referent of *ilūtu* in *Erra*'s second tablet:

(5) *enna ša itbû rubû marduk ša ummânī šunūti elâšunu ul iqbi*
ṣalmīšunu ša ina nišī abnû ana ***ilūtīšu*** *ṣīrti*
ša ilu lā irrû iṭeḫḫû mīnu
"Now, he who has risen[24] (from his dwelling), Sovereign Marduk –
he did not command the ascent of these craftsmen.
"How could their images, which I created among humankind,
come near to **his** (Marduk's) sublime **divinity**,
"Which not (even) a god can approach?"
(*Erra* II 31-3)

As Taylor also points out (2017, 403 fn. 25), language almost identical to that used to describe the 'different' divinity of the Seven appears in a hymn to Ninurta in his manifestation as Sirius; this is the fourth and last instance of which I am aware of a god's divinity being described using derivations of *šunnû*:

(6) *ina kullat kala ilī šu*[*n*]*nât* ***ilūtka***
ina nipiḫ kakkabānī numm[*u*]*rū zīmū*[*ka kīma*] *šamši*
Among all the totality of the gods **your divinity** is qui[te an]other:
When the stars come out, [your] features shine [like] Šamaš.
(K.128[25] obv. 13-14)

It may be significant that, in all three instances apart from *Erra* IV 3 in which a deity's *ilūtu* is said to be 'different', this statement is followed by remarks regarding that deity or deities' physical form: He who catches sight of the Seven is struck with fear; Marduk's physique is too ingenious to grasp and difficult to look upon; and the features of Sirius shine like the Sun. This indicates that, in these contexts, *ilūtu* refers specifically to the concrete manifestation of divinity: the fearful and awe-striking form of a god. This may be why it is Sîn, the radiant moon god, whose godliness is manifest to all, who is identified as Marduk's *ilūtu* in a syncretistic prayer to Marduk found at Nineveh:

(7) *sîn* ***ilūtka*** *anu malkūtka*
dagan bēlūtka enlil šarrūtka
adad gešrūtūka ea eršu ḫasīsīka
ṣābit qan ṭuppi nâbu [*t*]*eleʾûtka*
ašaredūtka [*n*]*inurta dannū*[*t*]*ka nergal*
Sîn is **your divinity**, Anu your sovereignty,
Dagan your lordship, Enlil your kingship,
Adad your might, wise Ea your intelligence,
Nabû, he who grasps the reed stylus, your [a]bility,

24 Foster (2005) translates *enna ša itbû* as "Even now that noble Marduk has arisen (from his dwelling)". Taylor (2017), similarly, has "Now that prince Marduk has arisen". However, it is more likely that *enna*, rather than indicating temporality, is used here to indicate semantic topicality, as it does in *Erra* I 149, spoken by Marduk, *enna aššu šipri šâšu ša taqbû qurādu erra* "Now, as for that task of which you spoke, Warrior Erra".

25 Edition Mayer 2005 and *eBL* (see `www.ebl.lmu.de/fragmentarium/K.128`).

[N]inurta your leadership, Nergal your streng[t]h.
(*Syncretistic Incantation-Prayer to Marduk* 1-5)[26]

4.5 *ilūtu* Meaning E: Godliness

A fifth meaning that can be conveyed by *ilūtu* but not by English 'deity' seems to have to do with how much of a god – that is, how great and powerful – a god is, in the same way that 'heroism' refers to the degree to which someone is a hero rather than his or her being a hero:[27]

(1) *anāku ana ṣalmāt qaqqadi **ilūtki** u qurdīki lušâpi*
I will praise **your divinity** and heroism to the black-headed people. (BM.26187:[28] 102)

(2) *ana marduk rēmēnî ana damiqti ana qātī damqāti piqdanni*
*ludlul narbîka luttaʾid **ilūtīka***
Entrust me to merciful Marduk, *to goodness*, to good hands,
So that I may praise your greatness (and) glorify **your divinity**. (Oshima 2011, P 8: 65''-6'')

4.6 Implications for *Erra* IV 3

The analysis given above delineates five meanings for *ilūtu*:

a. **Being divine** (as in Eng. 'divinity')
b. **Deity** (as in Eng. 'divinity')
c. **Anaphoric** (when appended with a possessive suffix, *ilūtu* can refer to a specific, aforementioned deity, e.g. *ilūtīša* 'Her Divinity' [cf. Eng. 'Her Majesty'])
d. **Divine power/nature/form**
e. **Godliness** (with 'godliness' referring to the degree to which a deity is godly rather than to the fact of his or her being divine).

Using each of these five meanings for *ilūtu* would produce the following five translations of *ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš*:

a. You changed your **being divine** and became like a man
b. You changed your **deity** and became like a man
c. You changed (sth.), **Your Divinity**, and became like a man
d. You changed your **divine power/nature/form** and became like a man
e. You changed your **godliness** and became like a man.

The translations corresponding to Meanings B-C do not seem to fit the context. We are therefore left with Meanings A, D, and E. Erra presumably did not change the fact of his divinity (Meaning A) before entering Babylon, for he was just as much a god while devastating the city as he was before doing so. In the sense that he is acting untoward, he may have conceivably changed the degree to which he is being godly (Meaning E), but the fact that the sources have *ilūtu* in parallelism specifically with *narbû* 'greatness'[29] and *qurdu* 'heroism',[30] indicates that a deity's degree of *ilūtu* was anchored in its power rather than its morals.

We remain, then, with Meaning D: divine power/nature/form. Saying that Erra changed his divine power in becoming like a man would not make sense, as he was no less powerful in decimating Babylon than he was previously. Choosing 'divine nature' would seem to bring us back, as it were, to where we started: translators have routinely translated *ilūtka tušannīma* as "You changed your divine nature",

26 Edition and discussion Oshima 2011, 386-96. This prayer is classified as Marduk 19 in Mayer 1976, 397.

27 On promises, often found at the ends of prayers, that the sufferer will praise divinities should they bring about his or her salvation see Mayer 1976, esp. 307-27, particularly relevant in this context since they discuss promises of the praise of *ilūtu*.

28 Edition Zgoll 2003 and *eBL* (see `www.ebl.lmu.de/fragmentarium/BM.26187`).

29 As in Meaning E, citation 2, above.

30 As in Meaning E, citation 1, above.

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leaving the specific nature of Erra's transformation unclear.[31] Yet here the three contexts, apart from *Erra* IV 3, in which *ilūtu* and *šunnu* appear together – namely in descriptions of the divinity of Ninurta, of Marduk, and, earlier in *Erra*, that of the Seven – come into play, supplying a third argument in favor of the position of Roberts and Taylor. In all these three contexts, a god's 'altered' divinity does not manifest in their behavior but in their very being, and most of all in their form. These parallels indicate that, in transforming his *ilūtu* and becoming like a man, Erra put in human form rather than behaving like a man. This understanding of *Erra* IV 3 would cohere with the line's translation by Jean Bottéro and Samuel Noah Kramer (1989, 241), "Après avoir modifié tes (apparences-) divines et t'être assimilé à un homme".

Two parallels to such a transformation may be noted. The first is found in a letter sent by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal to the people of Nippur. In that letter, Ashurbanipal promises them that whoever catches an unnamed fugitive will receive the criminal's weight in gold,[32] and then instructs them to monitor the roads and carefully interrogate all passers-by, lest the fugitive escape the Assyrians' grasp:

> *mindēma sartatti ramānšu ušannêma uṣṣâ mamma ša lā ša'āli lā tumaššarāma lā ittiq u kī ina pānī gaṣṣūte ittiqu*
>
> Surely,[33] he will dishonestly change himself and (try to) escape. Do not let anyone go without questioning! (No one) should pass (uninterrogated) even if they should pass through with a *chalky*[34] face! (SAA 21 18: obv. 19-b.e. 3)

The phrase *ramānšu ušannêma* "He will change himself" has almost the same grammatical construction as *ilūtka tušannīma*. As with Erra's transformation, it is used to denote a physical change done in the service of disguise – though on the part of a human rather than a god.

The second parallel would be found in a text produced by a different culture entirely: the *Bacchae* of Euripides. In that play, Dionysus – whose divinity Pentheus, king of Thebes, has denied and disrespected – disguises himself as a human immediately before he begins interacting with the people of Thebes (ll. 53-4).[35] He then upends their lives, none more so than that of Pentheus, who would later be ripped to pieces by his own frenzied mother with the aid of other women driven mad by Dionysus. Likewise, Erra would put on a human form immediately before going into Babylon and unleashing violent chaos within it.

31 E.g. Cagni 1977, Foster 2005, and Wisnom 2019, quoted above.

32 On this text, see Ito 2013.

33 As Wasserman demonstrates (2012, 43-63), the particle *minde* does not denote uncertainty (e.g. 'perhaps'), but a high degree of assurance (e.g. 'probably' or 'surely').

34 The phrase *pānī gaṣṣūte* is difficult. SAA 21 has "disfigured face", while Ito (2013, 23) translates "face of gypsum". Deriving *gaṣṣūte* from *gaṣṣu* 'gypsum, whitewash' (on the Mesopotamian uses of which see Firth 2011) and thus following Ito, is tempting: referring to the fugitive as having 'a gypsum-colored face' would make sense here, as this would serve, by means of hyperbole, to encompass any means of physical disguise. Yet *gaṣṣu* is not attested as an adjective derived from *gaṣṣu* 'gypsum, whitewash'. Rather, it is extant as meaning 'furious' (CAD G: 54), which does not fit the context, or 'trimmed, hewn' (CAD G: 54, derived from *gaṣāṣu*/*kaṣāṣu* 'to trim, cut' [CAD G: 53]). One may, aligning with SAA, opt for the second of these meanings in the sense that the fugitive 'change himself' by disfiguring his own face to avoid being recognized. Yet this would seem quite drastic and dangerous a method of disguise, certainly when compared to covering one's face with chalk. In favor of construing *gaṣṣūte* as 'chalky', one may offer two other arguments. The first is based on a Neo-Assyrian source. The adjective *gaṣṣānu* 'calcareous, chalky' is attested in a Neo-Assyrian letter discussing the inscription of a foundation stone with the king's name: *ša uššê karāri pūlu panīu ša nupaṭṭirūni gaṣṣānu šū* "Concerning the laying of the foundation – the former foundation stone that we loosened was (too) calcareous" (SAA 16 125: 5'-7'). Admittedly, the 3rd person masculine plural form of *gaṣṣānu* would be *gaṣṣānūte*, not *gaṣṣūte* as in SAA 21 18, yet that *gaṣṣu* could serve as an adjectival base makes it more likely that *gaṣṣūte* is likewise derived from it. The second argument has to do with Classical sources, for they speak of covering oneself with gypsum to modify one's appearance. Herodotus (*Histories* 8.27) and Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 10.1.11) tell of a night raid carried out shortly after the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE) by the Phocians against the Thessalians and their allies. Before the attack, we are told, the Phocians covered themselves with gypsum, with the result that their enemies, misled by the Phocian's appearance into believing that they were under the attack of beings supernatural rather than mortal, were soundly defeated. More importantly yet for the present discussion, such authors as Harpocration (s.v. "ἀπομάττων" [Keaney 1991, 36]) and Nonnos (*Dionysiaca* 6.169-73) relate that, before the titans killed and dismembered the infant Dionysus Zagreus, they covered their faces with gypsum to disguise themselves (ἐπὶ τῷ μὴ γνώριμοι γενέσθαι "to avoid being recognized", in Harpocration's phrasing). Based on these sources – brought to my attention thanks to R.G. Edmonds' helpful discussion of the role of chalk in the worship of Dionysus Zagreus (2013, 352-3), and for generous help in understanding which I thank John Clayton – one may argue that the author of SAA 21 18, though Neo-Assyrian, likewise associated gypsum with disguise. If so, this would mean that *gaṣṣūte* would more likely mean 'chalky'.

35 ὦν οὕνεκ' εἶδος θνητὸν ἀλλάξας ἔχω | μορφήν τ' ἐμὴν μετέβαλον εἰς ἀνδρὸς φύσιν "On which account I have changed my form to a mortal one and altered my shape into the nature of a man" (Murray 1909, transl. Buckley 1892).

5 The Usurper

One may also propose, building upon arguments, presented below, put forward by W.G. Lambert, William McGrath, and Peter Machinist, that Erra's putting on human form possibly reflects real historical events. Two fragmentary Neo-Babylonian chronicle tablets – Glassner 2004, 46 (here A) and 47 (here B) – narrate following concerning the reign of Adad-apla-iddina, who ruled between 1064 and 1043:

> *adad-apla-iddina apil itti-marduk-balāṭu aramû u šar ḫammā'i isḫû*(*šū*)^{A}*ma māḫāzī kala ša māti ušal*[*pitū*] (*agadê*)^{A} *dēr duranki sippar u parsâ iddû sutû itbēma šallat šumeri u akkadî ana mātīšu ušēṣi ašrāt marduk ište'ēma*[36]*libbašu* (A: *libbi bēl u mār bēl*) *uṭīb parṣīšu*(*nu*)^{A} *ušaklil*
>
> (During the reign of) Adad-apla-iddina, heir of Itti-Marduk-balaṭu, Aramaeans and a usurper rebelled (against him)^{A}, and desec[rated] all the sanctuaries of the land, laid low (Agade)^{A}, Der, Duranki, Sippar, and Parsâ. The Sutean rose up, and brought out all the plunder of Sumer and Akkad to his own land. He (Adad-apla-iddina) sought the sanctuaries of Marduk and gladdened his heart (A: the heart of Bel and the son of Bel) and perfected his (A: their) rites. (Glassner 2004, no. 46: 29-34, no. 47: 6'-9'; variants in brackets)

These tablets were not yet published when W.G. Lambert wrote his review of Gössmann's edition of *Erra*; yet, based on a fragmentary duplicate tablet (now available as Glassner 2004, no. 45), he made (1957-58, 397-8) a connection between the civil strife in *Erra* IV and Adad-apla-iddina's tumultuous reign. Due to the fragmentary preservation of that tablet, he believed Adad-apla-iddina to have been an Aramean usurper (*aramû šar ḫammā'i*) rather a king against whom Arameans and a usurper (*aramû u šar ḫammā'i*) rebelled (*isḫû*). He therefore argued *Erra* IV's civil strife to reflect citizen antagonism towards the usurper Adad-apla-iddina, himself potentially allied with the hated Suteans, and his reprisals against his own rebelling people.

McGrath, working along similar lines while having access to Glassner 2004, nos 46-7, speculates as follows regarding Erra's actions in Babylon:

> As for the first reported event, the civil strife in Babylon itself, one is reminded of the report of the Walker Chronicle which relates that Aramaeans and a usurper king rebelled against Adad-apla-iddina. Might the civil war of the *Erra Epic* be a distorted and exaggerated retelling of this episode? (McGrath 2024, 345)

And Machinist wrote as follows:

> the poem, perhaps unique among the major works of Mesopotamian religious literature, appears to be a transparent "mythologization" of a specific historical event or period. This point is nowhere better illustrated than in Tablet IV:3, where, to describe how Erra caused a civil war and destruction in Babylon, the poet claims: *i-lu-ut-ka tu-šá-an-ni-ma tam-ta-šal a-me-liš*, "You changed out of your divinity and made yourself like a man". (Machinist 1983, 221)

Thus, Lambert proposed that Erra's actions in Babylon are connected to Adad-apla-iddina's reign; McGrath made a connection between the civil war in Babylon and the usurper king who rose against Adad-apla-iddina; and Machinist highlighted *Erra* IV 3 specifically in construing *Erra* as a mythologization of a historical event. Combining these ideas, it may be tentatively and speculatively proposed that *Erra* IV 3 implies Erra to have taken the form of the usurper king who rose against Adad-apla-iddina and thereby sparked civil strife in Babylon. Erra's actions in tablet IV would then be a deliberate mythologization of events remembered, as shown by the chronicles quoted above, in later Babylonian historiography. Understood this way, Erra's instigation of a rebellion by Babylon's citizens would refer to an insurrection led by the *šar ḫammā'i* against Adad-apla-iddina, and Erra's subsequent driving of the *šakkanakku* into massacring the people of Babylon to Adad-apla-iddina's subsequent reprisal. That *Erra* IV is, in part, such a mythologization might help explain why it was specifically noted that Erra "changed his divinity and seemed like a mortal".

36 A: 33 [*iš-te-'e*]-*em*, B: 9' K[IN-*m*]*a*.

6 Conclusion

In *Erra and Išum* IV 3, the god Išum tells Erra, a deity of war and disease, "You changed your divinity and seemed like a man" (*ilūtka tušannīma tamtašal amēliš*). Scholars have offered two interpretations of the nature of Erra's transformation. According to the first, Išum means that the divine Erra behaved in a way more appropriate to a mortal than a god. According to the second, Išum meant that Erra came to seem like a man in that he took on human form. This article attempted to shed light on this question by drawing on *Erra and Išum* as well as the broader Mesopotamian textual record.

The resulting analysis has yielded three arguments in favor of the second interpretation. First, the fact that *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* and *Enūma eliš* speak of a being or beings' resemblance to deity in language strikingly similar to that of *Erra* IV 3, yet in a context showing this similarity to be visual rather than behavioral, indicates that Erra's resemblance to a human is likewise visual in nature. Second, the metaphor of the decoy bird, which Išum uses to describe Erra's massacre of the Babylonians, perfectly fits a scenario in which Erra pretends to be a man to draw Babylon's citizens to violence and then brings about their demise. And third, an analysis of the attestations of *ilūtu* 'divinity', reveals that in Mesopotamian contexts in which a god's divinity is said to be 'changed', that deity's uniqueness lies chiefly in the power and perfection of its form rather than unusual behavior on its part. It is then hypothesized that Erra's human form may perhaps represent a usurper-king who rose against the Babylonian king Adad-apla-iddina, thereby implying that he was Erra's human avatar – the god of violence in mortal guise.

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