Sumerian Disputation Poems

A total of six Sumerian poems fulfil the five characteristics of the genre outlined above: *Hoe and Plow* (*csl* 5.3.1), *Ewe and Grain* (*csl* 5.3.2), *Summer and Winter* (*csl* 5.3.3), *Tree and Reed* (*csl* 5.3.4), *Bird and Fish* (*csl* 5.3.5), and *Silver and Copper* (*csl* 5.3.6). These six poems are called in their final doxologies a-da-min, "disputation" (see above). They are, however, not the only Sumerian poems so classified: at least two other texts are called *adamìn* by their rubrics: *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* (*csl* 1.8.2.3) and *Enmerkar and Ensuḫkešdana* (*csl* 1.8.2.4). In addition, the poem *Dumuzi and Enkimdu* (*csl* 4.8.31) is classified by its rubric as a *balbale* (a rubric often used for love poetry), but a line towards the end represents it as a "disputation held between a shepherd and a farmer." These three poems, which have been normally described as either "epics" (thus the two texts featuring Enmerkar) or "love poems" (thus *Dumuzi and Enkimdu*), have been shown by several authors to have the same basic structure as other disputation poems, and also to contain indicators that suggest that they were performed.

Although they belong to the same emic category as the six poems mentioned, and although they display the same basic tripartite structure, these three poems differ from them in a number of ways. First, none of them contains a cosmogonic prologue, which appears in five of the six disputation poems (all except *Hoe and Plow*). Secondly, the contenders are human, and not inanimate objects. Thirdly, in the six disputation poems the narration is limited to the introduction, whereas it is ubiquitous in the other three poems. Our six poems therefore form a distinctive group within the texts called in their rubrics *adamìn*. Inasmuch as they are the only Sumerian poems that

---

25 The former was edited by Mittermayer 2009, the latter by Wilcke 2012b.
26 *ETCSL* 4.08.33. The text was edited by Sefati 1998: 324–343, see also the edition and translation by Attinger 2010/2015a.
27 *sipā engar-da a-da-min dug₄-ga* (*Dumuzi and Enkimdu* 88).
29 Except for the small narrative section contained within *Bird and Fish* (see below).
30 van Dijk 1953: 29–85 called them "adaman-du₄-ga’ sapientiaux," and justified regarding them as a group different from other *adamins* because they contained a comparison of the
fulfil the five requisites articulated above, these six poems are the only ones relevant to the present discussion.

As will be discussed below (1.4.a), Sumerian disputations have a tripartite structure: they begin with a prologue followed by the disputation proper, and end with an adjudication scene. The prologue aims to trace the conflict between the two contenders as far back as possible, to the beginning of the universe. Five of the six poems\(^\text{31}\) begin with a cosmogony that narrates how the gods created the universe and its creatures, including the two main characters, and how they both came to dispute. The reasons for the disputation are usually trifling: a casual encounter of the two litigants on their way to the palace or the temple with their offerings is enough to trigger the debate.

The debate is built as a series of speeches and rejoinders, which often number two per speaker. The arguments adduced by each speaker usually concern either their utility to humans or the opponent’s lack of it. The first speech of the disputation and all subsequent pleas are introduced by one of the following speech introduction formulae:

First speech: X-e Y-ra gù mu-un-na-dé-e, “X called out Y”\(^{32}\)
 Closure formula: u₄-bi-a X-e Y-ra in-šè mu-ni-in-dúb, “on that day X insulted Y”\(^{33}\)

---

relative merits of each contenders: “Nous entendons par adaman-du₁₁-ga sapientiel: les disputes qui ont pour objet la comparaison de valeurs, la lutte de prévalence. (...) Quand (...) le jugement ne procède pas par la voie objective de l’analyse qui est celle de la science, mais par la voie subjective de l’esthétique où les impondérables jouent un rôle, c’est la sagesse” (van Dijk 1953: 33). Other authors have also espoused a similar subdivision of the genre adamin: thus Wilcke 1965/1971: 2151–2153 and, following him, Volk 2011/2012: 219, divide the genre into “Streitgedichte historischen Charakters” (which includes the two Enmerkar stories plus Enki and Ninmah), “Streitgedichte mythologischen Charakters” (which includes Dumuzi and Enkimdu) and “Streitgedichte über naturkundliche Themen” (which includes the six disputations listed above).

31 Except for Hoe and Plow (which contains a hymn to the Hoe as its prologue).
32 Attested in Hoe and Plow 8, 20, and 63 (àm-ma-dé-e); Ewe and Grain 71; and Tree and Reed 49.
33 Attested in Summer and Winter 153 and 185; Tree and Reed 92 and 138; and Bird and Fish 51, 80, and 137. On the syntax of the formula, see Karahashi 2000: 126–127 and Michalowski 2004: 38.