CHAPTER I.4

The Place of Disputation Poems within Babylonian Literature

It has often been observed that disputation poems are “playful,” as opposed to the more serious “wisdom” dialogues represented by poems such as the Babylonian Theodicy. But what is the specific purpose of this playfulness? How exactly do disputations relate to other works of Babylonian literature? Which other texts are related to them? To answer these questions, attention will be paid to the structure and style of the disputations, and the issue of whether or not disputations contain literary allusions to other Babylonian literature will be examined. Finally, the function of these allusions will be explored.

1.4.a The Structure of the Disputations

Both Sumerian and Akkadian disputation poems display a stable and somewhat rigid structure, which was first described by van Dijk 1953: 39–40. Most strikingly, the same basic structure is also observable in disputation poems in later traditions, in languages such as Syriac, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, as will be studied below (1.6). Disputation poems consist of three basic components: a prologue, the disputation proper, and an adjudication scene.

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179 Thus e.g. van der Toorn 1991: 63–64 (who states that disputation poems “were primarily meant for popular entertainment”), Murray 1995: 159, and Veldhuis 2003: 12 (who classifies disputations as “light-hearted literature”). See also Bottéro 1999: 22: “Les «tensions» ne sont pas seulement des œuvres littéraires, des exercices de style; des témoins des préoccupations économiques de leurs auteurs; de leur exercice de la justice ou du débat public; de leur art de discuter et d’argumenter; de leur intérêt pour le jeu de hasard; de leur propension à l’amusement, voire à un certain humour; mais aussi de leur réflexion sur les choses, de leur passion de les connaître, exactement et analytiquement.”

Prologue

Mesopotamian disputations begin with a prologue that often traces the origins of the dispute back to the very beginning of time. According to the majority of the prologues, the rivalry between the contestants is foreshadowed at the moment of their creation: when the world and its creatures were first spawned, the two litigants (which are presented as the “prototype” of the species, as the first palm or the first poplar)\(^{181}\) come to dispute to decide which is superior. In Tamarisk and Palm, the gods create the country and appoint a king to rule it; then the king plants a tamarisk and a palm in his palace, and both trees begin to argue:

In those distant days, in those distant nights, in those far-away years,
When the gods established the land,
They built the cities for the far-away people,
When they piled up the mountains
And excavated the rivers, the (grantor) of life for the land,
The gods of the land held a counsel,
   The god[s ...] \(^{(5)}\) were pondering with each other.
Šamaš was sitting among them,
And [the great Lady of the Gods] took a seat.
Before then, there had been no monarchy in the land,
   And [sovereignty] had remained [with the god]s (alone).
(But) the gods had mercy on the black-headed people
   (And) gave a king to the people of the land of Kiš,
[The king planted a palm in his palace,]
   And grew a tamarisk nearby.
In the shade of the tamarisk banquets were laid out,] (...)\(^{(10)}\)
   In the shade of the palm [the drum] resounded, (...)\(^{(2)}\)
Both trees were enemies, and would constantly vie with each other.\(^{182}\)

The prologue is completely preserved in Tamarisk and Palm and the Series of the Spider; only the end of it survives in the Series of the Fox and the Series of Ox and Horse; and a small fragment of what appears to be the prologue of the Series of the Poplar is known (section Ia). Almost all prologues of Sumerian disputations have been recovered: they can be as long as one third of the entire composition (thus in Ewe and Grain \([\text{csl} 5.3.2]\) and Summer and Winter \([\text{csl} 5.3.3]\)).


\(^{182}\) Tamarisk and Palm 1–11 (see above i.3.a). The translation follows the Emar version of the text (MS E), restored with the help of MS Ac.