CHAPTER I.6

Mesopotamian Disputations in Later Tradition

Not a single manuscript of a Babylonian disputation poem is dated, but the more or less clear archaeological context of many of them shows that they were still copied during the Hellenistic period. Around this time, disputation poems similar to the Akkadian poems appear in two neighboring literatures: Aramaic and Greek. Disputation poems survive the death of cuneiform script in a gamut of forms and languages: the genre resurfaces in the 4th century CE, in Syriac literature, in which it flourishes with an unprecedented strength. Around the 9th century CE, Arabic disputations are first attested in the East, and in the West, disputation poems in Latin make their first appearance. The panoramic impression one gains is that of a millenary relay race, in which one culture bequeaths an ever-changing baton to the next.

The purpose of this section is to provide a concise, but comprehensive and fully annotated, history of this race. Such a history has not yet been written, and in consequence the student of comparative literature interested in the extraordinarily long history of the genre is forced to consult a myriad of diverse publications in scattered books and journals from multiple disciplines. In reviewing the multiple manifestations of disputation poems in the world, special attention will be paid to establishing whether or not they might ultimately stem from the Mesopotamian tradition, i.e., to the vertical aspect of their transmission. At the same time, the horizontal relationship between the disputation poems and other works in the same literary tradition will be examined, in an attempt to establish whether in other literatures they serve the same purpose they seem to serve in Akkadian, that of parodies of “serious” texts (see I.4).

A poem like Tamarisk and Palm is attested in the 18th century, after which it disappears from the record until the 12th century. There is a six-century gap in our documentation, but it is clear that the poem was transmitted in one form or another in the intervening period, since, when it resurfaces, the text is still

---

337 Some of the Babylonian manuscripts of Fox may even date to the Parthian period. MS a of the Story of the Poor, Forlorn Wren (see below v), is one of the latest datable cuneiform tablets with a literary text; however, as argued below, the Story is a fable, rather than a disputation.
the same. When one looks at different cultures, the situation changes: not once is the same disputation poem attested in two different languages, which would be the only definite, indisputable proof of intercultural transmission.\footnote{Exceptions are (1) the Sumerian translation of *Tamarisk and Palm* studied above (i.3.a and i.5.c), and (2) a disputation poem involving an olive tree preserved in the *Nabatean Agriculture*, a text purportedly translated from Syriac to Arabic (see i.6.b), but the Vorlage (if there was one) is unknown. Note also the Neo-Aramaic translations of Classical Syriac poems, discussed below in §5.3.} It is true that some of the topics of the disputations are extraordinarily resilient: thus, the debate between Summer and Winter is attested in Southern Iraq in both the 18th century BCE (in Sumerian) and the 20th century CE (in Arabic), and also in virtually every literary tradition in which debate poems have been cultivated. Notwithstanding this coincidence in the choice of topic, the poems themselves are independent creations: the appearance of the same contenders in different cultures is probably an accident, due to the fact that the contestants (e.g. Heaven and Hell or Winter and Summer) are natural opposites. The topics of disputations do not appear to be important factors for establishing whether or not a later literary tradition is indebted to an earlier one.

Between the earliest known Akkadian disputation (the 18th-century manuscripts of *Tamarisk and Palm*) and the second earliest (the 12th-century manuscripts of the *Series of the Fox*) there is over half a millennium of silence in the sources. But it is clear that both poems belong to the same tradition, even if they do not contain the same text, since they display the five universals of the genre enunciated above (1.1), namely that they are: (1) poems or poetic texts, which (2) usually have a tripartite structure (introduction, disputation proper, and conclusion), (3) contain few or no narrative portions, and which (4) feature elements that are usually inanimate, who (5) discuss the supremacy of one over the other.\footnote{The tripartite structure of the Mesopotamian poems, studied above (1.4.a), can also be observed in most of the disputation poems discussed in this section, which begin with a prologue, which is followed by the discussion proper, and end with a verdict. The observation that Syriac and Mesopotamian disputation poems share this same structure, first made by Grelot 1958, has been called “perhaps the most amazing discovery arising from this ancient genre” (Murray 1995:160).} When one looks at world literature, only a handful of poems that conform to these universals are known: a real tradition of these types of poems does not seem to exist outside a limited number of regions and periods, which are summarized in figure 6 (p. 150). To assume that poems which are so similar, and which are, from a global literary perspective, relatively uncommon, originated independently in these different places at different times, seems more