

On the Sumerian disputation between the hoe and the plough¹

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[The article deals with the famous Sumerian disputation poem in an attempt to elucidate its contents and literary structure. This consists of three independent speeches that are analysed in their individual elements, thus making plain the definitive progression in the evolution of the subject matter. The progression is reached by means of a dialectical affording of arguments and counter-arguments that each part puts forward to assess its preeminence. The fine and subtle intricacies of this masterly rhetorical piece are made clear, ending with a hint at the vexed problem of its origin and function.]

1. The Sumerian debate poem e^{ri}šal-e, composed without much doubt during the early old Babylonian period in Southern Mesopotamia (Nippur?), can be reconstructed almost completely from published fragments and texts. The present paper, although necessarily provisional in absence of a complete and scholarly edition, aims at a first analysis of the poem as a debate².

1. This article, based upon a paper read at the 1983 *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* in Leyden, is dedicated to Prof. Em. Dr. J. Vanderheyden of the Catholic University of Louvain in gratitude for his unforgettable lectures on the best dispute of them all. His inspiring identification with Owl, Nightingale and Nicholas of Guildford is still now, after more than twenty years, one of the main reasons for my interest in this kind of text.

2. The published text material is: *OECT V* 34(1-198), *UET 6/1* 42 (i: 46-58; ii: 169-179), *UET 6/1* 43 (obv. 81-98; rev. 99-116), *STVC 117* = CBS 6775 (11-33), *ISET 2* 81 = Ni 9980 (obv. 14-31; rev. 36-45), *STVC 108* = CBS 7782 (i: 25-29; iv: 175-180), *STVC 128* = CBS 7820 (i: 47-53; iv: 158-166), *ISET 2* 89 = Ni 9661 (obv. 54-64; rev. 147-154), *STVC 119* = CBS 13879 (ii: 82-93; iii: 128-139), *ISET 1* 163 = Ni 4536 (obv. 95-99; rev. 140-146), *BE 31* 50 = Ni 2400 (obv. 100-115; rev. 124-139; edge: 147), *SRT 26* = Ni 2346 (iii: 104-115; iv: 158-168), *SLFN 49* = 3 N-T 902,98 + 904,179 + 905,192 (1-4 ... 13-27; join by author), *SLFN 48* = 3 N-T 903,129 + 903,135 + 904,166 + 905,182 (obv. 56-79; rev. 80-102), *SLFN 47* = 3 N-T 916,320 (56-63), *SLFN 49* = 3 N-T 900,1(66-77), *SLFN 51* = 3 N-T 902,60 + 917,375 (obv. 77-88; rev. 89-99; join by author), *SLFN 47* = 3 N-T 908,314 (102-105), *SLFN 49* = 3 N-T 905,214 (obv. 108-114; rev. 128-129), *SLFN 50* = 3 N-T 903,123 (obv. 109-116; rev. 143-146), *SLFN 50* = 3 N-T 916,346 (i: 109-121; ii: 166-173 [sic!]), *SLFN 51* = 3 N-T 905,208 (switch sides! obv. 122-131; rev. 140-148), *SLFN 47* = 3 N-T 904,142 (148-151), *SLFN 48* = 3 N-T 905,204 (155-162), *SLFN 50* = 3 N-T 916,348 (obv. 168-178; rev. 187-194), *SLFN 49* = 3 N-T 901,43 (obv. 170-176; rev. 177-181). Sketches of the contents of the composition are found in the *UET 6/1* volume, Introduction, pp.6-7, and in the *OECT V* volume, General Description, p.10. Further information can be gathered from J.J.A. van Dijk, *La sagesse suméro-accadienne* (Leiden 1953), *passim* and p.41, or from E.I. Gordon, "A New Look at the Wisdom of Sumer and Akkad", *BiOr* 17(1960)122-152, esp. pp.145-146. Partial translations are found in: S.N. Kramer, "Sumerian Literature and the History of Technology", in Anon., *Ithaca: Actes du X^e congrès international d'histoire des sciences* (Paris 1964), pp.377-380, and S.N. Kramer, *Sumerian Culture and Society* (Menlo Park, CA 1975), pp.14-16. M. Civil's dissertation for the "Doctorat de 3^{ème} cycle", *Le débat sumérien entre la houe et l'araire* (1965), was inaccessible to me. A complete and scholarly edition of the composition by M. Civil is imminent.

2. The overall *structure* of the text is relatively simple and straightforward:
 - i Introduction (ll. 1-6)
 - ii Debate (ll. 9-180)
 - a. The Hoe: Challenge (ll. 9-19)
 - b. The Plough: reply (ll. 21-65)
 - c. The Hoe: final argument (ll. 67-180)
 - iii Conclusion (ll. 182-198)
 - a. Evidence: both contestants are equally worthy (!) (ll. 182-187)
 - b. Enlil's verdict (ll. 189-198)

The peculiar features of this text are obvious. The *introduction* is not the usual mytho-historical setting³; instead, it is a kind of hymn - addressing the hoe only, and stressing its poverty⁴. This introduction may perhaps be taken to indicate that the outcome of the debate is not much in doubt. The *body* of the debate itself shows this quantitatively. The (short) opening challenge by the hoe is followed by a much longer counter-argument - but this is more than tripled by the final argument. So the hoe not only gets two speeches against the single speech by the plough; in all it gets ab. 120 lines to the plough's paltry 40. One may well think that the plough does not really get its day in court during this lop-sided debate. Finally, the *conclusion* is rather strange as well: although the hoe predictably carries the debate, evidence is adduced that both contestants are equally worthy.

3. Analyzing the three speeches, we find that they are independent units showing different features, although, as will be seen, there are links, cross-references, etc. and there is a definite progression in the evolution of argument.

3.1. The hoe's first speech consists of a challenge contained in a couplet opening and closing (ll. 9-10 = ll. 18-19) a series of negatives (you cannot ...).

The couplet reads:

"Plough, you trace furrows - what is your furrow-tracing to me?"

"Plough, you cut furrows - what is you furrow-cutting to me?"⁵

The inference is of course that this furrowing by no means surpasses the hoe's building activities. But here already the hoe shows its craftiness or perhaps cunning in debate, for the verbs used by the hoe contain a subtle and learned pun. The verb *GID*₂ is the normal verb used for the drawing of a furrow, but it is also the equivalent of Akkadian *arāku* ("to be long"), and the literary reference may well be to expressions not unlike the famous lines in the *Dialogue of Pessimism*:

3. See e.g. van Dijk, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

4. See line 1-2 (sources: *OECT* V 34 and *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 902,98 +)

e^šal-e š^šal-e š^šal-e sa lā-e

š^šal-e š^šasal-e zū š^šma-[nu-e??]

"O hoe, o hoe, o hoe, tied with string;"

"hoe (made)of poplar, with a tooth of ash?;"

which shows a texture constructed upon the phonemes /a/ + /l/ combined with /a/ + /s/ or /s/ + /a/, and also bears some resemblance to the *incipit* of the Ox Drivers' song (see M. Civil, "The Song of the Plowing Oxen", in B. Eichler *et al.*, eds., *Kramer Anniversary Volume* [Neukirchen 1976], pp. 83-95).

See also our line 5 (only source: *OECT* V 34)

š^šal-e dumu-ukūr-ra šā-tūg-[nīg-dāra? ...]

"Hoe, child of the poor man, (his/its?) loincloth?..."

5. Sources: *OECT* V 34 (single source for ll. 9-10), *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 902,98 +, *STVC* 117 = CBS 6775, *ISCT* 2 81 = Ni 9980 (only traces)

š^šapin i-gíd-dé-en gíd-da-zu nam-mu

i-lagab-bé-en lagab-ba-zu nam-mu

"Who is so tall as to ascend to the heavens?"

"Who is so broad as to compass the underworld?"

Thus the seemingly innocuous technical reference to the plough's traditional activity becomes a hidden taunt at its pretended stature. That this is at least a possible *double entendre* is borne out by the second verb: LAGAB is used in its meaning of *ḥirsu*, hence *ḥarāsu*. But in the lexical lists the very next Akkadian term is *kubbuu* ("heavy, thick, honoured"). Thus the lines may well be intended as:

"Plough, you are long (tall?) - what is your length (tallness?) to me?"

"Plough, you are ponderous (?) - what is your preponderance (?) to me?"⁶

And so the tone is already set for the whole further proceedings. The list of negatives, besides producing a closely-knit and poetically well-arranged stanza, is also a very clever ploy, designed to lead the plough into considerable difficulty. The text has:

"You cannot dam up water when it escapes;"

"You cannot heap up earth in the basket;"

"You cannot press clay; you cannot make bricks;"

"You cannot lay foundations; you cannot build a house;"

"You cannot strengthen the old wall's base;"

"You cannot put a roof on the honest man's house;"

"O plough, you cannot straighten the broad street!"⁷

Several points deserve to be made from this. 1^o The negative mode is not just used to mark the difference between what the plough can and cannot do (ll. 9-10 = 18-19 vs. ll. 11-17), though it does so, of course. It also conveys a note of scorn while reserving as it were the affirmative mode for an effective

6. For GÍD, see e.g. Oppenheim, *Exodus Collection*, p. 162, while the *arāku* equivalence is of course well known. For LAGAB, see most easily MSL XIV p.210. See further W. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford 1960), pp.148-149 and the note on p.327 where more references can be found.

7. Sources: mainly *OLCV* 34; also *SLIV* 49 = 3 N-T 902,98 +, *STVC* 117 = CBS 6775, *ISCT* 2 81 = Ni 9980. Variant readings have been disregarded here as in subsequent quotes.

11 [a] ū-ba-ni-ib-é	nu-u-e-da-an-uš-[en]
12 saḥar ^u du ₂ ssu-e	nu-u-e-da-an-si-si-in
13 im nu-bāra-en	si ₂ nu-dū-en
14 úš ki nu-gā-gā-an	é nu-dū-dū-en
15 é-gar ₂ ^u ur ₂ ^u ur ₂	ur-bi nu-ús-en
16 ūr ū-zī-da-ka	é nu-um-gā-gā-en
17 ^u apin sila-dagal-la	si nu-um-sá-sá-en

The translation of l. 16 is an approximation (or a guess): I do not understand the grammar of this line. As to the formal arrangement of this passage the following provisional remarks may be made, although it should be noted that real understanding of the organisation of literary texts will be much helped by a global and systematic study of Sumerian Poetics as a whole.

The passage can be divided into a quatrain (or two distichs) and a tercet. The first distich is held together by the almost identical verbal forms as well as by the related vowel patterns (a-u-e/i in the first half line; u-e-a- in the second half line). The second distich is arranged into four short half lines, each containing a short verbal form, which is doubled in the second line of the distich. Also, the vowel patterns are here even more systematic (l. 13: i-u-a-(e)/ i-u-u-(e); l. 14: (u)-i-u-a-a-/e-u-u-u-(e)). The tercet shows an increase in the number of syllables, and especially in ll. 16-17 a *double* system of vowel patterning: in *both* 16 and 17 the pattern i-a-a of the first half line becomes i-u-a-a in the second half. Furthermore, there is also a distinct progression in the lexicon: a + saḥar; im; si₂; úš; é (consisting of: é-gar₂, ^uur₂, ^uur₂); finally, sila. Again, this series is so arranged that phonology holds it together as much as semantics do; cfr. *a* vs. *saḥar*; *im* and *si₂*. It might perhaps be objected that most if not all of these features are simply brought about by grammar. The answer would of course be that in Sumerian as in any other literary language the *grammaire de la poésie* consists at least partly in the *poésie de la grammaire* (see R. Jakobson, *Questions de poésie* [Paris 1973], *passim* and especially "Poésie de la grammaire et grammaire de la poésie", *ibid.*, pp. 219-233 [translated from an English version of 1968]; also the remarks by P. Michalowski, "Carminative Magic: Towards an Understanding of Sumerian Poetics", *ZA* 71(1981)1-18; perhaps a bit farther afield, but methodologically very important, much of the work done by T. Sebeok on Cheremis incantations, especially chapters III, V, VI and XI of his *Structure and Texture, Selected Essays in Cheremis Verbal Art* [The Hague-Paris 1974]).

repetition later on in the argument. 2° This taunting insistence on the plough's deficiencies is not put as a simple equation ("All right, you can do this- but you cannot do the other thing!"): against the two verbs used in the positive –and maliciously at that– there is a string of nine different technical terms in the negative⁸, presenting an array of different and useful activities. 3° These activities are well chosen - though the choice is less than completely fair, in that some activities are already present or at least implied in others. They seem to involve quite naturally from the basic handling of water and earth into the pinnacle of civilisation: the brick-work of a city⁹. Against this background the repeated lines 18-19 (= 9-10) take on a new and much deeper significance.

3.2. The answering argument by the plough takes much longer. The formal arrangement is not unlike that of the first speech, in that it opens and concludes with lines that are in a way reciprocal and use the I-you opposition explicitly.

However, the differences with the hoe's repeated distich are revealing. The plough's opening tercet runs:

"I, the plough, fashioned by great force, bound by a great hand,"

"I am the mighty surveyor of Enlil;"

"I am the true labourer of mankind!"¹⁰

and the concluding paragraph has:

"You, you have insulted me!"

"You dare compare yourself with me!"¹¹

Comparing this to the hoe's challenge, we note that 1° formally the plough's insistence on the first person (gá-e ... -m e-en; ... m e-en) and the second person in combination to the first (za-e gá-e-ra ...; n i-zu gá-e-da ...¹²) is the opposite arrangement as that used by the hoe ("Your ... doesn't concern me"); 2° the plough only talks about itself; 3° the challenge contained in the hoe's distich has not been answered. The plough's greatness, maliciously granted by the hoe in the first place, is insisted upon, and nothing is done about the implied taunt.

Indeed, one may well feel that the plough has already blundered into a well laid trap, a notion confirmed by the somewhat clumsy attempt at refutation in the body of the speech. The argument consists of three parts (ll. 24-34/35-54/55-61) of which the first and third repeat the pattern of the opening and concluding lines ("I am high and mighty"; "You are worthless"), while only the central part constitutes a kind of reply noting a number of useful features.

The *first part* elaborates the notion that the plough is held in very high esteem: at its festival, the king slaughters cattle¹³, and there is much rejoicing as the king holds its bars and the nobles go at its side; indeed all

8. l.11: uš = *sekēru ša mē*; l.12: si-(si) is what always happens with sahar into a dussu; l.13: bār(a): cfr. bāra-ga = *hašsu*; dū is well known as simply *banti*, but here probably = *labānu*; l.14: ki-ga(r) is traditional, as is dū for building activities; l.15: ús = probably *emēdu*; l. 16: line is not clear to me, but gá-gá is probably simply = *šakānu*; l.17: si-sá is as always *šurēšuru*, a common verb for laying out streets.

9. At least, this is *implied* by the references to housebuilding and streets.

10. Sources: *OECT* V 34; *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 902,98 +; *STVC* 117 = CBS 6775; *ISET* 2 81 = Ni 9980.

21) gá-e ^uapin á-gal-e dí-m-ma šu-gal-e kéš-da

22) sa₁₂-su g₅-ma ḥ^{de}n-lil-lá-me-en

23) engar-zi-nam -lū-ulū-me-en

11. Sources: *OECT* V 34; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 903,129 +; *SLFN* 47 = 3 N-T 916,320; *ISET* 2 89 = Ni 9661. The text is much broken in all published MSS, but a reasonable reconstruction would seem:

62) za-e gá-e-ra in-gig mu-e-[broken, but doubtlessly: dub₂]

63) n i-zu gá-e-da mu-da-ab-ša-e

12. See notes 10 and 11, and note that the /e/ in gá-e-ra and gá-e-da, which is somewhat surprising, is there in text Ni 9661 but perhaps not in the other MSS.

13. See G. Gragg, *The Keš Temple Hymn* (TCS III). New York 1969, p.186. Sources: *OECT* V 34; *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 902,98 +; *STVC* 117 = CBS 6775; *ISET* 2 81 = Ni 9980; *STVC* 108 = CBS 7782.

countries acclaim it in awe, and the nation looks on in joy¹⁴. So the plough must indeed be very important.

The *second part* tries to answer the argument: the plough is responsible for grain and all it brings: heaps and sheaves of grain are heaped up for Enlil and are filling the storehouses of mankind¹⁵. Even the poor can still glean what is left over, and then the straw is put to use¹⁶.

Two points must be made here: first, even in this passage, the plough is unable to forget its pride: the beasts of the fields kneel down before the furrows and sheaves, and the sheaves themselves are laden with awe¹⁷. Secondly, the whole passage is of course much more in praise of grain than of the plough, so that the argument is indirect at best.

Lastly, the *third part* is pure invective, alluding to the hoe's low status and dirtiness, culminating in the scathing –or meant to be scathing– enjoinder: "Go and dig holes!"¹⁸.

3.3. Follows the hoe's final argument, which is in a way a minor masterpiece of rhetoric. As in the opening challenge, the hoe starts obliquely by granting a point: "I concede I am but small, but why should that concern me?"¹⁹. The implication is clearly: "Look what I can do!".

The body of this long speech can be divided into two more or less equal parts (ll. 70-118/119-180). In

14. 30) lu^gal-e á-mu šu bí-in-du_g
 31) gud-mu ⁸šudun-a si ba-ni-ib-sá
 32) bá-ra-bá-ra-gal-gal zag-mu-ta im-da-su_g-su_g-bē-eš
 33) kur-kur-re u_g dūg-ge-eš mu-e
 34) un-e igi-ḫúl-la mu-un-ši-bar-bar-re

Sources: *OECT V 34*; *STVC 117* = CBS 6775; *ISCT 2 81* = Ni 9980; *STVC 108* = CBS 7782.

15. 46) ⁸ur⁷dul-gur⁷-maš-⁴en-lil-ra gú mu-na-ab-gur-re
 47) ⁷igig ⁸UNUNUZ mu-na-ra-dub-dub-bé
 48) araḫ_g-nam-lú-ulú-ka-šē mi-ni-ib-si-si-en

Sources: *OECT V 34*; *UET 6/1 42*; *STVC 128* = CBS 7820. Line 47 remains unclear to me.

16. 49) nu-sig nu-mu-zu lú-ki-gul-la
 50) gi-gur-úr-ra šu um-ma-ab-til-eš
 51) ^{^N}pad-pad-du-mu im-ri-ri-ge-ne
 52) in-nu a-šá-ga dub-dub-ba-mu
 53) nam-lú-ulú im-da-[]-dē³[]

Sources: *OECT V 34*; *UET 6/1 42*; *STVC 128* = CBS 7820.

17. 35) ab-sin-gub-ba-mu eden me-te-aš bi-ib-gál
 36) išin-na a-šá-ga gál-la-mu-šē
 37) máš^{me} lu-a ⁴su-mu-gan-na im-ši-gam-^e-ne¹-eš

Sources: *OECT V 34*; *ISCT 2 81* = Ni 9980. Compare l. 35 with, e.g. Li B, l. 8: meⁿ aga-zi sag me-te gál for which see *JCS 30(1978)36-37* and 45.

- 44) uru-mu eden-na du_g-du_g-a-bi
 45) ḫur-sag sig_g-ga ní gūr-ru-ám

Sources: *OECT V 34*; *ISCT 2 81* = Ni 9980. du_g-du_g in line 44 is here taken to mean zu^u or *ṭubḫudu*, while uru probably means "constructions" and will refer to sheaves or heaps of grain, as the comparison explains.

18. 59) pú ba-al ḫur ba-al lú-li-dur-ra ba-[a]

Sources: *SLFN 48* = 3 N-T 903,129+; *SLFN 47* = 3 N-T 916,320; *ISCT 2 89* = Ni 9661.

19. 67) ⁸apin tur-ra-mu nam-e-en bulūg-ga-mu nam-me-en peš₁₀-gál-la-mu nam-me-en

Sources: *OECT V 34*; *SLFN 48* = 3 N-T 903,129+; *SLFN 49* = 3 N-T 900,1. It should be stated in all fairness that the next lines contain the hoe's statement that it does take precedence. But the point seems to be that it does *not* say that it is inherently greater or more worthy than the plough. The point of precedence is, in the first instance, to be taken quite literally *in time*, as the next sections make clear. The lines in question are:

- 68) ki-⁴en-lil-lá-ka dub-sag-zu gá-e-me-en
 69) é-⁴en-lil-lá-ka igi-šē ma-ra-gub-bé-en

(Sources as in l. 67) with the notion of *service* as always present in the term gub (see e.g. Civil, *AFO 25(1974-1979)67*; Vanstiphout, *RA 74(1980)67* or the *Gerichtsurkunden passim*).

the *first part* the hoe sets out to refute the plough's argument. This is done in two complementary ways: the hoe points out its own precedence in time as well as in importance, thus refuting the second part of the plough's argument; but at the same time it quite effectively punctures the plough's high and mighty attitude by pointing out the inherent weakness of the plough's structure and appearance, not forgetting to turn around some of the points made by the plough. At the end the hoe proves (?) its point by a mathematical comparison. Moreover, since the point of attack consists of the plough's agricultural use, the hoe arranges its refutation within the framework of (part of) the agricultural year. In detail, the arguments are as follows:

(1): (ll. 70-82) At a time when the plough cannot be put to work, the hoe is already busy making ditches etc., so that fowler and fisherman can live²⁰.

(2): (ll. 83-90) When finally the waters recede work in the fields can begin. Again, it is the hoe which has to be used to prepare the field for the plough²¹.

(3) (ll. 91-105) When at last the plough gets down to do some work - what a sight it is: six oxen, four men, and the plough only the eleventh!²² This of course refers to ll. 31-32, where the plough boasts about the "nobles at its side". And when the plough breaks down -which often happens- even more people are in attendance. Also, where is dignity when repairs are being done?²³ A subtle point of irony is contained in l. 94,

20. 70) e i-ak-en pa₅ i-ak-en
 71) a-gār-a-gār-ra a um-ma-si-si
 72) ⁶⁶gi-⁶⁶gi-a a ù-mu-ni-dé-dě
 73) ⁶⁸dussu-tur-mu mu-da-ab-ri
 74) id ù-mu-kud pa₅ ù-mu-kud
 75) id-maḥ-zi-ga-šē a um-ma-ni-ri
 76) am-bar-e-da um-da-ak-en
 77) gá-e ⁶⁸al nigin-bi-im im-da-gub-bé-en
 78) im-ulú im-mir-e-šē nu-mu-un-si-il-si-il-e
 79) mušen-dù-e nunuz ib-ri-ri-ge
 80) ⁶⁸šu-peš-dě ku₆ mi-ni-ib-ḍab₅-ḍab₅-bē
 81) un-e ⁶⁸bar-mušen-na šu ù-ma-ab-til
 82) ne-šē hé-gál-mu kur-kur-ra šu-bi hé-ni-ib-sù-sù

Sources: *OECT V* 34; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 903.129 +; *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 900.1; *SLFN* 51 = 3 N-T 902.60 +; *UET* 6/1 43; *STVC* 119 = CBS 13879. It will be easily seen that this passage too is strictly and cleverly organized. The last line characterizes it as evidence adduced in the debate (ne-šē; "In this way ..."). It should be noted that two texts (*OECT V* 34 and 3 N-T 902.60 +) seem to read ... hé-gál-UM ... which I cannot explain.

21. Lines 83-86 make the position clear:

- 83) a-gār-ta um-ta-kud-a-ta
 84) ki-dur₅ kin-gá ba-gál-la-ta
 85) ⁶⁸apin igi-zu-šē a-šā-ga gá-e ma-ra-an-e₁₁-en
 86) a-šā tak₄-tak₄ ma-ra-ra-an-du₈-en

Sources: *OECT V* 34; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 903.129 +; *SLFN* 51 = 3 N-T 902.60; *UET* 6/1 43; *STVC* 119 = CBS 13879. Line 86 is not clear to me as it stands. It will have something to do with "opening up" the field, since both du₈ and tak₄ will be = *petu* here. The *UET* text has apparently gál after a-šā, but since the rest of the line is missing there this does not help. In any case, the next lines describe how the hoe prepares the field for the plough's work.

22) A much quoted line is l. 91:

gud-zu vi-ām lú-zu 4 za-e [X] 11-kam-ma-bi-me-en

Sources: *OECT V* 34; *UET* 6/1 43; *SLFN* 51 = 3 N-T 902.60; *STVC* 119 = CBS 13879. My reading of, and remarks upon, the second number in *Akkadica* 36(1984)3 and 14 should be disregarded. The earlier lines referred to are quoted in footnote 14.

23. See lines 98-102:

- 98) ⁶⁸eme ù-me-ni-kud (... rest of line not clear)
 99) engar-zu ⁶⁸apin-bi til-la mu-šē mi-ri-ib- []
 100) min-kam-ma-šē nagar ma-ra-ḥun²-e (rest of line not clear)
 101) é nam-gašam ma-ra-ab-ni-gin-e
 102) túg-du₈ bar-dun ma-ra-ra-an-zé-en

where we find the plough gaping in admiration at its single furrow - a hint at the obvious point to be made about l. 35 of the plough's speech²⁴.

(4): (ll. 106-110) Summing up, the numbers show that the plough's great ways are not matched by its work²⁵.

(5): (ll. 111-118) As a parting shot a kind of anecdote is told: when the plough goes on its way, the unwieldy thing falls into the water - and then again the hoe is needed in order to make a fire to dry it out²⁶.

Although these categories cannot be kept strictly apart, the *second part* (ll. 119-180) is more in the nature of counter-argument, pointing out the building activities of the hoe, and therefore repeating the challenge in the affirmative.

Also the hoe finds a very convenient point of departure in the plough's taunts about its (the hoe's) low

Sources: *OECT V* 34; *ISCT* 1 163 = Ni 4536; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 903.129+; *SLFN* 51 = 3 N-T 902.60+; *UET* 6/1 43; *BE* 31 50 = Ni 2400; *SLFN* 47 = 3 N-T 908.314. The ends of the lines, especially in the *UET* text, are not clear. In l. 99 one expects a *verbum dicendi* at the end. An approximate translation of this difficult passage would be:

"When your 'tongue' is broken/breaks ..."

"Your labourer (*adls?*) you: 'This plough of mine is broken again!'"

"And again carpenters are hired for you..."

"And the whole chapter of workers again surrounds you;"

"Harness-makers are scraping a fresh/ raw' hide for you".

Reading on, we find in l. 105 (sources: *OECT V* 34; *SLFN* 47 = 3 N-T 908.314; *UET* 6/1 43; *BE* 31 50 = Ni 2400; *SRT* 26 = Ni 2346):

kuš nu-dūg sag-du-zu bi-ib-tuš

"A stinking hide is put upon your head!"

In combination with the foregoing quotation, the meaning in the immediate context is clear: the plough breaks down rather often, and then the *angar* (not the *lugal* this time!) shows something less than reverence. Then the plough is indeed surrounded by many people, but they are of somewhat different status than the people mentioned by the plough itself. And indeed the episode ends quite literally with the "crowning" indignity of the stinking hide. This last line (105) may perhaps also be put into a larger context. We saw in line 35 a possible reference to the frequent formula of the crown as a symbol (the expression *me-te ... gál* makes this probable). We should also note that the plough had already used this expression when taunting the hoe:

line 61: su arad-lú-ulū-ka sag me-te-aš [*probably* bi-ib-gál]

"The hand of the slave of mankind is put upon (your) head as emblem!"

(Sources: *OECT V* 34; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 903.129; *SLFN* 47 = 3 N-T 916.320; *ISCT* 2 89 = Ni 9661). Here (l. 105) the hoe deftly turns the tables.

24. Sources: *OECT V* 34; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 903.129+; *SLFN* 51 = 3 N-T 902.60; *UET* 6/1 43:

ab-sín-su-aš-ám 'igi hu'-m u-un-da-ab-šag₅-ge

25. A well-known passage. See already *Akkadica* 36(1984)13.

Sources: *OECT V* 34; *UET* 6/1 43; *BE* 31 50 = Ni 2400; *SRT* 26 = Ni 2346; *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 905.214; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 903.123; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 916.346:

106) il-la-zu tur-ra-ám a-rā-zu maḥ-ám

107) u₇-zag-mu itud xii-ám

108) u₇-gub-ba-zu itud iv-ám

109) u₇-záḥ-a-zu itud viii-ám

110) gub-ba-zu-gin₂-ám ba-du-un

Perhaps it is also significant that the number of lines allotted to each disputant fits in with this sum: the hoe speaks for about 120 lines; the plough for about 40. The numbers do not *exactly* tally, but near enough for the small divergence to be explained by either introductory and closing lines (not to be counted) or by different line-divisions, or both.

26. See ll. 113-115 (sources: *OECT V* 34; *UET* 6/1 43; *BE* 31 50 = Ni 2400; *SRT* 26 = Ni 2346; *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 905.214; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 903.123; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 916.346):

113) igi-zu ^{du}geštin-na-gin₇ a im-ta-suḥ-en

114) ^{su}dal-ta kur-ra um-ta-ak-en

115) i-izi-mu e-[]-ni-in-sig₇-sig₇-ge-[en?]

status and its hole digging: these points are very deftly turned into an asset. The whole speech ends –again– with a story people tell by the fire (witnesses' evidence): When Enlil becomes friendly again, he first strikes the earth with the hoe. In this way, the traditional mytho-historical introduction is cleverly introduced into the argument²⁷, and of course Enlil's evidence is unanswerable. In detail this part runs as follows:

(1): (ll. 119-128) The hoe builds. The opening challenge which has gone unanswered, is repeated in the affirmative²⁸.

(2): (ll. 129-137) The building motif is expanded and given a new direction: when all building activity is over, and the city has been finished, the workmen deservedly rest and refresh themselves in the company of the hoe (answering the motif of the plough's festival ll. 24ff).²⁹

(3): (ll. 138-152) But not only workmen live by the hoe. Also boatmen and gardeners are able to sustain their families by the hoe³⁰.

(4): (ll. 153-166) Surely the hoe digs wells! And a very good thing too, because in that way it revives the canal workers and others - instead of being an insult, the quality of hole-digger is of great necessity to the thirsty traveller and the shepherd in the wilderness³¹.

(5): (ll. 167-180) These people while resting contentedly at the fire (also built by the hoe) tell that when Enlil became friendly again, he himself struck the earth with "the one with the single tooth"³².

4. The conclusion, as has been remarked, is rather strange: in a *first part* (ll. 181-187) the Sun apparently intervenes quoting traditional wisdom in the form of proverbs tending to indicate that the quarrel is unnecessary:

"The millstone lies still, but the mortar goes up and down". ...

"The perforated plate, should it dispute with the sieve?"³³.

27. See n.3.

28. See n. 7. Remark that lines 11 and 12 are not repeated.

29. Lines 135-137 (sources: *OECT* V 34; *STVC* 119 = CBS 13879; *BE* 31 50 = Ni 2400):

135) é-dù-dù-a gá-da šed-dé ní hē-em-ši-ib-te-en-te-en

136) gú-izi-ke₄ ^{u³}al um-ma-zal-la zag-gú um-ma-lá-a

137) e-ne-sù-ga-ni nu-mu-e-ši-du-un

30. See e.g. ll. 141-143 (sources: *OECT* V 34; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 905,123; *ISET* 1 163 = Ni 4536):

141) má-laḥ₄-ra gir₄ mu-na-an-dù-e-en esir mu-na-ab-bil-bil

142) má-gur₈ má-gi-lum ù-mu-na-dù/dim

143) má-laḥ₄-ra dam-dumu-ni á mu-un-da-an-è

In l. 142 the *OECT* text has a different, and to me unclear, line ending. The readings of the other two texts (dù and dim) are both acceptable.

31. The beautiful passage 158-164 deserves quotation. Sources: *OECT* V 34; *STVC* 128 = CBS 7820; *SRT* 26 = Ni 2346; *SLFN* 48 = 3 N-T 905,204.

158) lú-bi uru-dù-a-ni-gin₇ zi-ni-šè ḥa-ba-ši-in-tùm

159) um mu ù-mu-dim a mu-na-an-dé-e

160) zi-ni šā-ba mu-na-gá-gá-an

161) ^{u³}apin sùr ba-al-ba-al in-šè mu-e-dúb

162) eden par-rim₄ ki-dur₅ nu-gál-la

163) a dūg-ga-bi-ù-mu-ba-al

164) lu-enmen-tuku gú-pú-gá-šè zi-ni ba-ši-in-tùm

32. L. 174; sources: *OECT* V 34; *UET* 6/1 42; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 916,346; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 916,348; *SLFN* 49 = 3 N-T 901,43. ^{u³}al zú-dili par-rim₄-šè ba-an-si

33. Sources: *OECT* V 34; *UET* 6/1 42.

182) ^{na₄}kin ma-ná ^{u³}nagá ma-du₇-du₇

183) [^{u³}gán-na-ta []-ta dūg'X' mu-un-ak-e

184) [^{u³}šā]-sur ^{u³}ma-an-sim²-bi a-da-man-bi mu-un-ak

But then, in a *second part*, Enlil gives his decision (ll. 188-195) as follows:

"Enlil cried out to the hoe:"

" 'O hoe, do not be so angry!' "

" 'Do not cry out so loud!' "

" 'Surely Nisaba is the hoe's overseer, its supervisor!' "

"..."

" 'O hoe, five sheqel, ten sheqel make your price!' "

" 'O hoe, one-third mina, half a mina make your price!' "

" 'Like a maid, always ready, you fulfill your task.' "

"Dispute between the hoe and the plough:"

"The hoe is greater than the plough".

"Praise be to Nisaba"³⁴.

5. And so the prize goes to the hoe. This is of course made clear in Enlil's verdict, but it was already indicated by the very lopsidedness of the debate. On the other hand, one might perhaps expect such a dispute to culminate in the verdict - in other words, it would seem reasonable to suppose that these texts evolve inexorably towards an inescapable conclusion. Yet this is not often the case. Some famous debates are open-ended (at least the consensus of opinions about 'the Owl and the Nightingale' seems to be that this is the case)³⁵. This is presumably because the contestants are so finely balanced that they are complementary - just as

See G. Gragg, *Sumerian Dimensional Infixes*. Neukirchen 1973, p. 57, for l. 184. l. 183 remains unclear to me; ⁶⁵gá n-na = *maškakātu* (the harrow), so that the line could read:

"With harrow and with good things can be done".

34. Sources: *OECT* V 34; *SLFN* 50 = 3 N-T 916,348.

188) ⁶⁵en-lil-le ⁶⁵al gú-dug₄ am-ma-dé-e

189) ⁶⁵al maḥ-bi nam-ba-da-šur-re-en

190) maḥ-bi gú-zu nam-ba-e-dé-šub-[]

191) ⁶⁵al-e ⁶⁵nisaba ugula-a-ni na-nam ⁶⁵nisaba 'X' nu-bandā-ni na-nam

192) [] mu-ra-il-i kin []

193) ⁶⁵al-e 5 gín ⁶⁵al-e 10 gín níg-ka₉ ḥa-ra-ab-ak

194) ⁶⁵al-e 1/3 ma-na ⁶⁵al-e 1/2 ma-na níg-ka₉ ḥa-ra-ab-ak-e

195) géme-gin₇ gub-ba éš-gár i-gá-gá-an

196) ⁶⁵al-e ⁶⁵apin-na a-da-man dug₄-ga

197) ⁶⁵al-e ⁶⁵apin-na diri-ga-ba

198) [d]nisaba zag-mi

The *SLFN* text omits ll. 189-190; the *OECT* text omits l. 192.

35. See ch. 3 ("The Significance of the Debate Form") in K. Hume, *The Owl and the Nightingale. The Poem and its Critics* (Toronto 1975). For the text of this debate, one of the finest ever written, see E.G. Stanley, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale* (London 1960), or the modern English translation by Brian Stone in the Penguin Classics series, both containing excellent introductions. For rhetorical matters, providing as good an introduction to the genre as any, see in particular A. Carson, "Rhetorical Structure in *The Owl and the Nightingale*", *Speculum* 42(1967)92-103 and J.J. Murphy, "Rhetoric and Dialectic in *The Owl and the Nightingale*", in J.J. Murphy, ed., *Medieval Eloquence. Studies in the Theory and Practice of Medieval Rhetoric* (Berkeley 1978), pp.198-230. In fact, despite a number of very good studies of the genre in particular literatures (e.g. H. Walther, *Das Streitgedicht in der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* [München 1920]; H. Jantzen, *Geschichte des deutschen Streitgedichtes im Mittelalter* [Breslau 1896]; L. Selbach, *Das Streitgedicht in der altprovenzalischen Lyrik* [Marburg 1886]; D. J. Jones, *La tenson provençale*, [Paris 1934]; E. Wagner, *Die arabische Rangstreitdichtung und ihre Einordnung in die allgemeine Literaturgeschichte* [Mainz-Wiesbaden 1962]; H. Ethé, "Ueber persische Tenzonen", in *Verhandlungen des 5. internationalen Orientalisten-Congresses* [Berlin 1882], etc.; perhaps even J. Martin, *Symposium. Die Geschichte einer literarischen Form*, [Paderborn 1931], should be included here) there is no attempt known to me at a general treatment of the genre as such, although so many points of convergence between all literatures possessing the genre leap to the eye. Nor could there be one which would not start out with the Mesopotamian evidence, for which reason it is strange that the utmost importance of these Sumerian texts for Literary studies in general has only been stated by non- (or at best semi-)assyriologists (see S. Brock, "A

the opposite and complementary gastronomical preferences of Mr. and Mrs. Spratt must lead to a conclusion that is satisfying all round. Sometimes, however, there is a conclusion nevertheless. But it seems often of a rather technical and arbitrary nature. Lahar and Ashnan seems to be a case in point³⁶. In other cases, mostly of theological content, such as the debates between Church and Synagogue, or, e.g. the Syriac *Book against the Arabs* by Abraham of Beth Halē³⁷, the outcome cannot really be in doubt.

One sometimes meets the proposition that the outcome is not really based upon the merits of the debate, but upon the principle that it is always the most unlikely one who wins. This might be true in a number of cases with a folkloristic background (perhaps Tree and Reed?), but in general it is difficult to use as solution. How does one define likeliness? Strength, size, importance, or what? And even so, one is sometimes surprised: in all the Western European disputes or plays between Winter and Summer, Summer is the victor. Yet in Sumer Winter wins³⁸.

6. Where does our dispute stand? It is clear that the verdict goes to the hoe. It is also clear that we expected this, for the hoe has about 120 lines against the plough's 40. It will also be shown that the hoe is far more clever in debate than its opponent.

The question now is whether these features have defined Enlil's attitude, or whether he has other reasons for his decision. The latter seems to be the case, especially because of l. 195³⁹.

“Like a maid, always ready, your fulfil your task”.

Since the complementarity of the two implements cannot have escaped the Mesopotamians, and is indeed expressly stated in the proverbs, it seems unlikely that the hoe should win on the straight criterion of Usefulness to Mankind. Now l. 195, which is the last and clinching line and therefore may be thought to contain the real reason why Enlil arrives at this conclusion, carries three different notions: *humility* (like a maid), *continuity* (always ready), and *general usefulness* (you fulfill every task). A reexamination of the arguments used by the hoe allows us to interpret this line 195 indeed as an epitome of the points which make the hoe more important implement. For the argument is repeatedly made that the hoe can be put to any number of tasks, and is therefore more *generally useful*. The reason for this lies in its *simplicity* (this point is made by ridiculing the plough's unwieldy and highly complex structure)⁴⁰, which implies that it does not

Syriac dispute between Heaven and Earth”, *Le Muséon* 91(1978)261-270; id. “The Dispute Poem: From Sumer to Syriac”, *Bayn al Nahrayn* 7(1979)426-417; S. Fiore. “La tenson en Espagne et en Babylonie: Evolution ou polygenèse”, in *Actes du IVe congrès de l'Association internationale de littérature comparée* [The Hague 1966], pp.982-992; J.P. Asmussen, “A Judeo-Persian Precedence-Dispute Poem and some Thoughts on the History of the Genre”, in id., *Studies in Judeo-Persian Literature* [Leiden 1973], pp.32-59). In order to further the study of the genre at least in the Semitic (and related) Literatures, an informal task group has been set up at the Institute of Semitics of Groningen University.

36. See Lahar and Ashnan ll. 189-190 (lines which also appear as independent proverbs on Ur exercise tablets); sources: *ISCT* 1 89 = Ni 4365; *SLEN* 52 = 3 N-T 919.476; *UET* 6/1 35; *UET* 6/2 263; *UET* 6/2 266:

lū-kū-tuku lū-za-tuku-e gud-tuku lū udu-tuku
(var. kū-tuku-e za-gin-tuku-e gud-tuku-e udu-tuku-e)
kā lū-še-tuku mu-un-di-ni-ib-zal-zal-e
(var. kā lū-še-tuku-ka u₄ mi-ni-ib-zal-zal-e)

“He who possesses gold, he who possesses lapis lazuli, he who possesses cattle, he who possesses sheep:”

“Shall still pass his days at the gate of him who possesses grain.”

The implication seems to be that grain is the more basic and the more *current* commodity - and that this is about the only difference between the disputants. In any case, the dispute is very evenly constructed, and there seem to be no bias as in our dispute.

37. See A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, Bonn 1922 (1968), p. 211.

38. See W. Lungman, *Der Kampf zwischen Sommer und Winter* (Helsinki 1941), and B. Landsberger, “Jahreszeiten im Sumerisch-akkadischen”, *JNES* 8(1949)248-297.

39. See n. 34.

40. That is, the hoe does not refute the plough's greatness, but stresses its complexity (see n. 23) and sets this against the “single furrow” (n.24).

shirk *lowly tasks* (such as digging holes - point triumphantly turned around by explaining that this is what most people need)⁴¹. This argument of (perhaps not completely true) *humility* is then itself turned around: after all, the hoe sees itself as the *first* and *basic* implement used by humanity, and even by the gods. In this respect, lines 168-174 are very enlightening. We have noted earlier the absence of the usual mythohistorical setting. Yet the lines mentioned are precisely that; they even remind us of *The Curse of Agade* and (predictably) *The Hymn to the Hoe*⁴². The story that people tell when resting around the fire has it that, after Enlil had frown upon the land, the first thing he did was to strike the earth with the hoe. This means of course that the hoe was the implement used in the "Second Creation", and this motif should be read in combination with the fact that also in the agricultural year the hoe comes first. The hoe thus proves its case: it does take precedence, chronologically in the year, socially in its generality, and ideologically - as the story tells us^{42a}.

Nor is this usefulness barren or utilitarian. The point is repeatedly made that the hoe is not only the common working man's provider; it is also his constant companion, always at his side, even when resting in the cool evening, or eating and drinking at the fireside. There is apparently an emotional aspect to the hoe's "character". The hoe is man's friend for *all* seasons (as compared to the plough's high and mighty attitude - and its complexity and relative idleness)⁴³.

Two further points deserve to be made. First, it is perhaps permissible to raise the debate to an allegorical level, for most of the points scored by the hoe *could* be explained as implying that humble, simple, small and everyday things are more basic, and therefore more important, to mankind than highflown attitudes, complex technology and sophisticated specialization. Perhaps even a lesson (Small is beautiful) is intended. The second point, which I propose only with much hesitation, turns this around as well. The conclusion refers to Nisaba, the goddess of writing, as the overseer of the hoe. And the basic activity of the hoe may be said perhaps to consist of scratching in the earth (or clay?) with a single tooth. Is there a hidden reference to the art of writing? In any case, the *Hymn to the Hoe* is replete with *al*-iterations and other scribal conundrums and what must be called (anachronistically) inkhorn terms⁴⁴. Is the insistence on humility a mask for the scribe's pride?

7. But apart from this double meaning (hoe and plough, standing for "humble simplicity" vs. "complex greatness") the poem should also, and perhaps primarily, be read as a decidedly clever *exercise in rhetoric and/or dialectic*. For what happens is this: in the hoe's challenge, the basic activities of the plough (and incidentally its greatness) are granted, so that they can no longer usefully appear in argument; on the other hand we have a list of activities the plough cannot do. In the plough's reply the drift and danger of this challenge is not noticed: the defense is truly defensive, since it consists of a) insisting upon its own 'importance' and b) an elaboration of its basic activity (ploughing results in grain), followed by c) an attack on the hoe's small and humble status, its dirty work, consisting mainly in digging holes. Now points a) and b) were granted by the hoe in the first place, so these arguments have no force at all. Point c) is stupid since the plough even denies the value of the hoe's basic activity, a mistake carefully avoided by the hoe. Lastly, the hoe's main speech completely demolishes the plough's position. This happens in four ways, all of them running through the final speech and reinforcing each other.

a) By comparing their respective activities, and using the plough's own arguments (festival, harvest ...)

41. See n. 30.

42. See J.S. Cooper. *The Curse of Agade*, Baltimore 1983, pp.50-51 and 235-236. The Hymn to the Hoe remains unedited (an edition by G. Farber-Flügge is forthcoming) but can be reconstructed almost completely from published material.

42a. And is not every year a "second creation"?

43. See e.g. the quotes in n. 31.

44. See already the review of *UET* 6/1 by J. Kinnier Wilson in *JSS* 10(1965)271-274; also the article "Hacke" by C. Wilcke in *RLA* 4. Band, pp.36-38.

the hoe is able to refer to the whole of the agricultural year, which shows its (the hoe's) numerical and chronological precedence as well as the necessity for this precedence⁴⁵.

b) Again, by using the list of construction activities affirmatively, which is fair play since the plough somehow did not think it important to answer this point, as well as by taking up the scathing reference to hole-digging (introduced by the plough) the hoe manages to present its case completely. One might say that this happens by grace of the plough's clumsiness⁴⁶.

c) The plough's arguments referring to itself are not answered on substance, but, far more effectively, they are presented as pretentious and hollow: the great ones become oxen and later workmen doing repairs; the reverence of men and animals becomes the ploughman's disgusted "It is broken again!"; the crowning symbol of worth becomes a stinking hide; the noble progression becomes a ludicrous accident on the canal⁴⁷.

d) Lastly, witness evidence is introduced, and the witnesses include all kinds of people, and indirectly even Enlil himself - which is of course an awful but highly productive instance of special pleading trying to influence the bench.

Thus it can be defended that the *construction* of the hoe's argument is a fine piece of adversative rhetoric: it has led the plough into a trap from which it cannot escape. And perhaps it might be remarked at this point that a principle by which the most unlikely disputant wins *may* be present in this and other disputes, but that certainly the *substance* consists in the way in which he does so⁴⁸.

8. The *rhetorical* or *dialectical means*, as opposed to the general construction sketched above, by which the debate is brought to a conclusion, present us with some difficulties. In the first place, this debate is so lopsided that we do not really have two opponents of equal value; secondly, our knowledge of rhetorical technique in Sumerian is not as yet very advanced, and a close study of all debates would undoubtedly help⁴⁹; thirdly, there is almost nothing we can use in the way of tools for analysis, for certainly it would be an anachronism to try and apply systematically say Aristotelian or Ciceronian rhetoric principles to texts that are more than 15 centuries older. Still, a few acquaintances may be recognized. The opening challenge might be called the *partitio*, in that it sets out the case to be debated. The plough's reply would then be a straight *refutatio*, albeit not a very effective one, in that it consists mostly of epideictic 'evidence' of its own worthiness, of invective - always the hallmark of the weaker position - and only in a small way of direct evidence, which is moreover misdirected since it is much more about grain than about the plough. The hoe's final speech could be a mixture of *refutatio* and *confirmatio*, using *exempla* (counter-examples as well as direct examples), *enthymeme* (the numbers used in 11.106-110 may be said to constitute a logical point), *epideictic* self praise, and *evidence* of witnesses - altogether a much wider range than that presented by the plough. Also, at least two general tactical tenets proposed by Aristotle may be said to be illustrated in this debate: The plough seriously damages its case by replying as though the hoe in its opening challenge had proposed an unanswerable

45. See nn. 19 and 20.

46. See nn. 7 and 31.

47. See I. 32 and 100-101 (n. 14 & 23); I. 33-34/35-36 and I.99 (nn. 14,17 and 23); II; 35,61 and 105 (nn. 17 and 23); II. 30ff and 113ff (nn. 14 and 26).

48. See n. 35.

49. Although there is now at least an attempt to grapple with the matter: R. Falkowitz, *The Sumerian Rhetoric Collections*, Ph.D. dissertation, 1980. The role of what used to be called 'proverbs' heretofore is discussed, as is their structure and function. Apart from their independent role (Falkowitz) and their role in disputes (our text II. 182ff; see n. 33; also Lahar and Ashnan I. 189ff; see n. 36) one could also note their use in other compositions. Offhand I quote: Gilgamesh and Agga, II. 5-7 (and repetitions), II. 25-28 (proven by independent existence). See W. Römer, *Das sumerische Kurzepos "Bilgameš und Akka"* [Neukirchen 1980], with the reviews by J.S. Cooper and P. Michalowski, which are indispensable. Also Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna (ed. A. Berlin, *Enmerkar and Ensuhkešdanna* [Philadelphia 1979]) 11.64-68//108-112, although I confess that the meaning escapes me. See also Lugalbanda and Enmerkar (ed. C. Wilcke, *Das Lugalbanda-epos* [Wiesbaden 1969]) I. 216.

argument (construction work) - thereby making it truly unanswerable. Secondly, one might perhaps see the hoe's final speech as an application of the advice that arguments should be proposed ostensibly at random, so that the opponent (in our case perhaps also the reader/listener) does not immediately perceive how they hang together⁵⁰, and is thus led unawares to the clinching piece of evidence which here consists of the story that *everybody* tells about Enlil.

9. The thorny problem of *origin* and *function* cannot be completely overlooked. That there is a basic socio-cultural element of *play* underlying most if not all contests, as was propounded by Huizinga⁵¹, cannot be doubted. But it remains difficult to see what we should do with this, since our texts have such a definite and specific format as literary artefacts, and we are anyway within an exclusively 'written' context. That the debates should be somehow related to *play-acting*, i.e. drama, as has been proposed for Greek philosophical dialogues, is in my opinion begging the question, and at least for Mesopotamian Literature might just as well be used in the opposite direction⁵².

There is to be sure some evidence of a function of the debates at the *Royal Court*⁵³. But so is there for philosophical debate and other Academic activities at Italian (or Italianate) Renaissance Courts, and I doubt that this will lead us to the conclusion that intellectual life in the Renaissance was courtly, not academic.

Taking the texts as they stand, we can see most of them are pieces of poetically phrased adversative rhetoric. Adding the fact of the statistical preponderance of 3 N-T texts ("intermediate" exercise tablets)⁵⁴, we might surmise an *academic* function. Nor is this strange, since after all in some other literatures the disputes have precisely this function, and in Medieval literature in Latin as well as in the vernaculars the dispute was institutionalized⁵⁵. John of Salisbury has even explained to us precisely what the function of the Latin (closest to our Sumerian poems?) disputes was: an exercise in order to attain a *facilitas* in Latin, using the disputation format because that format provides the best and most natural blend of grammar (as he understood this, i.e. inclusive of poetics), lexicon, rhetoric and dialectic - in short, the *trivium*⁵⁶. Perhaps it is not too daring to posit a comparable function for our Sumerian Debates. In any case, the fact that we possess the oldest examples - and very fine texts they are too - of this long flourishing branch of wit, wisdom and good writing should stimulate us to treat them seriously as what they are: debate poems.

50. Quoted by J.J. Murphy (*op. cit.*, n. 35) from the eighth book of the *Topics*, interestingly enough in the context of another debate poem, *viz.* "The Owl and the Nightingale".

51. J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*. London 1949 (English translation from the German edition of 1944), especially chapters III, VI and VII. The idea was taken up by F. Kuiper, "The Ancient Aryan Verbal Contest", *The Indo-Iranian Journal* 4(1960)217-281, dealing mainly with the Rig-Veda (where it did *not* lead to an independent genre). See also Landsberger, *JNES* 8(1949)295-296 with n. 153 and S.N. Kramer, "Rivalry and Superiority: Two Dominant Features of the Sumerian Culture Pattern", in A.F.C. Wallace, ed., *Men and Cultures. Selected Papers of the Fifth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences*. Philadelphia 1960, pp.287-291.

52. See J. Andrieu, *Le dialogue antique*. Paris 1954. See also the article "Sumerische Streitgedichte" by C. Wilcke in *Kindlers Literatur-lexikon*, Sp. 2151-2154. The fact that the Battle between Winter and Summer probably has *more* versions meant to be acted out than versions that are not, is probably to be ascribed to a magical-ritual origin. See the collection by Lungman (n. 38).

53. See J. van Dijk, *op. cit.*, p. 37 n. 2.

54. See n. 2.

55. I am alluding, of course, to the famous *quaestio disputata* and the *quaestio de quodlibet*. Important modern studies are to be found in: Anon., *Les genres littéraires dans les sources théologiques et philosophiques médiévales (Actes du Colloque international de Louvain-la-neuve, 1981)* (Louvain-la-neuve 1982), particularly C. Viola, "Manières personnelles et impersonnelles d'aborder un problème: saint Augustin et le XII^e siècle. Contribution à l'histoire de la *quaestio*", *ibid.*, pp. 11-30; B.C. Bazan, "La *quaestio disputata*", *ibid.*, pp. 31-50; J. F. Wippel, "The Quodlibetal Question as a distinctive Literary Genre", *ibid.*, pp.67-84. For an overview of the material in one of the vernaculars, see S. Axters, "Over 'quaestio disputata' en 'quaestio de quodlibet' in de Middelnederlandsche Literatuur", *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 17(1943)31-70, who lists 45 texts in Middle Dutch Alone.

56. See J.J. Murphy, *op. cit.* in n. 35, *passim*. The point about the *trivium* is not trivial. This is a training stage, leading to greater things, just as at least the 3 N-T tablets lead us to believe for our Sumerian texts.