

*Aggressive goddesses, abusive men:
gender role change in Near Eastern mythology*

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This article focuses on three charged encounters between goddesses and mortals as described in the mythological texts of three major ancient Near Eastern cultures. The first is the encounter between the Anatolian goddess Inara and the mortal Hupashiya, as portrayed in the Illuyanka myth (Beckman 1982:11-25; Hoffner 1998:10-14). The second is the encounter between the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar and Gilgamesh, as portrayed in the sixth tablet of the “Epic of Gilgamesh” (Dalley 2002:77-83; cf. George 2003: 616-631). The third is between the Ugaritic goddess Anat and the hero Aqhat, as portrayed in “Aqhat” (Parker 1997:49-80).

Several scholars have suggested analogies between these goddesses, who share a number of comparable characteristics. However, in this article I suggest an alternative reading of these texts using a gender-awareness approach, which put more emphasis on the role of the female protagonist, of the writer and of his audience. My analysis of these mythological texts is made with full awareness of the vast differences in socio-political value systems and *Weltanschauung* between these cultures and modern ones.

I have chosen to present the theme of “gender role change” that takes place in these encounters, as the three have similar elements and parallel motifs. In my view, the theme of “gender role change” is an important means of demonstrating society’s ambivalent attitude towards women, and clarifies the dialogue of polarity between “positive” and “negative” female behavior in these traditional societies. The theme of “gender role change” is also important for illustrating the “femininity paradigm” of the patriarchal cultures of the ancient Near East.

First, a short synopsis of the three encounters:

In the first encounter the goddess Inara is looking for a mortal to aid the Storm-god, probably her father (Haas 1994:436), to defeat his enemy, the Dragon Illuyanka. In return for his help, Hupashiya, a mortal, demands to sleep with the goddess and she complies. After the victory over Illuyanka, Inara settles Hupashiya in a house she builds on a rock in Tarukka. She orders him not to look out of the window while she is gone from the house, lest he sees his wife and children and wishes to return to them. Inara leaves the house and comes back after twenty days. During her absence Hupashiya disobeyed her order and when she returns he weeps, saying: “Let me go back home” (Hoffner 1998:12). Although the text is broken, most scholars assume that the goddess kills Hupashiya: (Haas 1994:104; Beckman 1982:19; Hoffner 1975:138).

In the second encounter, the goddess Inanna sees Gilgamesh as he is washing and dressing and she desires him. She offers him sex, marriage, wealth, fame and immortality at her side. Gilgamesh shuns her offers with scorn and insults. The furious Inanna turns to her father, the god Anu, the head of the Mesopotamian pantheon, and threatens to bring destruction on the world if Anu refuses to give her the divine bull, in order to punish Gilgamesh. Reluctantly, he agrees. Inanna takes the divine bull to Uruk, Gilgamesh’s city,

and the bull wreaks havoc, before being killed by Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu. Inanna does not succeed in killing Gilgamesh but takes her revenge on him by causing Enkidu's death (Dalley 2000:77-84).

In the third encounter, the goddess Anat sees the hero Aqhat and his bow. She desires the divine bow, crafted by the god Kothar-wa-Hasis, but she is also interested in Aqhat himself. She asks him for the bow but he refuses. She promises him silver, gold, and immortality, but he insults her and continues to refuse her offers. The furious Anat goes to the god El, probably her father, the head of the Ugaritic pantheon. She demands his consent to Aqhat's murder and threatens him with personal violence if he refuses. El capitulates. Anat entices Aqhat to join her on a hunting trip and recruits Yatpan, a mortal, to assist her. She disguises Yatpan as a vulture and hides him under her wings. They fly above the unsuspecting Aqhat while he sits down to eat in the field. Yatpan kills him and takes his bow, but it falls into the sea and disappears. Anat mourns Aqhat's death (Parker 1997:60-67).

In these three encounters we meet female goddesses who do not behave according to the social/cultural standards of their cultures, and "do not fit the traditional female stereotype of the patriarchal societies of the ancient Near East" (Jacobsen 1976:141). These special young and warlike goddesses, with closely aligned characters, present a paradox of independent, powerful females in andro-centric cultures. With their culturally masculine sphere of activities, their independent behavior and ingenious character cross the boundaries of the expected gender roles.

What are the elements of "gender role change" that we find in these encounters?

- First, a divine female in the public sphere;
- Second, descriptions of male beauty and nudity that sexually attract the goddess;
- Third, a goddess with assertive/aggressive behavior and masculine functions.

The first element of "gender role change" is the public space. In ancient Near Eastern cultures women were subject to many gender-related restrictions. The place for the normative woman was mostly inside the domestic boundary, while the public sphere was usually reserved for men. Contrary to the conventional traditional feminine stereotype, these three goddesses defy the social order. Inanna/Ishtar and Anat roam the heavens and earth, they move freely and unaccompanied in the public sphere and even reach the underworld: Inanna in "Inanna's Descent" (Black 2004:65-76), and Anat in the Baal Cycle (Parker 1997:156-160). Inara also moves from Kishkilusha to Zigagaratta, from Zigagaratta to Tarukka, and so on. If we consider Inara's identification with the goddess Teteshapi, as suggested by F. Pecchioli Daddi (1985:367), then Inara, too, enters and exits the underworld freely. We find out from the various law codes of the ancient Near East, of the significance of public and private space, especially as they relate to offenses against women. The penalty for adultery is more severe if the offense took place in a domestic space, the place reserved and protected for women, than if it happened in a public place. Biblical law (Deut. 22:23-25) and Hittite law (HL § 197/83; Hoffner 1997:156) distinguish between rape that takes place at home or outside the city. The Assyrian Palace Decrees (Roth 1995:153-209) are a most

important example for the distinction between the private and the public spaces concerning women. In their private palace-quarters no man is allowed even to set eyes on a woman. Some of these restrictions are also mentioned in the Hukkana Treaty (Beckman 1996:28). Contrary to the earthly women, the divine female is as independent as a free man to go wherever she wishes. The public sphere is where the three encounters between goddesses and mortal men take place.

The second element of the “gender role change” in these three encounters is a physical description of the body and the beauty of the mortal man, and of his sexual allure. Beauty and nudity descriptions of both male and female are found in mythological texts linked with allure and seduction (Bahrani 2001:55). However, in encounters between men and women, the beauty and nudity described are that of the female. These descriptions are not solely for aesthetic purposes but rather to convey erotic and sexual connotations. The interesting and intriguing aspect of these encounters between the goddesses and the mortals is the fact that although both Inanna and Anat are described in many texts as beautiful and erotic, surprisingly, in these encounters, the male heroes are not attracted to them. The descriptions of beauty and the sexual allure are rather related to the male heroes and not to the female goddesses.

It may be argued that Hupashiya was at first attracted to Inara and that was why he demanded to have sex with her. But I suggest that the reason for his demand seems more like a male exercising his power over a divine female who needs his help rather than because of sexual attraction.

The aggressiveness of the goddesses is first and foremost represented by their “Gaze,” a psychoanalytic term used frequently in modern social and feminist theories. I would like to relate to the explanation of the term “The Gaze” which is derived from the works of Jacques Lacan (1977:1-7). Lacan’s theory surmises that “the Gaze” is a symbolic social construct of the “relationship between vision-looking and power.” “The Gaze,” maintains Lacan, has a role in the Symbolic Order. “The Gaze” is not simply a glance or a look, but a look that structures and controls” (Bahrani 2001:35). The masculine gaze, according to Lacan, cannot be separated from sexual hierarchy; the “Gaze” belongs to the male, whereas the woman is seen. The male’s gaze dominates the scene while the woman has only a passive role. We find an example of the sexual connotation for the male’s “Gaze” in the Hittite myth of Hedammu: “And Hedammu [...]. [He raised (?) his head from the watery deep. He spied Shaushka...Hedammu [sees (?) the beautiful goddess], and his penis springs forth.” (Hoffner 1998:54-55).

However, in these encounters the “Gaze” is that of the divine female. She is the aroused and the active party while the male is the passive one.

The goddess Anat is described thus: “Raising her eyes she sees” Aqhat, whom she calls later in the text: “Aqhat the Hero,... the finest, cleverest of fellows!” (Parker 1997:60-62). The goddess Inanna “...raised her eyes to the beauty of Gilgamesh” (Dalley 2000: 77). What follows is a detailed description of Gilgamesh washing and dressing, with attention called even to his hair.

In the Inara-Hupashiya encounter there is no physical description of Hupashiya and no “temptation scene.” However, although she is approaching the mortal, he is the one who demands sex directly and bluntly, as a reward for services rendered by him to the goddess.

Nevertheless, in the Illuyanka myth the focus of the “gender role change” is introduced later on.

In the encounter between Inanna and Gilgamesh, “Inanna forces Gilgamesh into a passive role as an erotic object of her aggressive feminine desire, symbolized by her desirous gaze” (Walls 2001:34). Inanna’s “Gaze” at Gilgamesh shows “the symbolic power of the gaze as control over an object” (Guinan 1998:44), which symbolizes in this encounter the “gender role change”.

The next element of “gender role change” is represented in the assertive and aggressive behavior of the goddesses. In their expressions of sexual freedom and the manner in which the three of them boldly approach the mortal heroes, with forwardness atypical of women’s behavior in traditional societies, these goddesses are almost totally independent of male authority, and function with typical masculine characteristics.

They are the ones who begin the dialogue with the mortals, trying to solicit them, proposing and making the kind of promises usually made by men. They offer the heroes presents, status, marriage, a home and security, things that are expected of a man in these societies to provide for his woman. Inara is the one who even gets to fulfill some of her promises.

The males in the myths, mortals and divine, describe the assertive, aggressive nature and masculine behavior of the goddesses in negative overtones. Anat is described by her father El: “I know you, daughter, as desperate, [Among goddesses no]thing resist you. Go off, daughter, haughty of heart,...to resist you is to be beaten” (Parker 1997:63-64).

Anu is enraged by Inanna’s violent demand for the mythical beast (the gods’ weapon) and says to her: “On no account should you request the Bull of Heaven from me!” (Dalley 2000:80).

The masculinity of the ancient was measured, according to Hoffner (1966:327), by one’s prowess in battle and his ability to sire children. Two of the goddesses, Inanna and Anat, are famous for their warrior bravery and are actually engaged in combat and war, the most significant activities of men. From a social point of view, “War serves more than another social activity to define, classify, and uphold traditional gender roles” (Kuhrt 2001:1-2). Inanna is called “Lady of Battle” (Black 2004:335), and battle was to the Sumerians “Inanna’s dance” (Jacobsen 1976:137). Anat is Baal’s partner in combat and wars. Anat boasts of her long list of fights and victories: “Surely I fought Yamm,... Surely I finished off River, the Great god. Surely I bound Tunnan and destroyed (?) him. I fought the Twisty Serpent...” (Parker 1997:111). Inara shows great courage and fearlessness of character, as she is the only one who dares to face Illuyanka after he had defeated the Storm-god. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that Inara is also connected to battles and war. It is very likely that she is the goddess referred to in CTH 336 as the one who killed the cattle and destroyed the city. These goddesses are also portrayed in the role of “*potnia thērōn*” (“mistress of animals”), which has both predatory and protective aspects. Inara, as the protective goddess of the land, also has the wild beasts under her aegis (Haas 1981:107). In rituals she is portrayed as a hunting goddess, but also as a protector of animals (Haas 1994:437). Inanna/Ishtar has control over animals (in the iconography she frequently appears with felines) and “she is the only goddess to have the epithet of ‘lioness’ (*labbatu*) in

Mesopotamian texts” (Harris 2000:167). The goddesses are also associated with hunting, Anat's favorite occupation, which is also identified as a masculine activity. Bows and arrows are part of Inanna's gear: “Let me prepare arrows in my quiver. Let me ... slingstones with the rope. Let me begin the polishing of my lance” (Inanna and Ebih: Black 2004:335). Anat covets Aqhat's bow, which was created by the craftsman god Kothar-wa-Hasis to be used for hunting. She asks Aqhat for the bow, he refuses and insults her by saying: “Bows are [weapons of (?)] warriors. Will womankind now be hunting?” (Parker 1997:62). The bow and arrow are the most important masculine symbols in ancient Near Eastern cultures (Hoffner 1966:326-334). In “Pashkuatti's Ritual against Sexual Impotence”(CTH 406), the sorceress Pashkuatti performs the following ritual on a male patient: He is dressed in woman's clothes, holding woman's artifacts: a spindle and a distaff in his hands, he then exchanges them for the bow and arrow (Hoffner 1987:277).

Another example appears in the “Ritual and Prayer to Ishtar of Nineveh” (CTH 716). The objective in both the ritual and the prayer is to destroy the masculinity and battle prowess of the enemy: “Take away from the (enemy) men manhood, courage, vigor and *māl*, maces, bows, arrows (and) dagger(s), and bring them into Hatti. For those (i.e., the enemy) place in the hand the distaff and spindle of a woman and dress them like women” (Collins 1997:164; cf. Hoffner 1966:331).

Inanna is also responsible for the reversal of the traditional sex roles entrusted to her by her parents, Enlil and Ninlil. Her purpose in the “Hymn for the goddess Inanna” is “to turn a man into a woman and a woman into a man, ... put spindles into the hands of men, and give weapons to the women” (Black 2004:91). Whereas Inanna/Ishtar changes warriors into women by taking away their bows, metaphorically, Anat actualizes the threat (Walls 1992:202). The same symbols still figure in Homer's *Odyssey*: Loyal Penelope's spindle is the female symbol, and Odysseus's bow is that of the male.

As for the sexual connotations, in the encounter between Inanna/Ishtar and Gilgamesh, she is trying to persuade him: “Come to me, Gilgamesh, and be my lover!” (Dalley 2000:77). Then she uses explicit words: “Bestow on me the gift of your fruit!” Such expressions are usually used in Sumerian love songs, to describe the female's secret parts: “Like her mouth, her vulva is sweet” (Alster 1985:133). Inanna is behaving in this scene with sexual aggression precisely as Gilgamesh used to behave with the young women in Uruk: “Gilgamesh would not leave [young girls alone], the daughters of warriors, the brides of young men. The gods often heard their complaints” (Dalley 2000:52). Inanna behaves towards Gilgamesh with the same lack of restrictions and sexual aggressiveness as Gilgamesh himself had used. He exploited his status as the king of Uruk and demanded the “*Droit de Seigneur*,” to sleep with young brides on their wedding night instead of their bridegrooms. His conduct angered the families who prayed for the gods' help. The matter was brought before the Annunaki, the great gods of heaven and earth, and resulted in the creation of Enkidu.

Inanna's behavior represents a model of a “gender role change” as a sexually independent woman. This masculine behavior of Inanna is also the reason given by Gilgamesh to explain his insults and abuses. He tells her that she is unsuitable for married life and counts a long list of Inanna's previously abused lovers and their fate. He accuses her of treating them badly, turning them into animals and causing their death: “Which of your lovers [lasted] forever? Which of your masterful paramours went to heaven? ... And how

about me? You will love me and then [treat me] just like them!" (Dalley 2000:78-9; cf. Leick 1994:262). Inanna/Ishtar's sexually violent encounters are also mentioned in CTH 363, a "Hurro-Hittite Hymn to Ishtar": "You devoured your husbands ... You, Ishtar, thus always finish men off" (Güterbock 1997:67; cf. Archi 1977:309).

In the first stage of the encounter between Inara and Hupashiya there is no apparent "gender role change." The sexually independent and aggressive party is Hupashiya. When Inara asks for his help Hupashiya says: "If I may sleep with you, then I will come and perform your heart's (desire). [So] he slept with her" (Hoffner 1998:12). In this stage he remains true to the conventions of the masculine role, but later the "gender role change" comes about, and Inara takes the lead. She is the one who had planned the feast, she lured Illuyanka out from his lair and helped Hupashiya to overcome and bind the serpent. After the victory over Illuyanka, Inara settles Hupashiya in a house she builds on a rock in Tarukka.

The "gender role change" at this stage, in my view, is of particular significance. Hupashiya in this goddess/mortal relationship went through a full character transformation. From a male hero he turned into a traditional "feminine" stereotype. This transformation is expressed in several elements described in the myth. First, Inara builds a house and settles Hupashiya in it. She controls their relationship and orders him: "When I go out to the open country, don't look out the window. If you look out, you will see your wife and children" (Hoffner 1998:12). In the Illuyanka myth we are introduced to a well-known motif of the "woman in the window." This motif illustrates the status of women in patriarchal societies as "the passive, looking out, like a prisoner who is a captive within the patriarchal home, looking out towards freedom" (Aschkenazy 1998:25). Hupashiya is behaving like this metaphorical woman. By Inara's orders he is confined to sit at home, waiting for her, while she is free to come and go at will. "When twenty days had passed, he looked out the window and saw his wife and children. When Inara returned from the open country, he began to weep, (saying): "Let me go back home" (Hoffner 1998:12). Hupashiya is described as a man who lost his masculine characteristics and received feminine ones. From a mortal hero who helped the Storm-god defeat the dragon he turned into a stereotypical frightened "female" who is crying and begging to return home to his family. Inara's relationship with Hupashiya lasted only a short period; later on she dominates the relationship with fear and threats. Inara resembles Circe and Calypso in the *Odyssey*, who for a while controlled Odysseus and his men with witchcraft and magic, but finally he resisted both of them and returned home to his loyal wife.

Inara's sexual freedom and defying characteristics are especially emphasized in this encounter, because she takes a married man, father of children, for her mate. G. Wilhelm succinctly sums up the relationship between the goddess and the mortal man: "Inara joins a long line of unmarried goddesses who take a human lover and later kill him" (Wilhelm 2002:62).

Freedom of speech, freedom of movement and sexual freedom were the private domain of the male in patriarchal societies. The "proper" woman's conduct is described in the Hittite legend on "The Sun God, the Cow, and the Fisherman": "She is dependent (?) on the authority (?) of the god. She stands in woman's subordination (?), and she does not disobey (her) husband's word (?)" (Hoffner 1998:87). Women, and even goddesses, who roam freely

without the protection of a male relative, women or goddesses who attempt or initiate sexual relations in these societies, endanger the social order. Such females were socially condemned and treated offensively. An example of such an attitude is found in the Canaanite myth of “Elkurnisha and Ashertu.” When Elkurnisha hears about his wayward wife (Ashertu), he instructs the Storm-god Baal to sleep with her and humble her: “Go threaten (?) her. [...Ashertu], my wife, and humble her” (Hoffner 1998:91). Even though the “temptress” is a goddess, she is still a female behaving inappropriately, and as such she is defying the social order. Therefore she must be punished.

These encounters also represent the goddesses as a link between the divine and the mortal worlds from a negative point of view. These goddesses more than the male gods, are closer to human beings and for that reason are treated with less respect. The writers of these narratives make it quite clear that the human world is separated from the divine world, and should be kept as such. Mortals who break this rule will eventually pay a high price with their lives.

The theme of “gender role change” in these narratives is centered on heroic multifaceted goddesses whose imagery contradicts the traditional female stereotype. Although these exceptional aspects of the goddesses may be set in historical, mythical and theological background, they enable us to catch a glimpse of the cultural discourse and social ideology of these societies. I propose that their independent character and masculine aspects were probably also meant to clarify the dialogue between the poles of positive and negative woman behavior. Inanna’s, Anat’s and Inara’s role in their respective cultures can be understood as one that defines the limits of civilized society. The authors utilize the narratives of these special goddesses to clarify gender role boundaries in ancient societies, to illustrate the “correct” behavior and the “proper” place of women, and to demonstrate that the fantasy of relations between goddesses and mortal men is unstable and short lived. Family life, in comparison to this fantasy-adventure, is stable and permanent and is the foundation of society.

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