"Wit, Banter and Sarcasm in Mari Letters." Pp. 181-90 in Philippe Abrahami and Laura Battini (eds), Ina $^{d}$marri u qan ṭuppi. *Par la bêche et le stylet! Cultures et sociétés syro-mésopotamiennes. Mélanges offerts Olivier Rouault*. Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd. 2019.

# Wit, Banter and Sarcasm in Mari Letters

Jack M. Sasson

Vanderbilt University, emeritus

Leading troops on a military campaign, a general named Baḫdi-Addu wrote this note to his king, Zimri-Lim of Mari (ARM 2 118 = LAPO 17 577, Sasson FMA: 181).

> The last nomad contingent has arrived here and both first and last are in good order. No sickness (among them) whatsoever. There is hardly any damage and the participants are fine. My lord must in no way be troubled. Another matter: Normally, I keep the ear set during all military missions; for troubles are many. Yet now, on this mission, when I set the ear, there were no troubles or anything. Only laughter and playfulness, as if they were still at home. They are content. The heart of my lord's servants speaks with enthusiasm only about making war and killing the enemy. My lord should rejoice.

We are around 1770 BC, plus or minus a few years depending on how much you wish to be a stickler on chronology. A coalition of powers, including Babylon, Ešnunna, and Mari was warring against Elam, a major power now in Western Iran. Zimri-Lim was then ruling Mari, a town on the mid-Euphrates that left us an archive of about 17,000 documents. These expose warring conditions that are slightly better than what we are witnessing today, with lots of opportunity to kill, loot, and acquire slaves.

On the few occasions when they were not battling, Baḫdi-Addu's soldiers indulged in 'laughter and playfulness, as if they were still at home.' Had we but eavesdropped on them, we might have had an inkling about what kind of repartees kept their spirits up. Were they witty, firing away *bon mots*, some of them undoubtedly coarse? Did they guffaw over ribald stories? Did they lampoon leaders, those of enemies or even of allies? Or did they gleefully indulged in *risqués* pantomimes, complete with obscene gestures or even cross-dressing? We might also wonder about their comic repertoire even as we recognize that much that elicit laughter from humans—then as now—is beyond recovery: the pratfalls, the exaggerated gesticulation, the wink of the eye, the alteration of the voice, the cruel impersonation, and so forth. We might have recovered some of these from artistic depictions on walls or artefacts—as is the case for ancient Egypt. From Mesopotamia, however, the yield is much less. It is limited to a few figurines of debatable interpretation. We must sadly rely on the written word from which to reconstruct the comic variety that tickled the ancient's fancy.

The Akkadian words used by Baḫdi-Addu are *ṣūḫum* and *mēlulum*. *mēlulum* broadly defines playful action and, for those with a peculiar bent, it may include warfare. We know from a letter that folks escaped their drab surroundings to reach one of Mari's taverns (*bīt sābītim*) where they could indulge in *mēlulum* (ARM 2 118). *ṣūḫum* seems to be about banter. In one odd Gilgamesh Epic episode involving the goddess Bēlet-ilī, this sort of badinage so delighted the god Anum, that he bestowed on her a fancy necklace (Gilgamesh XI 163 = George 2003: 714-715). The verb from which the second term *ṣūḫum* derives is *ṣiāḫum*. Oddly enough, most dictionary citations of this verb (CAD Ṣ 64-65) are associated with omens and portents: people cackling in their sleep, giggly babies with oddly shaped thumbs, and –this one must have been a hoot—heads that guffaw after being cut off, obviously a precursor to Lavoisier's post-mortem experiment at the guillotine.

Mesopotamians themselves hardly had much use for the generic labelling that might indicate the kind of literature at stake. When they did, they favored circumlocutions, and this was true of other ancient literatures as well. For example, many hymns are categorized after the instruments that accompanied their articulation, a lyre, a drum, and the like. Other alludes to the length (šìr.gida, 'lengthy song') or purpose (ér.šà.ḫun.ga, 'to pacify the heart') of these chants. Mesopotamians might also assign labels so broad as to defy our capacity to parallel them. With no native criterion to guide us, therefore, until a generation or so scholars reckoned Mesopotamians as humorless as they did the Hebrews. The opinion was that Mesopotamians were too respectful of the gods and fearful of nature to dare crack a joke.[1] Since then, however, in our estimation these folks have lightened up considerably; as a result, there are now several

[1] In fact, one might search in vain the discipline's major reference set, the magisterial *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (RlA) for an entry on 'Humor,' although there is a brief account by W. Röllig (1987-1990: 64). Luckily, there are such entries in its field counterparts, among them the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, and most classical dictionaries and encyclopedias. The *Wikipedia* entry for humor surveys the subject from the Classical period on.

essays evaluating ancient Sumerian and Akkadian narratives with potentially comic purposes.[2]

In this paper, I go back to Mari archives that are familiar to Olivier Rouault, our *jubilaire*, and cull from them samples of wit and humor that were circulating then rather than mummified in literary documents.[3] Most of the 17,000 tablets found there are administrative, so hardly a source for mirth. Very few literary texts from Mari have been published so far; but a quarter of the 9000 or so tablets now in public domain are letters exchanged among diverse segments of the populations, from elite to commoners. Scribes wrote letter on clay tablets so that any exchange was limited by its format. Only relatively later and still rarely, do we have narratives that spread over more than one tablet. Nevertheless, the Mari letters that diplomats posted could be long and garrulous, among the best examples of narrative prose in cuneiform literature. In fact, one has to wait for Hebrew Scriptures to find as nicely shaped examples of the genre.

In these letters, correspondents readily dispensed anecdotes and spread juicy gossips about the personalities and courts they are visiting. To stay their king's attention, they occasionally doled out gossip, spicy and salty. Such messages, alas, did not include the *emojis* so familiar to us in email chatter; so we must guess how seriously they wished to be taken. Below, I avoid classifying extracts by the many sub-categories of the humorous, from burlesque to witty. Rather, I present them under three tags: 1. Material from Mari that I think evoked smiles or laughter; 2. Episodes that letter writers meant to be humorous; and 3. Instances that both writers and recipients found funny.

## 1. Tickling our Fancy

In the first category belongs most of the Mesopotamian literature that for good reasons scholars have identified as intentionally comic, despite the absence of overt labels or signs. Among these works are the Sumerian 'The Three Ox Drivers from Adab' and several Akkadian texts such as the 'Poor Man from Nippur,' 'At the Cleaner,' and 'The Physician from Nippur'.[4] True, we need to be careful here. The letters from Mari do include passages that seem fraught with comic potential, and it may well be that writers and readers felt the same away about them; but absent a reply from their recipients, the issue can be moot. Thus, on reading a letter from a Qaṭṭara queen berating her husband for threatening to cut her up into twelve pieces, we are horrified; for we are all familiar with an appalling little episode in the Bible (Judges 19) where a man does just that to his concubine. Yet we know that the couple was affectionate (see below) and so recognize the hyperbolic nature of the exchange.[5] Yet, do we assign it to a comic category? With this caveat in mind, let me turn to my first example.

### *Treason and blasphemy*

Ibalpiel is a major tribal army officer (*merḫûm*) who roamed the provinces for King Zimri-Lim. He has left us many letters couched in engaging prose, at once chatty and precise, with fine humor and irony. He opens one letter to his king by citing a tribal sheikh named Ḫamman. This Ḫamman had wished to ingratiate himself with the king, so he relayed private news from an un-named 'man from Arduwan.' The information incriminated an agent of the king named Baṣṣum as secretly disloyal. Ibalpiel first relays the accusation before revealing how Ḫamman gathered witnesses to confirm it. He continues:

> The next day, to reaffirm his declaration, Ḫamman stood three men behind wooden double-doors... He summoned that man from Arduwan and began to question him as follows, 'Go back over the words you spoke yesterday.' But this man proceeded to tell Ḫamman, 'If you reveal this conversation to anyone, I can no longer live but will die!' Ḫamman right away took a sacred oath ('oath by the gods') for his sake, thus, 'I swear not to reveal your words to anyone.' Because he took a sacred oath for his sake, (the man from Arduwan) went over the words he spoke the previous day, saying, 'For two years now, Baṣṣum has been continually beholden to Bunuma-Addu.' [The three men] could each hear these words from behind wooden double-doors.

Having reported the anecdote, Ibapiel tells the king to decide the fate of the traitor. Yet, the question that troubles is why this elaborate story when Ibalpiel, a trusted officer, could simply have fingered Baṣṣum as a traitor? Some of the reported moves do not quite jive. That Ḫamman hid three named witnesses behind a door is certainly plausible. Less so, is that the blabbermouth would agree to repeat a damning charge for no good reason, especially when he is cited as recognizing the danger of such an undertaking. Further, while it is conceivable that people take oaths that they never intend to fill, scarcely likely is that they would share such a plan in advance, especially to superiors who expect their integrity. Additionally, I find it hardly believable that Ḫamman would convict himself by gratuitously admitting that he engaged in a flagrant

[2] The fullest study thus far is D'Agostino 2000. It has a fine bibliography. See also his brief entry (2014). An accessible article is Foster 1995.

[3] For a study of humor in the Assyrian royal archives, see Frahm 1998.

[4] They are, respectively, found in Foster 1975: 70-73 (see Alster 1991-93) and George 1993: 63-75.

[5] The text is OBTR 158. See now my forthcoming study, 'Vile Threat: Rhetoric of a Marital Spat.'

sacrilege, even when rationalizing it by attributing the crucial information to the witnesses.

I therefore believe that the yarn Ibalpiel attributed to Ḫamman as well as the juicy dialogues embedded in it are likely to be Ibalpiel's fabrication. Whatever the truth behind what had really occurred, Ibalpiel simply spiced it up for his boss. He scripted the incident into a sort of de-caffeinated Jacobean retribution play, in which faults and consequences are many but moral lessons are limited. As drawn, a comic setting would be just the right medium to make the king focus on one character, the traitor Baṣṣum. There would hardly be any interest in shaping a fate for the garrulous chatterbox or censuring the blaspheming Ḫamman. We shall never know whether Zimri-Lim cracked a smile on listening to Ibalpiel's concoction; but should we miss the sex and violence that invariably are components of the Jacobean genre of burlesque, let me turn to two other incidents reported in the Mari documents.

***Sex and violence***

For sex, I turn to a passage embedded in a letter by Buqaqum, one of the myriad of diplomats that Zimri-Lim employed to troubleshoot among his allies. (ARM 26 488; see FMA: 293 [§5.8.d.ii]). Buqaqum opens on a rather long and monotonous report; but likely anticipating his king's fading interest, he unexpectedly releases this bombshell:

> Before Sin-iddinam could marry me, I agreed with father and son, so that whenever Sin-iddinam left his home, the son of Asqudum would notify me, 'I want to have you!' He kissed my lips and touched my vagina; but his penis did not penetrate my vagina, for I thought, I will not sin against Sin-iddinam who has not sinned against me. I have not done in my own house what I am not to do.

This juicy little gossip ends with the line, 'the wife is safe,' strongly hinting that Buqaqum is picking up the scandal from a declaration the woman made when forced to submit to a river ordeal for a dereliction before her marriage. At such occasions, the accused or a surrogate makes an affirmation before plunging into a river, an avatar of Nārum, the river god. Survival confirms the avowal. The archives do not make it sufficiently clear who was this Sin-iddinam whose cuckolding so interested the king; but Asqudum is likely the well-known Mari personality, an erstwhile diviner, who threw his weight around because he was married to the king's sister. I know nothing about Asqudum's son, an obviously plucky Casanova.

What makes this little tidbit spicy is that we have another letter (ARM 26 252; see FMA: 292-93 [§5.8.d.i]) in which a provincial governor reports on the king's request to search for Rummatum, a woman cited as the 'travel-companion,' so a short-term concubine, of Sin-iddinam. She likely substituted for the accused wife in a river ordeal. If this conjecture proves correct, the conjunction would mean that the tempted soon-to-be wife was personally never in danger of losing her life; but her husband's favorite was. If so, then the errant woman had found a delicious way to punish her husband for her own sins. I have no recording of it; but I can conjure up giggles from both Zimri-Lim and Šunuḫra-ḫalu, his private secretary charged with reading the mail.

And now to the violence: There is this tidbit from the reminiscences of King Bunu-Ištar of Kurda. From all evidence, this Bunu-Ištar was so cantankerous that even his private secretaries escaped his court.[6] In his relatively brief reign, he displayed convoluted allegiances, eccentrically moving in and out of commitments. He lost his throne once for opposing Samsi-Addu, one of the fiercest and least charitable conquerors of the time. On regaining his throne, Bunu-Ištar gleefully told an officer of Zimri-Lim about a moment when, as a hunted man, he lived in exile in a town called Zalbar.

> When a while back I lived in Zalbar, Samsi-Addu wrote the king of Zalbar for my return. Saying 'Fine,' the king of Zarbal [sic] gave as substitute a rootless man (1 lú *rēqam*) turned *featureless* (lit., *empty*.)[7] [General] Aminum conveyed this man as if it were me, and Samsi- Addu killed him. So the king of Zalbar gave me life. (Since then) I left Zalbar and now live in Kurda.[8]

I would not want to conjure up the physical condition of the poor schnook delivered to Samsi-Addu. It is hard to tell whether there was chuckling or alarm at Bunu-Ištar's survivalist instinct, for Zimri-Lim, who had his own problems with him, would not have wished such an escape artist as a vassal.

**2. One-Sided Wit**

Another episode involving this same Bunu-Ištar permits me to move us into the second group of compilations. Here, I treat material that writers found witty whether or not their readers did so also. Prominent in this category are taunts and mockery, often aiming for slander and defamation. Because Mari letters illumine palace life, with bureaucrats galore jockeying for position, we meet

[6] ARM 28 163 = FMA: 223 (§4.4.b).

[7] Likely related to Hebrew *rêq*, applied to rootless people, as in Judges 9:4, 11:3.

[8] A.1215: 11–23; see Charpin and Durand 2004; FMA: 227 n. 29. The author of this letter, Yassi-Dagan, was a high-ranking general and he writes to his brother Sammetar, a major advisor of Zimri-Lim. Bunu-Ištar goes on to insult Zimri-Lim himself.

with many examples of smears and slurs, and the better ones always drip with derision. Thus, Bannum, an acid tongued tribal chieftain whose support was crucial when Zimri-Lim gained his Mari throne, has this to say about an appointee favored by the king, '[He is] a man who fattens like a hog—you can butcher him, and no one will stay your hand!' (ARM 26 5; see FMA: 169 [§2.3.b.i.1b]). This uncharitable characterization of a local bureaucrat is very coarse, and I doubt that anyone else but Bannum would find mirth in this sort of wit. Nonetheless, such sarcasm is likely to have remained local, courtesy of a bevy of appreciative scribes.

I have cited this gibe to contrast it with the next illustration. It features the same Bunu-Ištar of inconstant loyalties. Once, when his allegiance to Mari was in doubt, he received the following taunt from Zaziya, a Turukku leader hostile to Mari: "Where is Zimri-Lim whom you are all seeking to be your 'father' (suzerain)? When he himself is riding a palanquin, you are all marching behind him. Why has he not come here to save you?"[9] In the Mari period, few offences against royal dignity were deemed more reprehensible than accepting a lower status meekly.[10] Therefore, rulers would be outraged if someone of equal or of lesser status might treat them as inferiors. Ordinarily, when among his own riff-raff, a ruler parades in a palanquin lifted on the shoulders of slaves; but to do so when meeting other rulers was uppity and an insult. In fact, a representative of a king got killed for such an ostentatious display. This particular taunt must have cut Bunu-Ištar to the quick.

What spreads salt over this particular wound is the certainty that the ridicule would go viral. In contrast with the rather local, albeit mordant, insult Bannum concocted against a lowly official (see above), Zaziya's goad eventually made it to Zimri-Lim. In the process, secretaries and scribes were sure to share it among colleagues on reading or copying it, so that it was bound to quickly echo at courts galore. Yet, the sharpest barbs of Zaziya's sneer targeted Bunu-Ištar's current protector, Zimri-Lim, showing him impotent against Zaziya's aggression. Such dares and scoffs are cumulative, and if enough of them circulated uncontested, they would shake the confidence of vassals in their suzerains, leading to mass defections and rebellions.[11]

I have one illustration for the genre. It is contained in a rebuke that Ibal-Addu of Ašlakka aimed at one of Zimri-Lim's military officer.[12] Ibal-Addu first posed this rhetorical question, 'Who has grasped the hem of your lord and saved himself?' ('Grasping the hem' of someone was metaphoric for accepting his suzerainty.) Ibal-Addu then proceeded with his litany:

- Sabbuganni, king of Amaz, grasped the hem of your lord, but he was brought to an end (by ...), without finding a savior [*mušēzibum*]. Why did your lord Zimri-Lim, not save him?
- Sammetar of Ašnakkum, who even married Zimri-Lim's sister, people from [...] wrapped him in leather and delivered him to Elamite power. Why did your lord, Zimri-Lim, not save him?
- Yawi-ila of Talḫayum, whom Zimri-Lim set as king, an enemy brought him to an end in his own home. Why did your lord not save him?
- Now (it is) Šubram, as well as his people, who is (still) grasping the hem of your lord; well, Samsi-Eraḫ, a (mere) commoner, has already plundered his household and goods! Why did your lord, Zimri-Lim, not save him?
  As for me too, one of these days, might you save me?

'Who has grasped your hem and saved himself?' was Ibal-Addu's concluding line. One might imagine that Ibal-Addu was audaciously rejecting Zimri-Lim; in fact, he was his vassal, and the husband of one of Zimri-Lim's daughters, Inib-šarri. (Admittedly, this was not the best match, as she was 'damaged goods,' having been left the childless widow of Zakura-Abum of Zalluḫan, Ibal-Addu's sworn enemy.) Ibal-Addu was not really heckling his suzerain. Rather, he was pungently illustrating the steep price paid for loyalty and, no doubt, boosting the expected rewards due to him for constancy.

***Teasing***

Not all taunts were equally biting. I offer an example of a different sort of tease in this brief note that a king of Karana sent his wife, a generation after the demise of Mari (see above). King Ḫaqba-ḫammu writes to his wife Iltani, 'Ḫammi-ṣuri told me that you threw a party (*isinnam tēpuši*), yet no one paid you any attention. How is this possible? For myself, I certainly want to pay attention to you! So, no one pays you attention? Alright then; when I myself come, you will see how I will treat anyone who pays you no attention!' The content is a mock threat, the tone is playful, the whole very affectionate—a husband flirting with his wife. This is not at all the usual fare in ancient epistolary.[13] I hope she smiled on receiving it.

[9] A.1025: 13–19 (LAPO 17: 545; FMA: 79 n. 146). The letter was sent by the Mari general, Yassi-Dagan (Kupper 1990), the author of the previous letter cited.

[10] Wars broke out when someone addressed an equal as 'son' (that is, 'vassal') rather than as 'brother' ('equal'); or when a vassal addressed his patron as 'brother' rather than as 'father' ('suzerain').

[11] In fact, Zaziya makes this point crudely. Iddiyatum, a Zimri-Lim diplomat, gives this grizzly news to his king (ARM 26 511: 56–58; Lafont 1988: 479-482): 'The Turukku (ruler) captured the town he was besieging. He beheaded its king and had it taken to Išme-Dagan (of Ekallatum), saying, "Here is the head of someone who relied on you".' Vollemaere (2014) suggests that the unfortunate king was Arriyuk of Kalḫu. Largely for aural reasons, Arriyuk is often (and falsely) compared to Arioch of Gen 14:1, 9; see Durand 2005.

[12] A.3194 (Guichard 1999: 28–29); see FMA: 77-78 (§1.5.b.i).

[13] A more puzzling example of the same may well a letter sent by one man with what may be a pseudonym or nickname, Belum (*bēlum*),

### 3. Shared Laughter

My third category is the trickiest to assess, for it requires evidence that both sides in a correspondence appreciated it as comic when they heard it. Because we seldom find in the archives answers to a posted letter, we have to make do with instances in which a writer cites a correspondent's words before responding to them. There are dozens of such moments in the Mari archives, especially when administrators quote a royal order they had received before detailing the measures they took in response. Given their workday agenda, however, few of these exchanges are witty. It may be otherwise, however, when the repartees include proverbs and aphorisms for, plucked as they usually are from the public domain, wise sayings tend to lighten up the tenor of a message, and so affect the reaction to it as well.

Mari correspondents turned readily to aphorisms, sometimes even explicitly labelling them by the broad Akkadian term *tēltum* (Sumerian ka.ka.si.ga). Some are what one might label gallows humor, such as this one Zimri-Lim sent out to a palace matron, Addu-duri, who might well be a close kin. 'I have listened to the letter that you conveyed,' he tells her, 'You wrote about men, domestics who broke through and escaped the jail in Ṣuprum, but that these men were caught. This is like the folk wisdom that has it, "When a fire consumes a (single) reed, its companions are on the alert"....'[14] The notion here is that one needs to be on the alert to avoid the possibility of a breakout. By couching his lecture as a proverb, the king can chide without being too severe on his kinfolk. Just the spoonful of wit to make the medicine go down gently.

Here is another inserted proverb, this time from a note by a clique of diviners (ARM 26 171; Durand 1988: 348-351). Because they are experts at decoding the will of heaven by deciphering omens from natural phenomena, diviners offer advice that few rulers would want to ignore. In this case, the diviners had (selfishly) warned Sumu-dabi, a Yaminite chieftain at war with Zimri-Lim, of potential harm to the city in which they practiced their trade. Instead of heeding their advice, Sumu-dabi scolded them for doubting his capacity to protect them. Stung, the diviners pitched this truism to him, 'Has a man who died of thirst ever revived when he is thrown into the river?' There is something desperate about their complaints, for who would draw comfort from death just to prove themselves correct? In case their point misses the target, the diviners add, 'Once (the gods) *take accounts*, a dead person cannot afterwards be resurrected.' I cannot say that Sumu-dabi cracked a smile on such a clever lesson; but we should all be pleased to have this precious take on the Mesopotamian concept of the afterlife.

#### *Dogged lessons*

More ambitious is this famous example that comes from the acerbic stylus of King Samsi-Addu, a decade or more before Zimri-Lim. He had installed one of his sons, Yasmaḫ-Addu, on Mari's throne. Yasmaḫ-Addu turned out to be the artistic sort, attached to music and other such failings. In his messages, his stern father hardly had kind words for him, tagging him as effete and a harem resident. Once, having learned about his son's plans for a military campaign, Samsi-Addu tells him, 'To wipe out the enemy, you devise tricks and maneuver against him. The enemy likewise devises tricks and maneuvers against you, just as wrestlers use tricks against each other. I fear this is just like the old proverb, "In her indiscriminate shuttling (among mates), a bitch bore blind puppies." You must not do the same.'[15] The wit here is not just in the proverb's evocation of canine frenzy but also in linking it to a simile about the plodding strategy of Greco-Roman-style wrestlers. The combination of arrest and movement drives home an accusation of incompetence, haste, and recklessness, effectively illustrating the many ways Yasmaḫ-Addu is failing his father. Yet, despite its nice constructing, I doubt that ingenuity brought smiles to anyone but the writer.

From Mari, in fact, a surprising number of aphorisms builds on the behavior of dogs, from rabid to greedy. I draw this from one of the sourest letter to reach King Zimri-Lim. Its author was Bannum, that dyspeptic tribal leader we met earlier. He felt defensive because the king was accusing him of receiving bribes when assigning positions. Bannum does not flinch. He opens by quoting what the king had written to him earlier:

> What is this that by coveting a bit of money, you remove an administrator and install another person

meaning 'Lord' (ARM 10 141 = LAPO 18: 1256; see FMA: 324-25 (§6.5.b.i.1). He writes as a 'brother' to two women, Ištar-šamši and Laḫwi-malik. We actually know of two palace women with those names, the first cited as a scribe.

> 'Be well! I am well; both of you, do send me your greeting. Why were you (both) not pleased at my messenger's presence?
> Now to another matter: to Ištar-šamši: in my own heart, I do know that you are bearing misfortune. My sisters must inform me under oath that you are both not vexed. Their reassurance should reach me. Should I not yet come close to you in all ways?
> Once more: when I hear your name, Ištar-šamši, I am very happy. As you enter and leave (the temple), touch your nose toward (i.e., 'pray to') the goddess Bēlet-ekallim. There was a sign when it rained: so remember me; do not forget me. Henceforth, you must both not be vexed.'

The letter uses greetings to both women as envelopes for two core segments that address Ištar-šamši—possibly because she can read—with the second statement more intimate than the first. If so, it may be that the whole is a spoof, created and circulated among palace women. But how to explain its presence in the archives?

[14] ARM 10 150 (LAPO 18: 1112, FMA: 224 n. 22 [§4.5]).

[15] ARM 1 5 (LAPO 17: 517, FMA: 204 [§3.4.b.i]).

> in his job? (And then) you reprimand me in this way, 'Do not heed the counsel of a slanderer; do not even listen to slander. A bitch admonishes her pups, 'Your paws should not grasp anything!' Yet, she proceeds to snatch skins out of a kiln and starts chewing on it herself....

This matryoshka-like nesting of quotations and responses is tricky to unravel. Zimri-Lim thinks Bannum has accepted bribes to replace an administrator, yet he had the chutzpah to warn his king against believing any reports that he had done so. The king is outraged and slaps on him a proverb that highlights hypocrisy, made even more trenchant by evoking a mother who keeps food from her own children. Zimri-Lim ends his note by ordering Bannum to desist from replacing any administrator without consultation.

Bannum, however, was no shrinking violet and he hits back. 'Prove it that I took bribes,' he answers. 'Question the man I have appointed about probity.' He attacks the king's judgment for listening to hearsay and professes to know the ultimate source of the slander against him. (Likely, he had in mind the same Asqudum whose son was cuckolding Sin-iddinam.) Undoubtedly, no one laughs in this exchange and cleverness loses its bite on all sides. Still, this episode does raise the interesting question: Is humor at all humorous when it is so couched in recrimination that is misses its target?

***Banter***

Proverbs can also be grist for banter. A recent edition of documents on music making in the Mari court has highlighted complex palace rivalries. As I said earlier, Yasmaḫ-Addu was the sensitive sort, preferring the finer arts to warmongering. When he appoints Rišiya as his chief musician, his father is scathing, 'Music is now dead in Mari!'[16] Smarting from slurs launched by rivals, Rišiya refuses to wallow in counter-defamation, 'May I be paraded as a clown should I say or place on my lips any words that are in my heart. Have I not pledged loyalty to my lord?'[17] He also tries to bolster support by displaying his mettle in court intrigues. '... My lord had written me,' he writes, 'A lion does not plow; he hinders plowmen.' The king was obviously citing a proverb. Risiya drains the king's aphorism of its mordant wit by turning it allegorical: 'As for me, have I not done good work in your House? (Therefore), the plowman is the person who has slandered me while, in fact, I am the lion who hinders plowmen! While I have done well by your House, (the slanderer) has ruined the good in your House ever since he came here. When my lord enters Mari in good health, let him test my work and that of the person slandering me; he will promptly realize the good' (FM 9 17: 22'-41', FMA: 317 [§6.3.b.v.3]).

Admittedly, the humor behind the proverb is somewhat obscure—in fact, the proverbs puns on verbs with ambiguous roots, hence potentially leading to different translations. Yet Rišiya's eagerness to massage the witticism is proof of a mind too clever to dismiss. In fact, long after Yasmaḫ-Addu gives up the ghost, we find him Rišiya rising in his successor's court.

***4. Humor for the connoisseur***

I want to conclude by drawing a moral from the above survey. It is unfortunately true that no scholarly analyses of the comic adequately plumb the humorous. If you doubt me, try to chuckle on reading the book *Humor in Early Islam* (1956) by the great Islamiscist Franz Rosenthal! What made Mesopotamians laugh or giggle will not easily transport into our own days, at least not without extensive illustrations or recordings. However, there remains one more factor to consider on how we assess the evidence from antiquity on wit and humor. To do so, I briefly inspect another letter from the Tell al-Rimaḥ (ancient Qaṭṭara) archives I mentioned above.

Around 1750 BCE, a certain Napsuna-Addu sent this note to Queen Iltani (OBTR 42; FMA: 325 [§6.5.b.i.3]:

> May (the gods) Šamaš and Marduk keep you well. Concerning what you have written to me, 'I have sent you small fish that (my husband) Aqba-ḫammu favors.' Just as your husband Aqba-ḫammu has experienced small fish in Qaṭṭara and Karana, for a while now I have favored big fish in Šubat-Enlil, Ekallatum, Mari, and Babylon. With big fish not available (to you), you are conveying small ones; but who would eat them?

With its somewhat snarky and ungrateful tone, this is the sort of thank you note we are taught never to write. In fact, other letters of Napsuna-Addu (OBTR 40 and 41) show him to be fond of the fish he was receiving from the Queen. So, we are intrigued by what might be behind his cantankerous posture.

There is good reason to believe that Napsuna-Addu was Iltani's brother, governing at a nearby town.[18] Dig a little deeper into political events of his days, and his note turns into an allegory with mordant application. The big fish he favors follow a sequence of four kingdoms: Šubat-Enlil, Ekallatum, Mari, and Babylon. Knowledge

[16] Samsi-Addu writes this to his son (FM 9 13 [Ziegler 2007: 100-102; See FMA: 175 [§2.3.c.i.2]), 'You have appointed as *Kapellmeister* (Chief music-maker) Rišiya, the musician, who cannot maintain a *baddum*. Music is now dead in Mari! Come on now: appoint instead Gumul-Dagan as *Kapellmeister*, over his Mari colleagues. Or appoint for him Ilšu-ibbišu, who is not (yet) *ready* for the post.'

[17] FM 9 16 (Ziegler 2007: 107-108); see FMA: 175-176 (§2.3.c.i.3). Acting as a clown when not as a professional is a humiliating activity, as was the case of the blinded Samson (Judges 16: 25).

[18] See now Langlois 2017, vol. I: 151-53.

of period history reveals that each of these cities took control regionally only to lose it to the next in line. In Napsuna-Addu's days, only the last mentioned, Babylon, stood triumphant. Babylon, in fact, may well be from where he was writing his particular note; whether or not he was there to negotiate his chances to inherit his father's throne is a possibility. But in giving such a historically accurate series of rising and falling powers, Napsuna-Addu is playing on a Mesopotamian conceit codified in diverse versions of an influential historiographic document we have come to call 'The Sumerian King List.' Over hundreds of millennia, it chronicles the fate of two dozen cities and their rulers, shaping a sort of parable where kingdoms surge and ebb, obeying some heavenly dictate too remote for humans to fathom. The 'Sumerian King List' ends well before the rise Babylon under Hammurabi. Napsuna-Addu, therefore, was simply stretching the parable into his own days.

However, it is when Napsuna-Addu contrasts his taste in fish with that of the small fries favored by Iltani's husband, that the parable acquires a moral, and in this way morphs into a fable. His parting shot, 'who would eat them?' may well be rhetorical; but it is also a comment on the suppressed ambitions that keep local rulers smugly satisfied with the limited power that had come their way. Should Napsuna-Addu prove indeed to be a brother of the queen—the throne having slipped from his grasp into that of an erstwhile diviner now his brother-in-law—then his cynical note would have acquired its wisdom from intense resentment.

On deeper inspection, then, Napsuna-Addu's note has proven no less snarky for having little to do with piscatorial discrimination. It displays elements we hold essential to humor: exaggeration, incongruity, metaphors, perhaps also self-deprecation, for its author does not distance himself from those he is lampooning. He now is also clever and aware, turning personal bitterness into a forum about fate, opportunity, and the fortunes available to mortals. This may not be the best vehicle by which to elicit laughter from the king and his queen at Qaṭṭara; yet, if they were at all introspective, the homily might well have invited them to contemplate the choices they had failed to make.

I am hoping that this last excursion into a slice of Mesopotamian history and culture has enriched our appreciation of this brief note written almost forty centuries ago. Olivier, an old friend and fellow traveler in all matters dealing with Mari, will surely not need me to rephrase the lesson I am drawing from the pages I am dedicating to him; he might even agree that scholarship sometimes throttles the humor in the documents it studies. Yet, by probing deeper into the contexts in which wit was forged, we might recover fragments of a comic imagination that would be worthy of us to cultivate in our times.

**Abbreviations**

FM 9: *Florilegium marianum* 9, see Ziegler 2007.
FMA: *From the Mari Archives*, see Sasson 2017.
LAPO 16–18: *Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient*, see Durand 1997-2000.
OBTR: *The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell al Rimah*, see Dalley 1976, Langlois 2017.

**Bibliography**


D'Agostino, F. 2000. *Testi umoristici babilonesi e assiri*, Testi del Vicino Oriente antico Series. Brescia, Paideia.

D'Agostino, F. 2014. Assyrian and Babylonian Humor. In S. Attardo (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, vol 1: 68-70. Thousand Oaks CA, Sage Publishing.

Bendt, A. 1991-93. The Sumerian Folktale of the Three Ox-Drivers from Adab. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 43-45: 27-38.

Charpin, D. and Durand, J.-M. 2004. Prétendants au trône dans le Proche Orient amorrite. In J. G. Dercksen (ed.), *Assyria and Beyond: Studies Presented to Mogens Trolle Larsen*, Publications de l'Institut historique-archéologique néerlendais de Stamboul 100: 99–115. Leiden Netherlands, Institute for the Near East.

Dalley, S. *et al.* 1976. *The Old Babylonian Tablets from Tell al Rimah*. London, British School of Archaeology in Iraq.

Durand, J.-M. 1988. *Archives épistolaires de Mari I/1*, Archives royales de Mari 26. Paris, Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

Durand, J.-M. 1997. *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari* I, Littératures anciennes du Proche Orient 16. Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf.

Durand, J.-M. 1998. *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari* II, Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient 17. Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf.

Durand, J.-M. 2000. *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari* III, Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient 18. Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf.

Durand, J.-M. 2005. De l'époque amorrite à la Bible : le cas d'Arriyuk. In L. Kogan (ed.), *Memoriae Igor M. Diakonoff*, Babel und Bibel 8: 59-70. Winona Lake Ind., Eisenbrauns.

Foster, B. 1975. Humor and Cuneiform Literature. *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 6: 69-81.

Foster, B. 1995. Humor and Wit in the Ancient Near East. In J. M. Sasson *et al.* (eds), *Civilizations of the ancient Near East*: 2459-2469. New York, Scribners.

Frahm, E. 1998. Humor in assyrischen Konigsinschriften. In J. Prosecký (ed.), *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East: Papers presented at the 43rd Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Prague, July 1-5, 1996*: 147-162. Prague, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Oriental Institute.

George, A. R. 1993. Ninurta-Pāqidāt's Dog Bite, and Notes on other Comic Tales. *Iraq* 55: 63-75.

George, A. R. 2003. *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts.* Vol. 1. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Guichard, M. 1999. Les aspects religieux de la guerre à Mari. *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 93: 27-48.

Kupper, J.-R. 1990. Une lettre du général Yassi-Dagan. *Mari Annales de recherches interdisciplinaires* 6: 337-47. Paris, Editions recherche sur les civilisations.

Lafont, B. 1988. Chapitre 1. La correspondance d'Iddyatum. In *Archives épistolaires de Mari I/2*, Archives royales de Mari 26: 461-508. Paris, Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations.

Langlois, A.-I. 2017. *Les archives de la princesse Iltani découvertes à Tell al-Rimah (XVIIIe siècle avant J.-C.) et l'histoire du royaume de Karana / Qaṭṭara*, Mémoires de NABU 18. ARCHIBAB 2. Paris, SEPOA.

Röllig, W. 1987-1990. Literatur. In D. O. Edzard (*et al.*, eds), *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 7: 35-66. Berlin New-York, Walter de Gruyter.

Sasson, J. M. 2017. *From the Mari Archives. An Anthology of Old Babylonian Letters.* Winona Lake Ind., Eisenbrauns. (Paperback reprint, with corrections and additions.)

Vollemaere, B. 2014. Ekallâtum dans la région du Sindjar, durant les années ZL 11 et ZL 12. *Notes assyriologiques brèves et utilitaires* 2014/82: 130-31.

Ziegler, N. 2007. *Les Musiciens et la musique d'après les archives de Mari*, Florilegium marianum 9. Mémoires de NABU 10. Paris, SEPOA.