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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the geographic area that lies south of Baghdad, the area between Baghdad and the Persian Gulf, an area now under occupation by United States forces. The paper's focus is approximately 4300 years before, yet it hopes in the end to explain the rhetorical relevance of that time, that place, and the particular figure of an ancient woman, Enheduanna, for today. According to the paper, Enheduanna, a poet, princess, and high priestess wrote the "Exaltation of Innana," a complex 153-line hymn/poem. The paper states that her existence and work present the possibility of an illuminating case study of both her own "ancient context" and the "contemporary context" of her reception in current academia which lags well behind her iconic status in popular culture. It notes that working with the texts of Enheduanna presents several problems--the distance of more than 4,000 years seem to make her works and their themes difficult for students to comprehend, and the structure of her hymns, her use of repetition and metonymy as she ritually addresses the goddess Innana, is often puzzling to modern students. The paper suggests working with "The Exaltation of Innana" as an introduction to Enheduanna's rhetoric. It also recommends several resources to consult for placing her works in context. It contends that Enheduanna's work and life lay at the intersections of four contemporary debates about rhetorics as they inscribe the relationship of power and language. (NKA)

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# Teaching Ancient Mesopotamian Rhetoric: Gender and Literacy, Enheduanna as a Case Study at the Beginning of Written Literacy

By Roberta Binkley

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (54th, New York, NY, March 19-22, 2003)

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## **Teaching Ancient Mesopotamian Rhetoric: Gender and Literacy, Enheduanna as a case study at the beginning of written literacy.**

**This talk focuses on the geographic area that lies south of Baghdad, the area between Baghdad and the Persian Gulf. As the whole world watches, it is an area now under occupation by United States forces. My focus is approximately forty three hundred years before, yet I hope in the end to explain the rhetorical relevance of that time, that place, and the particular figure of an ancient woman, Enheduanna, for today.**

Archeologists acknowledge that among the oldest written texts are those that come from Uruk toward the end of the fourth millennium BCE. Written symbols were impressed on clay tablets and then baked to preserve an enduring record. In Mesopotamia by the very early third millennium, a growing class of scribes had already begun a long literary tradition. Throughout the third millennium, Sumerian, a language of unknown antecedents, was spoken. Although gradually replaced by Akkadian, a emetic language, Sumerian continued as the written language through the second millennium, and the Sumero-Akkadian system of cuneiform persisted for the next 3,000 years.

Thus a continuous cuneiform literary tradition existed throughout this area based upon an elite class of scribes, usually male, who transmitted the traditional rhetorical practices of their culture in systematically arranged archives and scribal schools. This tradition has been much studied because of the abundance of texts primarily written on clay.

Most of the texts from ancient Mesopotamia were not discovered until the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Thus the predominant focus in Mesopotamian textual study has involved compiling grammars, assembling dictionaries, and issuing editions of texts for analysis. One effect of the extensive and continuous existence of the scribal schools in Mesopotamian culture is that numerous copies exist of works the culture considered important. Thus any textual edition must take into account numerous tablets, with all the discrepancies. The nature of cuneiform itself leads to differences in scholarly readings, since the multivalent quality of cuneiform characters inevitably puts editors in a position of having to make decisions as to which of the many possible readings for a cuneiform applies in a specific instance. As a result, much of the scholarly attention has involved settling on and fixing the text. Additionally, agreements as to which texts constitute important knowledge for the discipline of Assyriology have inevitably influenced decisions as to which texts merit publication and translation. Many extant texts have thus received little or no attention.

One author, the earliest known author writing around approximately 2300 BCE, and her texts has received interesting, often frequently ambivalent attention. She is Enheduanna. She wrote the *Exaltation of Innana*, a complex 153 line hymn/poem. She was a poet, high priestess, and princess, writing 2,000 years before the Greek classical period. Her existence and her work raise fascinating questions about the beginning of literacy and the rhetoric surrounding that literacy.

Why focus on her beyond her claim to primacy of world authorship? She offers an insertion point into the area of ancient Mesopotamian rhetoric (how language and power were inscribed then and how they are inscribed now). Her existence and work

present the possibility of an illuminating case study of both her own ancient context (which may ultimately be unknowable) and the contemporary context of her reception in current academia which lags well behind her iconic status in popular culture. Her work (what she says) as the earliest form of rhetorical persuasion, presents a fascinating study of reception not only in ancient literacy, but of reception by the contemporary academy.

However, working with the texts of Enheduanna presents several problems. First, there's the distance of more than 4,000 years that seems to make her works and their themes difficult for students to comprehend. Then there's the structure of her hymns, her use of repetition and metonymy, as she ritually addresses the goddess Inanna that is often puzzling to modern students. Then there's the problem of her **context** that raises questions such as:

- What was the civilization like from which she wrote and composed, and how much must be guessed and inferred about that ancient time and place?
- How much must be inferred about gender and the status of women, even elite women such as Enheduanna?
- Is the rhetoric of *The Exaltation* one of political expediency, that forefronts the agenda of her father, Sargon?
- Does Enheduanna's discussion of her own writing present a process theory of rhetoric?
- How can that rhetoric be characterized?
- Does the rhetoric of her representation of the goddess Inanna represent a theological argument?

-And finally, *how* does her position as Other in terms of gender, period, place, and spiritual tradition color our reception of her and her works?

### **Enheduanna**

Working with the hymn, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, provides an excellent introduction to the works of Enheduanna. At only 153 lines long, it invites close reading. There are several translations available and it can be instructive to compare them. There's the first translation of William W. Hallo and J.J.A. van Dijk that was done in 1968 with an excellent explanation that remains the basic scholarly work in English. A popular treatment as well as extensive discussion from a Jungian point of view of this and two other hymns is available in Betty De Shong Meador's book, *Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna*. Also there's the accessible version in Willis and Alik Barnstone's book, *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now*. Michelle Hart's web site at:

<<http://www.angelfire.com/mi/enheduanna/>> helps Enheduanna to come alive for undergraduates on a visual as well as textual level. On that web site Hart offers a recent translation of "The Exaltation of Inanna" from the German Sumeriologist, Annette Zgoll.

### **Context**

An excellent starting place is the general 4 vol. reference collection edited by Jack M. Sasson, et. al. *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995.

Two books that deal with questions of the Greeks and their context within the larger Near Eastern world are by Walter Burkert and M.L. West. *In The Orientalizing Revolution*, Burkert focuses on what he calls the "orientalizing period" during the early

archaic age (750 to 650 BCE), or roughly the Homeric epoch. M.L. West takes a larger view from the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium to the first century.

Of course, there is the work of Martin Bernal and Edward Said who Certainly bring into question many of the assumptions of contemporary scholarly disciplinary methodology.

Extensive feminist criticism of historical writing also helps to raise interesting questions for students to consider. For example, Gerda Lerner's book, *The Creation of the Patriarchy*, an outsider's view of the rise of ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia has been widely read and used in women's studies courses. Although many specialists have critiqued her details, her thesis still has yet to be refuted. Zainab Barhani in her book *Women of Babylon* gives the first extensive postmodern treatment of women.

The larger cultural context of Mesopotamia and Egypt are well-described in William Hallo's excellent book with William Simpson, *The Ancient Near East; A History*. There's also the excellent general reference source of Marc Van de Mieroop's, *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History* also offers a good background to the cuneiform tradition A popular version of the mythic hymnic cycle of Inanna is translated by Samuel Noah Kramer and edited with a controversial commentary by Diane Wolkstein. For overviews of Sumerian literature see also Jeremy Black's book, *Reading Sumerian Poetry*, which takes a literary criticism approach. There's also the treatment of Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once...: Sumerian Poetry in Translation*.

**To return to the promise with which I prefaced this discussion: You'll remember that I promised to explain how near the beginning of literacy, the writing and**

**persona of a woman and the events that took place more than 4,000 years ago might relate to that same place--now the focus of world attention--and to our own more mundane plodding lives as teachers.**

**Why use Enheduanna as a case study? How is she relevant to our students and to ourselves? How does her ancient existence relate to what is going on right now in her ancient homeland? I believe her work and life lay at the intersections of our contemporary debates about rhetorics as they inscribe the relationship of power and language (who speaks, to whom are they speaking, and what are they saying?). In these intersections are the debates around hermeneutics and history, colonialism and postcolonialism, discussions of gender and literacy, and empire and war.**



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