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# Lamaštu, the Stranger

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## Abstract

The Mesopotamian demoness Lamaštu is commonly portrayed in the sources as an attacker of babies and mothers, who often commits her crimes disguised as a nanny or a wet nurse. The paper analyses her nature through the pattern of strangeness: a subjective attribute of difference from known patterns, related to unacceptability and danger. I suggest that Lamaštu's nature is expressed as a negation and estrangement of cultural identities, such as *humanity*, *indigenouness*, *womanhood*, and *professional childcare*. The former two identities encompass and define the whole of the indigenous society, therefore, any patterns of their negation must lie beyond the society's borders in principle. However, the latter two represent only a specific part of society and their strange forms may appear within its borders, which makes them problematic. Their connection to the former two might deny their ambivalence and relate their danger to absolute strangeness. The paper then finds specific patterns of strangeness in relation to social positions of nannies and women, and in the context of gender transgression and patriarchal structures.

## Keywords

Mesopotamia, demons, Zwischenwesen, strangeness, stranger, strange, cultural studies, culture, gender, danger, childcare, children

## Introduction

Lamaštu, commonly marked with the logogram KAMAD.ME,<sup>1</sup> was portrayed as a very dangerous Mesopotamian demoness, who could appear as the cause of different diseases, for instance, fevers (Bácskay, 2019). She is, however, especially represented as an attacker of unborn babies, little children, and their mothers, upon whom she inflicts trouble varying from mild indisposition to death. The logographic form of her name has been appearing in Sumerian sources since the later periods of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, and it was already used as a parallel for the Semitic name Lamaštu in the Old Babylonian era (Farber, 2014: 2). In the earlier periods, she usually only appears as a member of a demonic group, without particularly clear individual characteristics (Farber, 2014: 2), although her name already seems to

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<sup>1</sup> Lately, the reading KAMAD.ME has been suggested to replace the previously used reading DIM<sub>3</sub>.ME (George, 2018).

refer to a female demonic being related to illnesses.<sup>2</sup> However, as presented in the available sources, the demoness' physiognomy had been growing more complex in the following centuries, especially since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium and throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. These periods saw the emergence of a variety of relevant sources, especially a voluminous collection of incantations and ritual instructions used specifically for protection against Lamaštu (hereinafter referred to as "canonical" or "Lam. I–III" in direct references to the text),<sup>3</sup> and the era also provided us with rich evidence in Lamaštu's iconography.

In the detailed descriptions of the later sources, both in the sense of the canonical series and the non-canonical ritual texts and incantations, Lamaštu is presented as a powerful and scary demoness, a bloodthirsty predator of a significantly multi-layered personality. She is a "*Mischwesen*", i.e., a hybrid being consisting of both human and animal body parts; she is also, in her aspects of a more anthropomorphic kind, represented as a wild and, so to say, dysfunctional woman, who strives to intrude into a household to reach its children, for the purpose of which she usually impersonates a tender nurse or nanny. Occasionally, incantations also include a peculiar element of describing Lamaštu explicitly as a woman of a foreign ethnicity, i.e., an Elamite, Amorean or Sutean woman.

This seemingly inconspicuous detail is stated among a collection of mostly negative or at least ambivalent attributes. This fact gives these phrases a meaning of a rather symbolic kind, in reference, I believe, to an important aspect of Lamaštu's nature – her character of difference, oddity and strangeness, which are commonly related to a notion of danger. Once this pattern is considered as a key aspect in the interpretation of Lamaštu's nature, her physiognomy starts to appear as a multi-layered expression of strangeness, which emerges in her nature through negation of different human roles, both in the sense of social patterns and symbolic cultural notions. In this inversion, the human roles are twisted and turned into strange, unfamiliar patterns, and through this, as we shall see below, also something potentially dangerous.

In this text, I study how these different layers of role inversion relate to one another in Lamaštu's physiognomy, focusing especially on those connected to the internal structures of society. The human roles included in Lamaštu's imagery are of varying levels of specificity, as some extend over the whole of the given society or even of humanity, while other levels of Lamaštu's personality treat only a specific subidentity, internal to the society. Such subidentities may hold a particular position in relation to the rest of the society, in the symbolic construction of their acceptable and unacceptable forms, and also in the manner in which they can

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<sup>2</sup> See Wiggermann (2000: 218), specifically the note 5 with examples of early mentions. Note, though, that other authors read some of the examples differently, even without any mention of the name – see Rudik (2015: 192) for alternative reading of HS 1600 i: 7.

<sup>3</sup> The "canonical series" is a standardized collection of Lamaštu texts, comprised of three long tablets, which is documented to us in at least two different recensions (Farber, 2014: 17). Numerous manuscripts of the collection have been archived in different parts of Mesopotamia, and paralleled by related sections of different texts – for the list of canonical manuscripts, see Farber (2014: 45–50). References to lines of the canonical series will be based on the numbering of Walter Farber's (2014) edition for better clarity, as the structure can differ in individual manuscripts. Farber's translations will be used for the quoted passages of the canonical series, as well as for most of the non-canonical Lamaštu related sources, unless it is stated otherwise.

potentially bring the element of strangeness into the society's internal structures. In Lamaštu's case, the identities of such potential are the very specific role of professional wet nurses and nannies, and, from a broader perspective, the much more complex gender identity of womanhood.

### Lamaštu and the variations of strangeness

The idea that Lamaštu's strangeness is expressed through the inversion of familiar identities is in essence based on a presumption that the notion of the strange always emerges in relation to determined constructs of the familiar. In the words of Jolanta Saldukaityté (2016: 98): "Recognizing something or somebody as strange first of all indicates that we are already aware of the not-strange (...)". However, the patterns of the strange are not only *different from* the familiar; they are also generally *based on* the forms of the familiar, as its differing and potentially unacceptable versions. Mary Douglas (1984: 36ff), for instance, developed the definition of the strange as a reorganization of the known structures. Therefore, Lamaštu also differs in her wild forms from specific familiar identities, of which I identified the following four as recognizable in her physiognomy: the identity of humanity as a whole, the cultural and ethnic identity, a specific form of female gender, and the role of professional child caretakers. In the present paper, I discuss the varied manifestations of these identities, as they appear in the available sources, especially in ritual texts.

Firstly, Lamaštu negates the whole definition of humanity, both through her hybrid appearance and her violent behaviour. She oscillates on the borders of the human and the animal worlds. Lamaštu has a body of an anthropomorphic base. However, her relatively human trunk, supported by two legs, is supplemented with body parts of other animals, especially beasts of prey.<sup>4</sup> Like other demons, she shares her natural habitat with wild beasts, approaching the given household from the uncultivated areas of the steppe, reed thickets or mountains. In addition, she generally negates the rules of human behaviour through her violence, especially her violence against children. It is a possible interpretation that Lamaštu negates rather the manners of a *civilized* human being. However, in relation to her nature

<sup>4</sup> Lamaštu is usually both described and depicted having a head of a lioness or a she-wolf, her legs often ending with bird claws. Copies of some of her depictions on protective amulets are to be seen, e.g., in Farber (2014) in the *Plates* section, e.g., amulets IM 67882 and BM 132520 on p. 463 (note the doubled beastly head on the latter – a quite rare occasion; her feet also appear as probable bird claws in this image), or several amulets of a different, more linear style on p. 471 (IM 50053, IM19817, IM 22127, IM 22128), and an amulet of Teheranian origin, which is thought to depict Lamaštu with a head of a bird of prey – see Farber (2014: 5). Wiggermann (2000) also discusses the different trends of Lamaštu's iconography (p. 219–224, for redrawings of her various head and body styles see especially p. 233 and 235). Occasionally, Lamaštu is even compared to the mythical monstrous bird Anzû. She is said to have the face of Anzû in a Middle Babylonian parallel of the 2<sup>nd</sup> canonical tablet (BM 120022: 16) – see Farber (2014: 121, 180–181). A reference to Anzû's feet appears e.g., in Lam. I: 106 (Farber, 2014: 82 and 154–155), or in an incantation from the non-canonical text Thureau-Dangin RA 18, 163: rev. 14 (3 in Farber's edition, which is based on the text originally published by Thureau Dangin (1921) (AO 6473), as well as on its parallels), see Farber (2014: 268, 298–299). Note that Thureau-Dangin does not read a mention of Anzû in the passage – while Farber's transliteration reads "an-zu-ú", Thureau-Dangin (1921: 166) transliterates the phrase as "Zu-ú".

of a demoness and a *Mischwesen*, this is expressed in the inversion of humanity as a whole.

Secondly, Lamaštu is described as a woman of foreign ethnicity, i.e., an Elamite, Sutaean or an Amorite woman. This is a typical symbol of unfamiliarity, through which she is set apart from the whole of the indigenous society, especially women. While the literal meaning of these statements is that Lamaštu is a stranger, they are placed in the texts as a part of her frightening descriptions. In a canonical incantation, Lamaštu declares: “I am Sutaean, (...) I am terrifying” (Lam. II: 137<sup>5</sup>). A description of a similar meaning appears in a text parallel to the canonical series: “She is fierce, to be feared, a goddess, an Amorite woman” (YOS 11 20: 1–2). In this way, a relation is established between her foreignness and her scariness.

Thirdly, through certain elements of her behaviour and appearance, Lamaštu seems to be twisting a particular form of the female gender – a specific cultural image of a civilized kind of woman. She is described to be of a wild and untidy appearance, which may possibly relate to a hypothetical visual image of a female, marked by the culture as a norm. But it is also her general demeanour that potentially expresses a negation of a specific gendered identity. Several patterns of Lamaštu’s behaviour may be considered in this context, such as her violent agency or independence. Lamaštu’s focus on violence against children may, of course, be relevant in the context of the important area of female reproduction.

Fourthly, Lamaštu disrupts the cultural norms for acceptable behaviour of the professionals caring for human children, such as wet nurses and nannies. Lamaštu proclaims love for children, yet she only does so to conceal her actual intention – to hurt and murder them. In addition to this, an imagery appears in the sources that is related both to her nursing and beastly aspects: she is a caretaker of young animals. In a Middle Babylonian incantation, parallel to the 2<sup>nd</sup> tablet of the canonical series, she is told for instance: “Act as midwife for the herds of Šakkan,<sup>6</sup> the animals of the wilderness!” (BM 120022: 20). She gets depicted in certain earlier iconographic types with animals suckling on her breasts.<sup>7</sup> The effort to turn Lamaštu’s attention from the human babies to those of animals appears in the sources repeatedly (see Wiggermann, 2010). The reason for this strategy of substitution is, of course, the fear of Lamaštu’s violent, rather than caring nature. This also may be illustrated by the occasional ritual procedure, in which an animal youngling, e.g., a piglet, is not nursed, but slaughtered, and its heart is put into the mouth of Lamaštu’s figurine, before the dummy is destroyed or expelled out of the household, or even into the wilderness (Lam. I: 27, 30–31; Lam. I: 224–225, 227ff.).

As it was implied in the introduction, there is an essential difference between the former two and the latter two layers of Lamaštu’s physiognomy. Through differentiating herself from humans and indigenous people, Lamaštu constitutes elements entirely strange to that society. In the inversion of a specific gender, and of

<sup>5</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all translations of the canonical Lamaštu series used in this paper, as well as most translations of the non-canonical Lamaštu sources, are according to Farber (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Šakkan is a deity connected to the wild area of the steppe and to the animals both wild and domestic inhabiting the steppe in herds, sometimes he is described as their shepherd. See Wiggermann (2011).

<sup>7</sup> E.g., the relief on amulet IM 67882 (see Farber, 2014: 463) or the famous amulet De Clercq and Ménéant 1900, pl. 34 (see Farber, 2014: 2).

a specific profession, she relates to the culture's internal structures. Consequently, in this manner, Lamaštu relates to different levels of strangeness.

Strangeness and familiarity are not distinguished in a straightforward binary. They rather constitute a scale of various levels.<sup>8</sup> There is a difference between the strangeness of the demons of other worlds and of the people we meet in our neighbourhood. Similarly, there is a difference between the strangeness of a demonic creature living in the wilderness and of a woman in our town, who might violate local rules of female behaviour. The community would prefer a notion of an ideal world, in which the failed versions of its internal roles are to be found only far beyond its own borders, where demons and foreigners always belong. In reality, both the acceptable and unacceptable forms of the internal identities – of women and nurses – can be present in the society.

The concern over the intrusion of deviant roles into the social structures can be reinforced through the fact that the holders of these roles, both in their “correct” and “incorrect” forms, comprise only a part of the society. For the rest of the community, they always remain strange and unfamiliar to some extent. As an attribute of a person, an object or a pattern, strangeness is always relative. It lacks an independent essence, as it is always a characteristic attributed by a specific subject (Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011: 344). A society is a community of such different subjects and of different points of view, which may occur to some extent as strange to one another. It is also essential to consider, as I will show, that not all of these points of view included in a culture are of the same value and the same impact on the community. Consequently, the attributions of the characteristic of strangeness based on different points of view differ in their value and influence, as well.

The reason why the notion of strangeness is so essential in the symbolic systems of any culture and why the presence of the strange appears to be of concern is probably due to another key characteristic of the unfamiliar – its common connection to risk and danger. This tendency is usually explained as a result of the unpredictability of the strange. The unfamiliarity and the lack of experience with the strange make the object difficult to understand and to control for the subject, i.e., a subject both in the sense of an individual or the whole society. “Otherness,” Deborah Lupton writes, “is dangerous because it confounds order and control, it confronts people with difference” (1999: 13).<sup>9</sup> So also, in Lamaštu's personality, the otherness and dreadfulness are closely related.

Yet the notion of the dangerous strange appears to be even more complicated as the graded nature of strangeness comes into play. The theorists of the strange often stress that the term *stranger* arouses concern, particularly on such occasions on which the *strangeness* does not denote an absolute distance but rather a partial knowledge. An imperfect familiarity with the nature of the object results in an impossibility to classify the object clearly in the categories of safety and danger.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The term “familiar stranger”, introduced by Stanley Milgram in his 1972 essay (see Milgram, 2010), referred to this interesting scale in our own society. See also Bernhard Waldenfel's consideration of different kinds of the “foreign” (1996: 115–116).

<sup>9</sup> For the negative notion of the strange, see also Jackson, Harris & Valentine (2017: 5ff).

<sup>10</sup> See Bauman (1993: 54ff) on the ambivalence of the term “stranger”; see also Douglas (1984: 38), on the closeness of the terms of “anomaly” and “ambivalence”; see also Koefoed & Simonsen (2011: 345); Lupton (1999: 13–14).

Different modern theories of the strange usually (although not exclusively) refer to the notion of strange individuals.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Lamaštu, we speak of whole cultural identities, or more precisely of cultural constructs of these. Nevertheless, the discussed patterns of thinking can be applied to the suggested structure of Lamaštu's physiognomy. Lamaštu expresses a form of the strange originating in a clearly distinguished space; she is of a strange taxonomy and belongs to lands of great distance. Yet on another level, she expresses a potential strangeness of social roles internal to the culture, identities of individuals regularly encountered by other members of the community, to whom they are, however, never perfectly familiar. Therefore, in the view of the rest of the community, they bring this aspect of unfamiliarity inside the domestic area.

These two general kinds of strangeness are interconnected in Lamaštu's physiognomy. Why is that so? I suggest that in relating the unacceptable versions of strangers internal to the society to the patterns of strangeness entirely disconnected from the culture, the strangeness and oddity of the former are possibly emphasized as its key aspects. In this manner, the ambivalence of these, as their most concerning attribute, is denied, and they are clearly stated as foreign.

I will now discuss the identities of this kind expressed in Lamaštu's imagery and consider the specific notions of their strangeness in Mesopotamian society.

### **The perils of a nanny**

It is useful, I believe, to start with a more specific layer of Lamaštu's personality, as it represents the pattern of a potentially dangerous confrontation with the strange on a smaller scale, and, therefore, the pattern may become a bit more transparent in this context.

The character of a professional caretaker includes an aspect of strangeness in principle. Lamaštu never claims to be a mother or any other member of the family of the attacked child. She cannot use such a strategy, as the family is known to the household, unlike Lamaštu, and, to some extent, unlike a caretaker. The essential difference between a mother and a nanny is that the latter does not actually belong in the family. This means that the family allows a factual stranger to take care of a child, who represents the future, as well as the most vulnerable element of the family. Lamaštu's narrative then introduces a scary situation in which this stranger betrays the given trust and hurts the child despite many words of love.

In his analysis of Mesopotamian childcare, Marten Stol (Stol & Wiggermann, 2000: 171–192) uncovers several interesting details and concerns related to professionals who worked with little children in different contexts. The area of midwifery, for instance, appears to include the aspect of a reputation as an essential matter (as for the elite, at least), which is related to the problematic element of trust. Stol also develops on the anxieties concerning wet nurses, although he mostly mentions examples from earlier periods of Mesopotamian history, such as the first

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<sup>11</sup> See Jackson, Harris & Valentine (2017: 2–3) for a summary of different theoretical approaches to the notions of “the strange” and “the stranger”, referring in a great measure to discussion of the strange individuals. This approach is also applied by most authors mentioned in previous paragraphs, such as Bauman (1993); Jackson, Harris & Valentine (2017); Koefoed & Simonsen (2011); Lupton (1999).

half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, which precede the periods predominantly studied in the present paper. Nevertheless, it was the era in which the physiognomy of the later canonical *Lamaštu* was developing. The legal texts testify to a concern about the health of the wet nurse, which can influence the child negatively. Of course, the child's health is the predominant target of *Lamaštu*'s agency. She is a causer of illnesses, and her negative impact in this area is symbolized in the texts by claiming that the demoness is filled with venom.<sup>12</sup> Another common concern is the possibility that the wet nurse's social status may influence the status of the baby. Among the actual cases mentioned by Stol, this fear related, for instance, to such situations, in which the caretakers claimed the rights over the child or even happened to sell them as slaves. Therefore, the concern is not over a metaphysical change but over the fact that a wet nurse is in close contact with the infant and can, intentionally or not, confuse its relations. *Lamaštu*'s attacks usually took place in the area of the infant's health, but a particular notion of unwanted appropriation can be observed as well. The mentions of *Lamaštu*'s caring intentions do not include only the practice of a wet nurse's job but also surprising displays of tenderness and love for the babies, as, for instance, in an incantation, in which she "(...) suckles (them), sings (to them), and covers (them) with kisses." (Lam. II: 158). It is difficult to say whether these emotions were expected from the actual wet nurses or whether *Lamaštu* was crossing the borders here as well. Nevertheless, the quoted phrase is surrounded with descriptions of the demoness' horrors, therefore, the tenderness probably bears a negative characteristic at least in *Lamaštu*'s case.

*Lamaštu*'s identity of a twisted caretaker is placed in relation to her other dysfunctional identities, which consequently appear as the actual reason for her failure in childcare. The demoness' nursing is explicitly connected to her wild origin when she is presented as the nurse and nanny of the animals. According to the ritual texts, she is supposed to take care of the wild beasts rather than of human children. She cannot, actually, be a good nanny to humans because she is a beast, a hybrid monster, which belongs in the wilderness and not in civilized human society. In her anthropomorphic aspects, *Lamaštu* is also a stranger in the sense of ethnicity, which may, just as well, enhance the suspicion over her abilities in childcare. All of her dysfunctional identities, together with other attributes, turn *Lamaštu* into a dysfunctional woman – a woman who transgresses a variety of borders and given patterns of a standardized construct of the female gender, including her failure at childcare, as one of the key tasks assigned to this identity.

## **Lamaštu gendered**

The notion of the female gender is significantly more complex and difficult to analyse, as it is an identity of a much greater scale. Nevertheless, the aspect of womanhood is of great importance to the imagery of *Lamaštu*. It is most clear especially in those patterns of her nature that seem to negate the female identity.

Transgression of gender identity on either side of the standardized scale of gender is always a problematic matter in any culture. Societies usually consider gender categorization an essential aspect of their internal structures, and, therefore, any

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<sup>12</sup> "Snake's poison is her venom, scorpion's poison is her venom" (Lam. I: 127).



manipulation of this aspect arouses anxiety.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Lamaštu's breach of gendered patterns can be interpreted as another element in her personality based on twisted cultural roles, which generally provoke suspicion of danger. There are, however, two important matters to consider in this specific context.

Firstly, while the transgression of a gender identity is a complicated matter in general, the breach of *female* patterns might bring specific problems if it takes place in a society which might be marked as "patriarchal". Although the question of the exact position of women in Mesopotamia is very complex, it is commonly accepted that the culture falls in this category. Therefore, the possibility of patriarchal social patterns influencing the image and perception of Lamaštu should be considered.

Secondly, it is necessary to consider the actual meaning of the phrase "transgression of gender identity". The notion of gender is not culturally universal, and it can be difficult for us to free ourselves from our own concepts. This is especially relevant in the context of matters such as motherhood and childcare, which are connected to Lamaštu and which are particularly gendered in the Western culture. Furthermore, womanhood and manhood are complex notions, as there is not only one notion of a woman and one of a man, nor is there only one notion of a "correct" woman and the "wrong" one. An actual gender identity, as an attribute of an individual person, as well as a cultural pattern, is always connected to other characteristics, such as age, class, nationality, race, and possibly also profession, creating a variety of patterns under the summarizing categories of a standard gender binary. Modern feminist theories introduced the concept of the necessary inclusion of different factors in any gender analysis under the term "intersectionality" (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991). This concept can be of great use in our case, as we aim to relate Lamaštu's gender identity to the attribute of strangeness. The intersectionality approach, furthermore, draws our attention to the fact that Lamaštu's negation refers possibly to a specific gender pattern rather than to civilized womanhood as a whole. What kind of female identity does Lamaštu transgress, then? And is such a transgression always approached as unacceptable? These matters will be considered in the next sections.

### ***The Female Lamaštu***

Let me consider the potentially gendered themes of Lamaštu's physiognomy. A generalized female pattern appears in the ritual procedures of protection from Lamaštu, and I believe that it expresses a clear concern over her conduct as a female. In the process of ritual expulsion of Lamaštu from the affected household, her figurine is often provided with offerings. These can include food but also objects used for care about one's appearance or tools for handicrafts: "A soiled towel you give her as clothing. (...) You give her a comb, a d[is]taff, (and) a half-sūtu fla[sk] of oil." (Lam. I: 48–50). Lamaštu is also often depicted with these objects around her in the earlier iconographic types (Farber, 2014: 2). Such objects might be considered typically female even in the contemporary Western world, but they have already borne this character in early Mesopotamian sources. Similar gifts

<sup>13</sup> See Richey's essay (2021) interpreting Lamaštu's physiognomy in relation to the notion of "monstrosity" of gender transgression.

were, for instance, given to newly born girls already according to 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Sumerian birth incantations, while boys would receive weapons.<sup>14</sup>

Farber (2014: 3) observes that these symbols used in rituals against *Lamaštu*, as well as other ritual treatment of the demoness, such as the means of transportation used to expel her from the given household, are based on common human behaviour. He infers that this is due to the demoness being “accustomed” to human manners to some extent. He thus concludes that this treatment of *Lamaštu* indicates that the civilized form of a woman (or any human being for that matter) is already inherent in the demoness. These offerings indeed seem to have a notion of appeasement. They could be chosen for *Lamaštu* as gifts, which would calm even the most twisted kind of woman. Yet, they could also represent an attempt to bring *Lamaštu* closer to the culture’s notion of a *right* woman, i.e., to civilize her. Note, for example, the passage in a non-canonical incantation where the god Ea says to *Lamaštu*: “Instead of, O Daughter-of-Anu,<sup>15</sup> playing the nurse, you should have learned human behaviour!” and his speech continues in the actual listing of the said ritual measures:

Instead of having your hands immersed in flesh and blood, instead of running in and out of (other people’s) houses, accept from the merchant his purse and his travel provisions, accept from the smith rings befitting your hands and feet, accept from the jeweller eardrops befitting your ears, accept from the gem-cutter carnelian befitting your neck, accept from the woodworker a comb, a distaff, and a needle for your sewing needs! (Thureau-Dangin RA 18, 163: rev. 21–28; lines 14–21 in Farber 2014: 299)

This pattern then appears in this context as a symbol of the “correct” femininity, which the demoness is lacking, and which, potentially, could temper her aggressivity.

*Lamaštu*’s attack on reproduction and childcare can be understood as a negation of a typical important female task – while *Lamaštu* herself relates rather to the latter area, her violence is also directed on mothers and motherhood. However, the Western tendency to assign reproduction and childcare mostly to women may confound our interpretations of the Mesopotamian notion of this agency. While the situation in Mesopotamia may have been very similar to our own in this aspect, it is important to consider the possibility of difference. The extent, for instance, to which motherhood was considered a defining element of the female gender is a complicated issue in this sense. Certain theorists presume that birth is generally the only agency assigned exclusively to women in communities structured by standardized cisgender binary (Garcia-Ventura, 2016: 177f.). Yet, while Mesopotamian women were in particular imageries connected to children, it is a truth that childcare was not the only activity regularly assigned to females, and

<sup>14</sup> E.g., in a birth incantation from Fāra (FSB 57), the girl gets a spindle (*balak*) and a sort of hair-pin (tab – for this translation, see Rudik’s commentary, 2015: 325, while a boy gets two kinds of wooden weapons (*tukul* and *illar*). Rudik (2015) treats this matter generally on p. 78. Helle (2019) discusses the matter of symbolization and symbolic manipulation of gender through similar symbols.

<sup>15</sup> *Lamaštu*’s common epithet, see below.

Mesopotamian society also included specific kinds of women who did not engage in childbirth, such as, for instance, the *nadītu* priestesses (see below).

Of the patterns of Lamaštu's demeanour represented potentially as a negation of gendered notions, it is also her general independence from familial relations, which can provide us with a clue to decipher the identity that the demoness opposes. The independence of women in Mesopotamia is a complex issue to analyse. According to some scholars, different levels of autonomy appear to be distinguished between adult women – married and unmarried. A difference of conduct between these groups can be observed in literary patterns (Weiershäuser, 2018, especially p. 277ff), but also in actual social structures – the *nadītu* priestesses, for instance, who weren't allowed to get married or to give birth to biological children, are commonly recalled as an example of economically independent and well-educated women of Mesopotamia.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, it has been emphasized by different authors that the statements about actual married women of Mesopotamia as persons limited in their lives should not be exaggerated, or at least not overly based on the modern European notion of patriarchy.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Lamaštu's imagery would be in accordance with such a pattern, as she is never mentioned to have a partner of any kind, and her physiognomy also includes a narrative of breaking relations with her father, a male figure under whose familial authority a woman officially belonged, before she got married. Lamaštu is described as a daughter of various significant deities of the pantheon,<sup>18</sup> who decide to banish her based on her unacceptable violence.<sup>19</sup>

Based on the notion of a socially subordinate married woman, Lamaštu's independence may also be expressed in her ability to move freely around the landscape, especially around the wild spaces. Frauke Weiershäuser (2018: 279) concludes that such a possibility is rarely bestowed on married females in Mesopotamian narrative patterns, as opposed to other kinds of both male and female characters. A connection to the wilderness and the wild beasts is also attributed to other mythological women with a higher level of autonomy. The most famous of these is probably the goddess Ištar (Brisson, 2007: 70–71;

<sup>16</sup> See e.g., de Graef (2018: 153) on the difference of *nadītus* from married women in economic autonomy. See also May (2018b) in the context of female literacy and education.

<sup>17</sup> See Bahrani (2001: 105), on the modern Western bias influencing this notion; see also Stol (2016: 383) on important position of married women for the household and its management.

<sup>18</sup> Most commonly her father is the god Anu, but occasionally she is also the daughter of Ea (e.g., in a non-canonical incantation of the text Thureau-Dangin RA 18, 163: rev. 21 = line 13 in Farber's edition; see Farber 2014: 269–270 and 298–299), Enlil (e.g., Lam. II: 92 and 93; see Farber, 2014: 108–109 and 172–173), Nāli (whom Farber interprets as Enlil, too; e.g., in a non-canonical text on an amulet from a private collection (no. M 8: 1); see Farber (2014: 264 and 290–291); see also Dalley & Teissier (1992: 109), for discussion of the text), and sometimes also Antu, a mother, is mentioned together with Anu (e.g., Lam. I: 111; see Farber, 2014: 83 and 154–155). Lamaštu's title of "daughter of Anu" (*mārat*/DUMU(MUNUS) <sup>d</sup>*Anim*) is most commonly used rather in the function of an epithet, though, expressing her general affinity with the godly world.

<sup>19</sup> Direct references to this event are relatively rare, but Lamaštu being scolded for her behaviour by the great gods is a common narrative element in incantations. For a mention of the banishment, see e.g., early Old Assyrian incantation from the text BIN 4 no. 126 (NBC 3672): 8–15: "For her malicious ideas, her improper spirit, her father Anum threw her out of heaven, (threw her down) to earth for her malicious ideas, her chaotic spirit." (Farber, 2014: 281). Also, in Lam. I: 111–113: "It was Anu, her father, (and) Antu, her mother who, in view of her unseemly deeds, forced her to step down [from heaven] and (also) denied her a place of worship on e[arth]." (Farber, 2014: 155).

Wilcke, 1976–1980: 82). As a goddess of passion, she also differs from the standard image of a married woman, even if in a different manner than Lamaštu (Bahrani, 2001: 158ff.);<sup>20</sup> at the same time, as a goddess of war, she evinces a relation to a different context of violence. However, unlike Ištar, Lamaštu has broken her relations with the godly world, and the wilderness is now essentially her home. It is a space of many symbolic connotations. Beside other things, it is usually described as an uncivilized and dangerous area. It is actually a significant symbol of strangeness and foreignness in Mesopotamia, and it tends to be opposed to the familiar and civilized space of the city.<sup>21</sup> Lamaštu's essential relation to these areas confers these characteristics on her, as well, as Lamaštu is, in the first place, a dangerous, strange, and wild woman.

The incantations attempt to express this nature of Lamaštu also through her appearance. Besides her monstrous hybridity and beastly scariness, the authors of the texts considered the messy and uncultivated nature of her anthropomorphic features just as significant for the demoness' essence. In the canonical series, she is described as: “[Very lo]ng? are her fingernails” or a few lines later: “Her fibula [is broken], her breast is bare.” (Lam. I: 109 and 142); in a non-canonical Old Assyrian incantation, she is described as: “Her hair is hanging loose, her underwear is stripped off” (BIN 4 no. 126, NBC 3672: 16–17). While female nudity could bear different meanings in Mesopotamian symbolic structures, I believe that here it represents the characteristics of wildness and uncultivatedness. Male nudity, itself appearing in various contexts,<sup>22</sup> is famously used as an expression of these patterns in the story of Enkidu, the soulmate of king Gilgameš. Obtaining clothes is described as a part of his transformation from a wild man of the steppe into a cultured one. Interestingly, as a cultivated man, Enkidu becomes weaker than his previous wild self. Therefore, he represents a lesser threat to his future friend Gilgameš – just as Lamaštu should maybe become less dangerous when gifted with typical female attributes.

Throughout the previous description of Lamaštu's characteristics related to femininity, I have suggested that the demoness may represent a figure of a wild and independent female, as an opposition to a notion of a cultivated, modest and rule-observing married woman. It has, however, also been mentioned that the Mesopotamian society was not devoid of the independent agency of women, both married and unmarried, as its inherent and accepted element. Could a notion of an independent woman have been considered negative in some contexts? Ora Brison (2007: 72–73) has observed several occasions on which the autonomous conduct of female characters has been diminished in mythology. Yet I believe that other independent women of Mesopotamian literature are rarely described

<sup>20</sup> The unusual manners and dangerous character that the goddess Ištar manifests in the area of relationships is very well presented in a passage of the standard Babylonian version of the *Epic of Gilgameš*, in which the goddess tries to seduce the king. However, the king rejects her love, providing a list of Ištar's former lovers to whom she brought doom as an argument for his decision (VI: 42–79; see George, 2003: 620–623).

<sup>21</sup> This opposition appears already in the sources of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, probably in relation to the nature of Sumerian landscape, which was structured in independent city states, divided by dangerous areas of the steppe. See e.g., Pongratz-Leisten (1994: 25); also, Selz (2016, especially 305–306).

<sup>22</sup> See e.g., Asher-Greve & Sweeney (2006); also, Bahrani (2001: 40–69).

in terms as dramatically negative as is the case of the chaotic and bloodthirsty demonesse Lamaštu. Powerful goddesses are often ambivalent, but so are many male deities, and unlike Lamaštu, the goddesses usually bear a variety of positive elements in their physiognomy. Positively approached independent females among the human characters are also known in Mesopotamian literature (Weiershäuser, 2018). In her independence, Lamaštu seems to stand for a figure familiar to the culture in different forms, both literary and those represented in Mesopotamian constructs of social reality. I believe that in her extreme dark version of this figure, she specifically represents its negative hyperbole that was, like the identity of a twisted nanny, connected to Lamaštu's absolute strangeness of a demonesse and a foreigner.

Where could such a dramatic fear of independence emerge if the autonomous woman was not inherently negative to Mesopotamian thinking? Here, I believe, it would be appropriate to discuss the above-mentioned hypothesis that in a culture which is, in one way or another, patriarchal, the transgression of female identity patterns would potentially bring up specific problems.

### ***The Matter of Patriarchy***

The hypothesis suggested at the end of the previous section is based on a presumption that in a culture, approached as a structure constituted of a variety of discourses and points of view, not all of these lines and narratives are equal. Some of these hold a privileged position, and they have a more significant impact on the thinking of the whole society. These privileged narratives confer a privilege also on certain identities, the members of which consequently gain the capacity to create these narratives, while those not included among these can be described as minorities. The privileged identities are then approached as the core of the society in the privileged and, therefore, most widespread narratives. At the same time, although they are present in the culture, the other identities are considered different or strange, in a sense. Since the mainstream narratives also influence the thinking of the latter categories, individuals belonging to them can consequently accept this position through the process of internalization (see, e.g., Brown, Sellers & Gomez, 2002: 57–58) – they become strangers in their own homes.

These presumptions are, of course, by no means new in the humanities. Similar structures and tendencies have been studied in the past century in relation to various minorities, and, also, to the position of women in Western culture. The pattern has been famously expressed by Simone de Beauvoir in the title of her 1949 book *Le deuxième sexe* (“The Second Sex”), referring to society approaching “woman” as a sign of alterity, of the “other”, as opposed to the male core. Jacques Lacan (1973) introduced the concept of the “gaze”: a constructing look, which structures the world into observing and constructing subjects and observed and constructed objects in relation to the contexts of representation and power in the symbolic order of the society. This concept was usually interpreted in the sense of objectification in the relationship between womanhood and manhood. However, it can be applied to the general position of a minority, which holds a limited power over its self-representation and the creation of its own image – similar patterns have, for instance, been observed in relation to the postcolonial theory (Brown, Sellers & Gomez, 2002: 56–58; Burney, 2012: especially 42ff., 61ff.; Said, 1979;

Spivak, 1988). The minority cannot speak for itself, the majority speaks for it.<sup>23</sup> The minority is, therefore, always observed and always strange, and it also acquires the characteristics of risk and danger, which it, however, unlike distant foreigners, carries into the inhabited area.

The idea of a clear distinction between active and passive agency in the relation of minority and majority, as well as between women and men, has been criticized and reinterpreted (e.g., Bahrani, 2001: 34ff., especially 36; Kapur, 2000: 20–21). But even if we decide to accept this pattern as valid for the modern Western society, for instance as a not-omnipresent tendency, it is necessary to consider its validity for the structure of the studied culture, at least in the context of its constructed symbolic system.

Mesopotamia is commonly described as a patriarchal culture, at least in the way the culture represents itself in the elite layers of society, which produced the majority of available sources. Of course, the contemporary idea of a patriarchal Mesopotamia has been moderated and specified in the previous decades, with more reconsideration of the plausibility of any generalized statements. These are usually problematic, as the term *Mesopotamia* covers a broader geographical area and a large period of several millennia. Based on the specific spacetime factors, Mesopotamia saw a variety of different social systems and different life conditions of females (Stol, 1995). According to a common, although occasionally disputed interpretation, the periods around the break of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BCE are considered to have offered women more autonomy. This is supposed to have decreased in the following millennia, with, for instance, the Middle Assyrian period being occasionally mentioned as an especially patriarchal era of Mesopotamian history (e.g., McCarthy, 2016: 102; also, Liverani, 2014: 361). In addition, the complexity of the problem is enhanced by internal differences of the communities, as the position of women could differ widely based on their situation in life (e.g., Stol, 1995: 140). McCarthy (2016: 102) explains that “society was hierarchical, and sex and gender were part of these divisions, but at times subordinate to rank, class, and other factors”.

Contemporary analyses of Mesopotamian gender structures commonly emphasize that women of this historical epoch should not be perceived as absolutely devoid of agency and visibility.<sup>24</sup> So also Weiershäuser (2018), in her above-

<sup>23</sup> “It would be nice if every human being could speak in his or her own voice. However, intercultural experiences teach us only too well that behind such a voice there is always a specific authority speaking sotto voce for this human being without embodying him in all his universality. And all too often, there is a hierarchy hidden behind the pretense toward universality: Europeans speak about Europeans and non-Europeans, men about men and women, adults about adults and children, humans about humans and animals, those awake speak about the awake and also the sleeping. In all these cases, one side of the difference is clearly marked, but the other is not.” (Waldenfels, 2011: 73).

<sup>24</sup> See e.g., Pollock (1991); also, May (2018a) observing that the visibility of women of the Neo-Assyrian court is practically equal to the visibility of men of court, once the specific figure of the king is not included in the calculation. Svärd (2012: 507–518) suggests an approach on the base of which any culture would be analysed as a structure of complementary lines of different kinds of power, rather than a structure of an absolute hierarchy, including the structure of male and female areas of agency. However, while it is definitely advisable not to approach a minority only as a vulnerable victim and to perceive it as a group of independent individuals, I think it is also important to consider if the mainstream narratives of the society bestow the same value on the specific kinds of power held by the different subgroups.

mentioned discussion of diminishing the identity of married women in literature, has observed that while the literary married women are of limited autonomy in such formal manners, as is the omission of their own name, their activity is, nevertheless, often significant for the story. I have also discussed that a strictly negative approach to a notion of an independent woman is actually not unconditional in Mesopotamia, both in literary imagery and in actual social patterns.

Nevertheless, while Mesopotamia apparently comprised a variety of gendered patterns of power relations, the average situation seems to be based on a patriarchal structure. Its radicality, of course, differs very much according to the location, period, and class. The scholars who studied actual independent and educated females of Mesopotamia usually concluded that mentions of such women were much less present in our sources than those of publicly active men and that in specific contexts, the direct references to such women are decreasing throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> millennia (De Graef, 2018; May, 2018b; Lion, 2011). As I also showed, the notion of an independent woman could, according to some authors, be perceived negatively, as a threat to the order (Brison, 2007). In his study of law and social practices related to women throughout the whole of Mesopotamia, Stol (1995) offers examples of both mild and extreme inequalities in treatment of men and women from various periods.

### ***Lamaštu's Gender in Social Structures***

What position, then, does Lamaštu hold in these complex structures? If the concern over female independence indeed did appear in Mesopotamia, Lamaštu would represent its hyperbolic form, a wild woman, who brings death. The concern could originate from the general idea of gender transgression, which, as I have mentioned, is problematic both for women and men. Indeed, Enkidu's transformation from a wild man to a civilized one and from a dangerous enemy to a friend excellently parallels Lamaštu's pattern of gender transgression through the signifier of wilderness for a male character.

But as I have shown, Lamaštu negates a particular image of a woman, specifically of a mother and a caretaker, but more generally of a married woman, whose identity is to some extent subordinate to male members of her family. While the idea of a woman not taking part in these relations was not diminished as a rule, Lamaštu expresses a dangerous hyperbolic negation, as she negates the pattern extremely and violently. Through this, she endangers the idea of reproduction, an important aspect not only of womanhood but of the general structure of the nuclear family – a structure that she fails to take part in as a wife, as a mother, and as a daughter.

Motherhood, as a key aspect of the nuclear family system, becomes a critical topic in societies, the structure of which is based on the *male gaze*,<sup>25</sup> i.e., the constructing gaze privileged in a patriarchal society, and in which the woman is seen as “the other”. In her analysis of the Greek festival Adonia, Barbara Goff (2004: 143) speaks of “the contradiction inherent in patriarchal organization, whereby women, entrusted with the responsibility for life, are necessarily also equipped with the

<sup>25</sup> The *male gaze* is a common term in gender studies and feminist theory since the 1970's, see, for instance, Kosut (2012: 195–196).

power to bring death.” She refers to the situation in which the woman is a stranger to the main narrative, if it is primarily male, while at the same time she is given the power over the offspring, i.e., over something very problematic in itself and so essential to the society. It is a power which not even the most patriarchal system can contain entirely, even though extensive discussions continue in the contemporary West over the society’s effort to control female reproduction.

Lamaštu becomes a hyperbole of this concern, which the society includes within its borders, but which is related to extreme forms of strangeness and otherness in Lamaštu’s case. Lamaštu is not a human, nor a godly woman, as she has been banished from the pantheon, and she comes from iconic spaces of the other – the wilderness and the foreign lands. The “intersectionality”, nowadays interpreted as an attribute of the complex social reality, is interestingly reduced here, and it is used as an instrument for easy categorization of a danger. The internal ambivalence of the culture is simplified, driven up to an edge, and transferred beyond the borders to the absolute strangeness.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the varied layers of Lamaštu’s physiognomy through the notion of strangeness as its key aspect has, I believe, present interesting structural relations of the Mesopotamian society expressed in the demoness’ nature. She represents a figure of an evil nurse or nanny, revealing the fear of outsiders who are given the trust and the power over the most intimate core of the family’s future. She represents a wild hyperbolic negation of the female figure of a subordinated married mother, a key element of the pattern of the nuclear family.

The role-figures belonging to the society, like those of a nurse or an indigenous woman, are always at risk of failing at their role, thereby bringing danger into society’s structures. The concern over such a situation can be enhanced through a potential aspect of strangeness. The notion of unfamiliarity is regularly connected to danger, especially in the cases of partial familiarity, which includes the aspect of unpredictable ambivalence, and which is particularly the case of the two mentioned identities.

For example, a nanny or a nurse is only partially known to a family, because she is not related. A woman, married or unmarried, potentially holds the attribute of strangeness from the view of the mainstream narrative of a patriarchal society, which is based primarily on the male world view. Their strangeness decreases the possibility of control over their agency, enhancing the fear of their ambivalence of being partially unfamiliar and close at the same time. The failing and dangerous versions of such figures, expressed through Lamaštu, are, therefore, turned into an extreme in their danger but also in their distance. Transferred into the world of monsters and to different lands, they become complete strangers, they do not belong in the culture. Therefore, it is also easier to expel them beyond the borders, like a clay figurine of Lamaštu in a ritual.



## Abbreviations

- AO *Antiquités orientales, Museum siglum Louvre*  
BIN *Babylonian Inscriptions in the Collection of J. B. Nies*  
BM *Museum siglum of the British Museum, London*  
FSB *Frühe Sumerische Beschwörungen, siglum of texts form Rudik (2015)*
- HS *Tablet siglum of the Hilprecht Collection in Jena*  
IM *Museum siglum of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad*  
NBC *Nies Babylonian Collection, siglum of the Yale Babylonian Collection, New Haven*  
RA *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale*  
TCL *Textes cunéiformes, Musées du Louvre*  
YOS *Yale Oriental Series, Babylonian Texts (New Haven 1915 ff.)*

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