

Janus Parallelism in Šulgi V

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Janus parallelism, or polysemous parallelism, is a literary device that hinges on the multivalence of a single lexeme. Classically, this lexeme, or pivot word, is found in the second part of a tricolon, in which two different meanings of the locution in question connect the central clause to the first and third cola of the tricolon, respectively.¹ When understood one way, this central lexeme faces backward and concatenates the clause in which it is found with an earlier phrase; conversely, if this same lexeme is understood differently, it faces forward towards a later idea. Although first discovered and studied in relation to Biblical Hebrew, Janus parallels have been recognized in many languages – including those once spoken across the Ancient Near East.²

Though scholars have overwhelmingly identified extra-biblical Janus parallels in Afro-Asiatic languages (including Akkadian, Arabic, Hebrew, Hieroglyphic Egyptian, and Ugaritic), the existence of this literary device is in no way bound to a specific language family. In fact, at least two Janus parallels (or perhaps in these cases Isimud/Usmû parallels) have been found in Sumerian literature,³ though this literary technique is surely under-identified.⁴

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¹This technique was first recognized in Biblical studies in Gordon 1978: 59-60, where it was applied to Song of Songs 2:12. For more Janus parallels in the Bible, see Paul 1989, Paul 1992, Paul 1996, and Paul 2003 (examples from the first two citations are also included amongst the many instances of this phenomenon examined in Noegel 1996a).

²For examples of Janus parallels in Akkadian, see Horowitz and Paul 1995 and Noegel 1995, as well as Noegel 1996a: 156-180 for these and other polyglot exemplars.

³See Civil 1984: 64 and Lambert 1984; though Lambert and Civil recognized the wordplays in lines 153 and 162 respectively, they are only labeled as Janus parallels in Noegel 1996a: 174-175.

⁴For a good analysis of Sumerian literary techniques found in a single composition, see Zgoll 1997. For a general discussion of wordplay in Sumerian literature, see Klein and Sefati 2000; though Klein and Sefati give examples of a number of different wordplays and soundplays, they do not mention Janus parallelism.

In what follows I suggest that there may be another Janus parallel in the opening lines of the first text from the *Sammeltafel SRT 13* (Ni 2432), a royal inscription of the second king of the Ur III state, Šulgi.⁵ As a word of caution, the passage in which this technique is located is only partially preserved, and thus the following interpretation is tentative, though in my opinion, quite defensible. The composition in question, which has been dubbed Šulgi V, recounts the ruler's single-day, round-trip run from Nippur to Ur through a fierce tempest.⁶ Though the text may have been originally inscribed on a statue,⁷ it is only preserved on the obverse and two lines of the reverse of an Old Babylonian tablet from Nippur. The remainder of the reverse is a royal inscription of Išme-Dagan (designated as Išme-Dagan S), which describes the fourth ruler of the so-called First Dynasty of Isin as a runner, and according to the end of this text was originally inscribed on a (copper) statue as well.⁸ These similarities, coupled with the archaizing and peculiar orthography of Šulgi V,⁹ have led some scholars to question whether both compositions on this *Sammeltafel* were not originally written by the scribes of Išme-Dagan.¹⁰ Interestingly, other commonalities between Šulgi and Išme-Dagan have been noted by a number of scholars; as Frayne observes, the latter “seems to have undertaken an extensive rebuilding and restoration programme within [Nippur]. In this way he may have emulated the actions of his illustrious ancestor Šulgi.”¹¹

⁵For recent studies and editions see Klein 1985; Ludwig 1990: 75-89; and Frayne 1997: E3/2.1.2.54.

⁶Šulgi V is often compared to the longer Šulgi A, as both describe a single-day journey from Nippur to Ur through a rainstorm. It is only the latter that explicitly describes the reason for the run as the celebration of the èš-èš festival; Šulgi V simply indicates the fact that the king made offerings to Nanna.

⁷So lines 32-35.

⁸Though Frayne 1983: 746 sees this statue as having depicted a mir-snake, Ludwig 1990: 81, 90 raises important grammatical objections to Frayne's translation, and renders instead “eine Kupferstatue, (die ihn darstellt) wie er wütend laufend einherstürmt.”

⁹For which, see below.

¹⁰See Ludwig 1990: 77-78.

¹¹Frayne 1983: 744; for an analysis of the similarities (and differences) between the literature and ideology of Šulgi and Išme-Dagan, see Tinney 1996: 74-80.

When Šulgi V was composed, and how Išme-Dagan S may have been associated with this composition, remains unclear. Yet these issues are not central to the argument advanced here, and thus, we may leave them for the moment. Instead, let us turn our attention to the text of *SRT* 13 and examine the proposed Janus parallel. The opening lines of Šulgi V read:

1. ^den-líl u₄-è ÉŠ x KA [...]
2. mir-RU-gal ^da-nun-ke₄-ne [...]
3. ^dšul-gi ušum ní-gù[ru ...]

1. Enlil, the storm coming out ... [...]
2. Great mir of the Anuna gods [...]
3. Šulgi, the serpent, [clad] in awesome luminosity [...]

The Sumerian mir-RU in the second line of this text functions as the pivot word for the proposed Janus parallel, as the lexeme mir can mean both “storm” and infrequently, “snake.”¹² If mir-RU is understood as “storm,” then it parallels Enlil's epithet in the first line; conversely, if mir-RU is translated as “snake,” it parallels Šulgi's serpentine epithet in the following verse.

Images of snakes and storms are echoed throughout the composition. In line 7, Enlil's temple Ekur is coupled with the image of some sort of serpent,¹³ which Klein tentatively understands as an epithet of Šulgi.¹⁴ Additionally, in lines 13 and 27, different types of storms and storm-winds are used to describe Šulgi the runner, as well as set the stage for the events of Šulgi's ancient marathon.¹⁵ The existence of imagery throughout Šulgi V that echoes the dual meanings of the proposed pivot word supports the presence of the Janus parallel and illustrates how this literary device sets up the composition as a whole.

¹²For mir as a kind of snake, equated with Akk. *šibbu*, see the bilingual evidence in CAD Š/II: 375, as well as the lexical evidence in S^b I: 99 (MSL 3: 104), A VIII/1: 133 (MSL 14: 492), Recip. Ea F: 7' (MSL 14: 532), Nabnitu XXIII: 190 (MSL 16: 217), Idu II: 21, and especially Hh. XIV: 11 (MSL 8/2: 7), which equates muš-mir with *šibbu*.

¹³Sum. muš-gal (written gal-muš); see the comments in Klein 1985: 26* as well.

¹⁴Klein 1985: 25*.

¹⁵Sum. u₄,, mar-ru₁ o, ulumaš, and dal-ha-mun (written dal-ha-mu).

Outside of the royal hymns of Šulgi, the lexeme *mir* (with a serpentine meaning) and the corresponding term *mir-ša₄*,¹⁶ though rare, are closely associated with Ninurta and related deities in Sumerian Literature. In segment A of the composition known as “Pabilsaĝ’s Journey to Nippur,” the eponymous divine warrior is compared to a rising, awe-inspiring *mir*-snake.¹⁷ Though the argument has been made that the imagery in this passage accords better with the far more common meaning of *mir* as “storm,”¹⁸ the two subsequent lines of this text invoke Pabilsaĝ through other rising-animal similes, and thus all but ensure that the *mir*-snake is intended here.¹⁹ In terms of *mir-ša₄*, the lexeme is used as an epithet of Ninurta in lines 3 and 127 of *Lugale*,²⁰ where it is in close proximity to the appellatives “king” and “storm.” Tempestuous and serpentine terms are used to describe both the martial son of Enlil in mythological literature as well as Ur III (and Isin) monarchs in royal compositions, such as Šulgi V. Indeed, there is evidence that certain Ur III (and Isin) monarchs, including Šulgi, were connected to Ninurta through filiation with Enlil, sometimes to such an extent that, “Ninurta, along with other divine sons, thus merges with the person of the king.”²¹ In the specific case of Šulgi, association with Ninurta and other related divinities is illustrated through shared epithets; this conception is typified by the Janus parallel proposed here.

¹⁶For this reading, see Erimhuš V: 193 (MSL 17: 75), where *mir-ša₄* is equated with Akk. *šibbu* (CAD Š/II: 375). The reading *mir-ša₄* is potentially complicated by a number of manuscripts of Šulgi A. Most exemplars of Šulgi A: 44 preserve *NIR-ša₄*, which Klein 1981: 210 argues is a phonetic variant of *mir-ša₄*. In manuscripts D, LLL, and OO of Šulgi A, *NIR-ša₄* is written *NIR¹-DA*, *NIR¹-DA¹*, and *TIR-DA* respectively (so Klein 1981: 193, n. 44). If *NIR-ša₄* is in fact a phonetic variant of *mir-ša₄*, then these three manuscripts would suggest a reading of *mir-du* instead of *mir-ša₄*. How much credence one should give to these variant orthographies is unclear, considering the odd orthography of the first element of this lexeme in most manuscripts of Šulgi A, as well as a lack of clear evidence for this reading elsewhere.

¹⁷PBS 13 44: 13; Heimpel 1968: 509.

¹⁸Ludwig 1990: 90.

¹⁹Mittermayer 2009: 288 contends that the somewhat opaque reference to a rising *mir*-snake in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*: 466 draws on this imagery in “Pabilsaĝ’s Journey to Nippur.”

²⁰See van Dijk 1983: 51, 68.

²¹Annus 2002: 18.

Yet an issue still remains in regard to this Janus parallel: the orthography of the pivot word itself. Outside of its occurrence in Šulgi V, a writing mir-RU for mir is unattested, which has led scholars to interpret this line in various ways. Frayne, in his edition of the text simply translates mir-RU as if it were mir, without comment.²² In contrast, Klein, who collated the tablet in question some years ago,²³ notes the odd orthography of mir-RU, which he sees as problematic. His first suggestion is to tentatively emend MIR to ĜIŠGAL, resulting in the more familiar u₁₈-ru, based on the epithet en-u₁₈-ru-gal.²⁴ Though this emendation is not without merit, the line in question lacks a noun before mir-RU; additionally, the signs MIR and ĜIŠGAL are clearly differentiated from one another in Sumerian texts from the Old Babylonian period.²⁵ Alternatively, Klein suggests that mir-RU could be a writing for miri (or nimgiri, which Klein himself views as improbable), on the analogy of ĜÌR-RU for ĝìri in *TRS* 70, 24.²⁶

In light of the evidence amassed above, Klein's second proposal seems to offer the best prospect for understanding mir-RU. Indeed, as Klein points out, *SRT* 13 contains numerous "orthographical and grammatical peculiarities."²⁷ Though many of these peculiarities are characteristic of older forms found in Šulgi hymns, and thus, may be archaic survivals from the Ur III period, others are harder to account for and lack good parallels. Here then, the orthography mir-RU for mir (or miri) may simply be another odd feature on the obverse of a tablet studded with orthographic peculiarities.

A final way in which the writing mir-RU may be explained relates to its position as the "pivot word" in the proposed Janus parallel. A number of scholars in the field have argued that textual oddities, be they orthographic or morphological in nature, may function as scribal hints in certain cases, drawing the reader's attention to special textual features.²⁸ In this case, the orthographically peculiar mir-RU would serve as a point of focus, orthographically and visually alerting the reader to the importance of this lexeme within a poetic technique. When seen from this angle, this erstwhile problematic feature becomes an important tool for marking wordplay.

²²Frayne 1997: E3/2.1.2.54.

²³Klein 1985: 20*, n. 61.

²⁴Klein 1985: 24*.

²⁵See Mittermayer 2006: nos. 189 (ĜIŠGAL) and 219b (MIR).

²⁶Klein 1985: 24*.

²⁷Klein 1985: 14*; a list of some of these oddities characteristic of the Ur III period can be found on 15*, while those not particular to the Ur III period can be found from 16*-19*.

²⁸Noegel 1996b: 186 comments on variant orthography and wordplay, while Veldhuis 1993: 46 notes the role of “ungrammaticality” in marking these special textual features.

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