

THE EVIL EYE AND AGORAPHOBIA IN THE MAQLŪ-SERIES

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(Received 16/05/2013; Revised 25/10/2013)

ABSTRACT

The belief that certain people have the ability to harm other people or objects with a mere glance may well predate history. References to this superstition are contained in various Sumerian incantations dating to the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1600 B.C.E.). In recent years, Assyriologists have started to develop an interest in the psychology of this ancient superstition. In particular, Markham Geller (2003:115-134) has suggested that the Sumerian incantations, which make up the bulk of evil eye incantations from ancient Mesopotamia, were composed by specialist exorcists to treat paranoid schizophrenia. This article will investigate the possibility that an incantation against witchcraft and the evil eye contained in the well-known Maqlū-series may well have been designed to treat agoraphobia.

INTRODUCTION

The superstitious belief that some people, especially witches, have the ability to inflict harm with a mere look is recorded over a long period in ancient Mesopotamia (cf. Thomsen 1992:19-32; Ford 1999:202-277; Barjamovic & Larsen 2008:144-155). The majority of sources constitute Sumerian incantations, some with Akkadian translations, dating from the end of the third millennium B.C.E. to the Late Babylonian period. The phenomenon of the evil eye primarily belongs to the older period of Mesopotamian history. In the first millennium B.C.E. the older Sumerian incantations were copied and translated by highly educated specialists, such as incantation priests and physicians, who performed healing and apotropaic rituals for

the king, royal family, and high officials.

Investigating the psychology behind the limited number of ancient Mesopotamian incantations specifically directed against the evil eye, Geller (2003:118-128) concluded that Sumerian and Akkadian spells represented two distinct genres. He cautioned against the common notion that Akkadian expressions used to translate Sumerian *igi ĥul* ("evil eye"), such as *īnu lemuttu* ("evil eye"), were semantic equivalents of the Sumerian combination. Geller (2003:117-118) distinguishes between the evil eye as cultural construct in Akkadian literature and the evil eye as metaphorical reference to the intimidating hallucinations accompanying paranoid schizophrenia as described in some Sumerian incantations. In his view, the Akkadian genre construes the evil eye as a cultural notion similar to the folkloric understanding of this belief in other cultures (cf. Geller 2003:118-120). For example, the Neo-Assyrian VAT10018 presents the evil eye as a product of the envy and hatred of family, friends, enemies, or rivals. The suspected possessor is identified as an ordinary, in no way frightening, individual who may have cause to envy the victim or wish him/her evil. The effects of the evil eye are benign and constitute mere individual misfortunes, such as strife. By contrast, the Sumerian incantations describe typical symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, such as hallucinatory images and voices, feelings of persecution, loss of virility, the delusion of grandeur, the feeling of having been mistreated in childhood or infancy, and an altered view of reality (Geller 2003:120-127). With good reason, Geller concludes that the Sumerian incantations were most probably used to treat paranoid schizophrenia in a form of proto-psychology.

Although adding much to our understanding of the psychology of the evil eye in ancient Mesopotamia, Geller limited his investigation to specific incantations against the evil eye, which are rare (cf. Geller 2003:115). Outside of this corpus, the evil eye features prominently as an instrument of demonic power in both Sumerian and Akkadian witchcraft incantations from which a more detailed understanding of the psychology behind the evil eye superstition in ancient Mesopotamia may be reached. This paper will focus attention on a canonical incantation included on tablet III of the celebrated Maqlū-series in which the topic of the evil eye features prominently. Reading the text from a psychological critical perspective, it will be demonstrated that the incantation may have been used for the treatment of agoraphobia.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM AND MESOPOTAMIAN MAGICAL TEXTS

As much as ancient texts are the products of historical, literary, and social processes, they are also the outcome of psychological processes in which conscious as well as unconscious factors are at work. The objective of psychological criticism is to make texts intelligible on the basis of their context in life with special attention to the psychic factors that can be identified (cf. Rollins 1999:75). Psychology provides a lens through which certain dimensions of a text can be understood that would otherwise have remained unintelligible. Texts often speak of repressions, displacements, conflicts, desires, and neuroses, all of which are legitimate objects of psychological enquiry. Mesopotamian witchcraft literature constitutes a specific text genre that requires the use of fitting psychological critical tools in the process of interpretation. Of all the tools available to the psychological literary critic, the approaches of learning theory and cognitive psychology present themselves as particularly useful for an understanding of this genre.

Learning theory focuses attention on the fact that religion constitutes learned experience and behaviour (Rollins 1999:81). The psychological critic's goal is to appreciate behavioural change as the dominant theme of religious texts and to attempt an understanding of the psychological dynamics that inform such a change. These dynamics include stimuli and new models that occur in the symbolic world of the text. Containing spells and instructions for ritual behaviour, ancient Mesopotamian witchcraft literature describes, advocates, and attests to behavioural change. The elaborate portrayals of witches and detailed descriptions of anti-witchcraft rituals in Maqlū therefore need to be critically evaluated from a psychological perspective in order to appreciate the way in which they were designed to facilitate learning and thereby stimulate change in mentally ill patients.

Coupled with the insights of learning theory, cognitive psychology adds to an understanding of the cognitive restructuring of reality envisioned by the recitation of spells and performance of accompanying rituals as described in ancient Mesopotamian witchcraft literature (cf. Soerensen 2008:98-101). The cognitive processes at work in the transcendence of cognitively dissonant elements, such as anxiety, include new causal attribution, new anticipations, new self-assessment, and new role options described in these ritual texts. For example, when an image of a witch is furnished and ceremonially burned, such as in the Maqlū (lit. "burning")-series, the action serves an

important psychological function in that it attempts to restructure cognition by substituting irrational, counterproductive beliefs with more beneficial beliefs (cf. Geller 2010:viii).

THE EVIL EYE AND AGORAPHOBIA IN MAQLŪ III 1-16

In its standardised form the Maqlū-series constitutes the script of a single long ceremony during which at least one hundred incantations were recited and their rituals performed. Abusch (2002:99) suggests that:

The series *Maqlû* is the single most important, if also the most tendentious, member of that segment of cuneiform literature which records Mesopotamian magical and medical attempts to counteract witchcraft and its effects.

The series comprises eight tablets of incantations and a ritual tablet, giving directions for the ceremony, which was performed during a night and morning in the month of Abu. Maqlū therefore represents a consecutive and unified ceremony in which the incantations were recited and rituals performed in the order given and according to the instructions contained in the ritual tablet. More specifically, the series can be divided into three major divisions – Tablets I-V, VI-VII 57, and VII 58-VIII (Abusch 2002:100). The first two divisions were performed consecutively during the night, while the third commenced at dawn the following day.

Kinnier Wilson's (1965:289-298) suggestion that Maqlū could be regarded as a diagnostic manual for psychoses described in terms of categories comparable to those of modern psychiatry has been criticised (cf. Stol 1999:57). Still, there is no reason to assume that the ancient Mesopotamians had an entirely different psychological make-up from modern Europeans. Detailed descriptions of the phenomenology of mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, epilepsy, and various phobias remained remarkably constant over 3 000 to 4 000 years, although our understanding of their nature and treatment strategies have changed dramatically (cf. Geller 1997:5; Reynolds & Kinnier Wilson 2008:1488-1490). Maqlū III 1-16 adds to the list of ancient Mesopotamian descriptions of mental diseases in its account of the irrational fear of open spaces or

any place outside of one's home or safe haven, also known as agoraphobia¹ (cf. Wittchen et al. 2010:114-116). In this incantation, the public places haunted by a perceived threat, or the witch, include roads (line 1), houses (line 2), alleys (line 3), the square (line 4), and the street (line 6):²

Incantation. The witch, who goes on the roads,
 Who invades the houses,
 Who walks in the alleys,
 Who hunts over the square;
 5. She turns around, front and back,
 She stays standing in the street, and turns her feet,
 In the square she blocks the way.
 She took away the strength of the beautiful man,
 She took away the fruit of the beautiful girl,
 10. With one look she took away her attractiveness,
 She saw the man and took away his strength,
 She saw the girl and took away her step.
 The witch saw me, she followed me,
 With her venom she blocked my way,
 15. With her magic she hindered my gait.
 She pushed my body away from my god and my goddess.

The symptoms of agoraphobia are overtly spatial. Agoraphobics typically stay at home where they feel in control and avoid venturing out into public space. Making use of attachment theory and the findings of a qualitative survey, Holmes (2008:375-382) has suggested that agoraphobia be understood as a response to perceived threat in the absence of a secure base, represented by a known person or space. Holmes (2008:375) concludes that the central dichotomy in agoraphobia is not that between public and private space, but between threat and security. In this view, spaces that are traditionally thought of as secure, such as homes, could also be experienced as frightening (cf. line 2).

¹ From Greek ἀγορά (marketplace) and φόβος/φοβία (phobia).

² For the collation and translation of texts contained in the Maqlū-series, see “Texts of Group Nine: anti-witchcraft incantations within *bīt rimki* and related texts” in Abusch & Schwemer (2011:387-398).

The imaginative descriptions of witches as well as the dramatic actions of anti-witchcraft rituals were calculated to have a predetermined impact upon a patient's psyche (cf. Geller 1997:6). It has already been noted that the use of figurines in anti-witchcraft rituals allowed a patient to transfer his/her fear onto an object which could then be ceremonially destroyed. This ritual destruction of the witch therefore constituted a proto-psychotherapeutic attempt at cognitive restructuring whereby the petitioner's anxiety was personified and eliminated:

For the witch I plucked clay from the potter's wheel,
I made a figurine of my sorceress.
In your body I lay some tallow, the destroyer.
20. In your kidney I put some eru-wood, that burns you,
Eru-wood, that burns you, to inhibit your venom!
Above the city, I light up a fire;
Underneath the city I throw a potion.
Where you go in I light up a fire.
25. When you arise, may Gibil devour you!
When you settle, may Gibil seize you!
When you carry, may Gibil kill you!
When you draw, may Gibil burn you!
To the land of no return may Gibil, your tormentor, let you go!
30. May the furious Gibil burn your body! Incantation formula.

CONCLUSION

The spell contained on tablet III of the Maqlū-series presents the evil eye of a witch as contributing to a mental state that is best labelled agoraphobia. The text describes a state of incapacitating anxiety where the petitioner feels threatened by the thought of venturing out into open spaces, such as the square and streets. In this way, the spell of the Maqlū III tablet adds to the body of evidence that the ancient Mesopotamians, although having little understanding of pathology and no understanding of brain function, were keen observers and accurate describers of mental disorders.

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