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THROUGH THE GUTS OF A BEGGAR:
POWER, AUTHORITY, AND THE KING IN OLD BABYLONIAN PROVERBS

Gina Konstantopoulos

To a greater or lesser degree, much of the literature of Mesopotamia may be viewed through a political lens.1 The Old Babylonian period (c. 1800 BCE) is certainly no exception to this: though the majority of Sumerian literary texts are scribal copies of works first known to us from this period, many of their subjects center on kings from earlier periods, casting these texts as retrospective works by which the current ruler and institution of kingship could be portrayed.2 In creating an image of political power and kingship, these texts provide a view into the ways by which power was both considered and constructed in Mesopotamia during the early second millennium BCE. Although royal inscriptions and hymns serve as one of the most prolific avenues by which the image of kingship was created, these were also carefully curated texts, producing overwhelmingly favorable images of the rulers they centered upon. Such texts thus also elevated the institution of kingship, an act that could benefit the later rulers under whom they may have been written.

As a full analysis of the presentation of kingship in all Old Babylonian texts is a topic better suited to a monograph, or to several, I limit my focus in this paper to a more confined corpus; namely, that of Old Babylonian proverbs, a group of texts that, though somewhat loosely defined, is well-suited to serve as a lens by which to view constructions of power.3 First, proverbs were

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2016 meeting of the Advanced Seminar in the Humanities at Venice International University. It has been revised in reflection of feedback received during the seminar, and I am particularly grateful for comments from Antoine Cavigneaux, Yoram Cohen, and Joy Connolly, and for additional comments from Elizabeth Knott.
2. Several texts are known from third millennium copies (principally from the Ur III period, c. 2100 BCE) but this is the exception rather than the rule. Even by the Old Babylonian period Sumerian was likely no longer in use as a spoken language, instead in use within scribal and religious spheres. The date of the “death of Sumerian” as a spoken language is still debated, but see: Milstein 2016, 8-9; Edzard 2000; Michalowski 2000; Woods 2006.
3. As discussed in Taylor 2005, 15-18, the general classification of a proverb, as opposed to a riddle, short story, or fable, is difficult to precisely define. I follow here the general classifications utilized by Alster in his published collections. While the restriction of only considering Old Babylonian proverbs is a natural
uniquely positioned within the scribal curriculum, as scribes progressed through their training in two main phases. Instruction began with simple lexical texts, word lists designed to teach the students vocabulary while also refining their knowledge of the cuneiform writing system, while the second phase was characterized by the inclusion of the literary texts. Because of the complex and detailed nature of literary texts, which possessed more fully developed narratives, were longer in length, and had complicated Sumerian vocabulary and grammar, they were taught in the later years of scribal training. Proverbs were set at the close of the first, more elementary phase, and worked to help students progress to more complicated texts, particularly those learned by students progressing to more scholarly professions, though future administrators were not exempt from a knowledge of either proverbs or Sumerian literature. Proverbs were thus well represented in the scribal curriculum and broadly distributed throughout Mesopotamia.4

Proverbs serve a useful group by which to study expressions of authority for reasons beyond the wide circulation guaranteed by their particular place in the scribal curriculum. In purely practical terms, they are a bounded corpus that matches the limitations and restrictions of this present study, and once with a measure of internal consistency across its constituent texts. Proverbs may differ in content and structure to a degree – some proverbs are as short as a single line, while others may be as long as ten – but their wide distribution ensures a certain internal consistency in regards to their overall content. Furthermore, although proverbs may appear at first glance to be constructions of humor and whimsy, the satirical elements inherent in many of them provide a vector by which the texts can comment more freely upon kingship and power than examples belonging to other textual categories.

In examining this Old Babylonian material, there is an initial concern that these proverbs, particularly when read outside their initial contexts, are at risk of being over-interpreted or assigned meanings arbitrarily. Mehmet-Ali Ataç has refuted similar concerns regarding the potential over-analysis of compositional motifs present on cylinder seals, arguing that the visual elements of a cylinder seal, on account of the technical difficulties required to produce them, should not be considered as anything other than deliberate.5 From the purely technical standpoint, of course, the consequence of the bounded scope of this paper, note that literary constructions of power in the later periods, particularly centered on the kings of the first millennium BCE, have received more recent scholarly attention; see Finn 2017 and Pongratz-Leisten 2014.

4. See Veldhuis 2000, 384. There are a few difficulties to consider in using proverbs, however, and the largest concern is the nature of the texts themselves. While find spots are known for many of the proverbs, originating in cities such as Nippur and Ur in southern Mesopotamia, the corpus as a whole contains many tablets from unknown locations. With the exception of proverbs written as a series on a larger tablet, many of the proverbs are presented individually and are not connected to one another. However, this study, to a degree, considers the Old Babylonian proverb collections as just that – a single, universally distributed corpus. This perspective is divorced to a certain degree from the reality of the historical circumstances underlying these texts. The proverbs in circulation at Nippur may not necessarily have been taught at Ur, and vice-versa, and the sentiments expressed on them may have similarly been limited to one location or have been widely expressed. Despite these limitations, I would argue that the proverbs may still be viewed as a group as they reflect general, rather than localized or specific societal patterns and commentary, with the caveat that the nuances found in geographically localized proverbs remains an avenue for further study.

5. See Ataç 2012, 268. Ataç also observes within this same passage that even though we may not necessarily comprehend the varied elements of ancient Mesopotamian glyptic, they must still “be the constituent
carving of stone cylinder seals is technically more difficult than writing on a clay tablet, particularly if one is only required to write a two-line Sumerian proverb on a single lenticular tablet, a format by which isolated, shorter proverbs are found – though Sumerian proverbs do command and thus require knowledge of more complicated vocabulary than that of Old Babylonian glyptic. The production of these texts is the result of expertise that arrives from difficult training, and we should not necessarily assume that this expertise would create products of random circumstance, without meaning or message. Although existing to a certain degree within the scribal curriculum which produced them, the proverbs are not haphazard creations of chance.

Thus, even the most ludicrous of these proverbs are not simply expressions of whimsy, intended only to entertain an audience that was most likely composed of scribes and elite individuals. When the proverbs discuss power and authority, regardless of whether they praise, advise, or admonish it, the meaning is often clearly presented within the text and not obfuscated by allegory or analogy. In contrast, we see a number of other proverbs where animals occupy narrative roles within the texts, performing actions that would otherwise be occupied by human figures, as in the following proverb, which features an interaction between a mouse and a mongoose:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{peš} & \ 2 \ \text{giš-ur} & \ 3 \ \text{ra} & \ \text{giš-ur} & \ 3 \ \text{ra} & \ \text{mu-} & \ \ ‘\text{šub}\’ \\
\text{nin-kilim} & \ \text{mu-un-na-te} & \\
\text{niĝ} & \ 2 & \ \text{na-me-zu} & \ \text{ab-hul} & \\
\text{za-e} & \ \text{la-ba-an-e-te} & \\
\text{niĝ} & \ 2 & \ \text{na-me-zu} & \ \text{al-sa} & \ 2 & \ \text{en-e-še} & \ \text{I am equal to any part of you”}.& \ \text{6}
\end{align*}
\]

This proverb fulfills two functions. The most immediate is to entertain, but the more complicated sentence structure links to the text’s second, more didactic aim: the instruction in more elaborate and complex Sumerian grammatical patterns. Beyond those aims, it also embeds an allegorical message most easily revealed through the methodological framework of folklore analysis. The pattern here – that of a smaller, prey animal attempting to rival the size of a larger predator – is repeated throughout other folktales, a trope that can point to either the outsized and thus respected defensive ferocity of the smaller animal or its foolish and overstated bravado. This allegory is succinct enough to be easily delivered, and it may serve as the structural spine for any number of similar proverbial tales, seen in many different cultural contexts. In creating categories of proverbs, a key distinction in both form and function arises between those which feature allegorical messages and those which do not, even though texts from either category may be satirical in nature.

The Old Babylonian proverbs which reference kingship and power may feature animal imagery, with the king in particular often equated to a lion, but they generally lack the outright allegorical messages akin what is demonstrated in the proverb discussed above and talking animals are not seen within the proverbs that more directly comment on kingship and power. The inherently parts of a visual language with a distinct hieratic message”. Similarly, though the proverbs are often obscure, we may approach them as parts of a larger, culturally intelligible whole.

6. See Alster 1997, 308. All quoted proverbs in this article generally follow the published editions in Alster 1997, except where otherwise noted.
7. Both tropes are illustrated in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) system of folklore classification. The first appears in ATU classification 228: “the titmouse tries to be as big as a bear”, wherein the much smaller bird successfully defends her nest from a bear; see Uther 2004.
humoristic setting and innately satirical character of these texts, despite their less fantastical qualities, does critically allow for greater freedom in how they operate within the political structures of the time. This point becomes particularly salient as the proverbs demonstrate both positive and negative views on power and kingship: some may laud the institution of kingship while others speak out against that same institution.

The proverbs construct a more permissible social space in order to both endorse and deride kingship, echoing the sense of humor as a necessary quality of social critique. Here, satire is a space where the violations of order, both political and social, are not only permitted but to a degree expected. These spaces can happen on a grand scale, as philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin observed in regards to the later tradition of carnival or a festival of fools, an occasion he detailed as a “liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order”, if an extreme example of such. Bakhtin traces such events, and the suspension of social hierarchy they invite, to their ability to create a second, comic life; a trait that is not necessarily shared by proverbs. In contrast, proverbs may violate order when they speak about power, but they do so cautiously, even self-consciously. They do not invert the world but rather strive to comment upon it.

If satire, or at least, humor, is a prerequisite of describing and advising kingship, especially in anything other than favorable terms, it is a limitation only imposed when texts comment on native Mesopotamian rulers. We see an abundance of less than subtle jabs at foreign rulers situated in other texts: they are described as sub-human, bestial in general and simian in particular. The Sumerian text of *Gilgamesh and Huwawa*, one of a cycle of literary texts to feature the hero-king Gilgamesh, similarly portrays the monstrous Huwawa, guardian of the distant Cedar Forest, as a foreign dignitary, but one that is mocked as ignorant and easily tricked. Gilgamesh, on the other hand, possesses both the cleverness to trick Huwawa as well as the martial strength to defeat him following his deception. In contrast to these more overt examples, the literary text *Gilgamesh and Agga*, which also belongs to the cycle of texts concerning Gilgamesh, provides a fairly detailed look at the assembly and the main governing bodies of the city, with a *sub rosa* commentary that is not entirely complementary. Examples such as these, rooted in literary texts, are few and far between when compared to the more ample references seen in the corpus of proverbs, and any that criticize native institutions of kingship rely on the same inherent sense of satire and humor seen within the corpus of proverbs. Direct, or even negative, statements on the palace, king, and state are able to

9. Bakhtin 1984, 10. Even these inversions could be taken to such extremes as to incite painful backlash – the reversal of roles on display during the 16th c. CE in the feast of fools, where the poor assumed the roles of the nobility or the clergy, and (theoretically) vice-versa, becomes increasingly connected to a reversal of natures that must be at its core demonic. Such displays of social and physical inversions are thus increasingly connected to the actions of witches (themselves transgressive in light of the violations of social power such women represented) and persecuted. See Clark 1999, 17-20.
10. In this regard, proverbs adhere more closely to Mbembe’s discussion on the role of the invisible and the visible in the creation of “the image”. Here, proverbs construct an underlying commentary that is tied to the more visible text, but divorced from it when the subtler aspects of the proverb’s meaning are considered. See Mbembe 2001, 144-146.
violate the boundaries of genre but nevertheless require a humorous, if not entirely satirical, setting to do so.

Defining kingship

Mesopotamian texts as a whole may express a number of different views on authority and kingship, but outside of proverbs texts tend towards overwhelmingly favorable depictions of kingship. The royal hymns fall to one end of a spectrum of representations of kingship, showcasing a carefully-crafted image of the Mesopotamian king that was, at its core, a construction of self-aggrandizing hyperbole, with the ruler depicted in unequivocally superlative terms. Royal hymns, even those arguably composed well after the reigns of their titular rulers, described the king as the best of everything he attempted, a paragon in all respects, and foremost in swiftness, strength, and intelligence. Šulgi, the most renowned of the Ur III kings, proclaims in one of his royal hymns that he is: “the wise scribe of Nisaba; like my heroism, like my strength, my wisdom is (also) perfected” (dub-sar-gal-zu dnisaba-kam-me-en / nam-ur-sa-q-gu10-gin7 nam-kal-ga- gu10-gin7 / geštu2-ga šu hu-mu-ni-du7-am3). While Šulgi focuses here on the value of his intelligence, other references to the king center on his martial ability, highlighting his strength, swiftness, bravery, and portraying the ruler as a “warrior” or “hero” (ur-sȧġ), descriptions that are all in line with the actions most often required of the king himself. From the Sargonic period through to the end Neo-Babylonian period, royal inscriptions are populated with references to the military campaigns of the king, working to reinforce the image of the ruler’s martial qualities and absolute dominion.

The Old Babylonian proverbs, on the other hand, address power and kingship through the utilization of a number of terms. The concept of the king and kingship may be addressed directly, through the use of the words lugal and nam-lugal, respectively, and the institution associated with kingship and governance is universally referenced as the palace, or e2-gal. A person in a position of power may be designated as having authority (nir-ĝal2) or be described as foremost (sȧġ). In another proverb (Coll. 1.65), leadership is more specifically designated by the word overseer (nu-banda3) and another (Coll. 3.89) details the importance of a knowledgeable leader by describing the leader in question as a foreman (ugula). These terms all allude, often directly to the concepts of kingship and authority, but not to specific kings. Indeed, within the proverbs that discuss authority and power, the king is never directly named: the texts speak of the king, but not of any one particular and named king. These proverbs exist within a complicated period in

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15. Transliteration and translations of proverbs dealing with authority and kingship are given in full in the appendix; note that the collection numbering follows that in Alster 1997 and 2007, as does the general translation of the texts.
16. We should note that other proverbs, unconnected to direct discussions of authority, do mention a king by name. Coll. 3.27 appears to reference Ishi-erra directly, though only the first half of the proverb is preserved: “Ishierra, the king, with his hand…” (iš-i-erra lugal-e šu-ni ‘x1 nin1’-ra7 tin7 [x x x] e2-a); while Coll. 3.34 references the actions of Ur-Namma in building Enlil’s temple and Coll. 4.9 declares that the “the east wind is the wind of prosperity, the friend of Naram-Sin”. Perhaps the most interesting examples concerning named kings focus on the ruler Nanne, who the Sumerian King List depicts as the father of Meš-ki-aĝ̄-nanna. Both Proverbs Coll. 3.31 and Coll. 3.35 depict the deeds
Mesopotamian history, as the political reality of the Old Babylonian period included the presence and co-existence of different rulers within Mesopotamia. In disavowing a connection to any one king, the proverbs facilitated within themselves a certain plausible deniability, the inherent claim that their statements could always be applied to another individual, rather than the most immediately applicable figure of authority.

Though literary texts are overwhelmingly the source of descriptions of the martial strength of the king, the quality is not neglected within the proverb corpus. The king may be directly described as a mighty or possessing strength, as in the straightforward proverb stating that “a mighty man is the ruler of the earth”. Other texts describe the king as “the lord made perfect in heaven” (en an-na šu-du), before extolling his prowess as a builder. Often, however, the king is compared to fierce and powerful animals, especially the lion, as one proverb states: “the palace is a forest, the king is a lion; Nungal overwhelms men with a huge battle-net”. The connection between lions and kingship is a well-established trope, one that runs throughout representations of royal individuals in Mesopotamia, and is seen in textual as well as artistic representations, the latter depicted most famously through the reliefs of lion hunts found on Neo-Assyrian palaces, with the the predator’s power clearly utilized to bolster the image and military might of the king. This image was so linked to the power of the king that it could be attacked or defaced in order to undermine that power, as attested by the iconoclastic destruction of particular, deliberately selected images in the reliefs of Aššurbanipal’s North Palace at Nineveh.

While the proverbs do highlight the strength, power, and martial qualities of the ruler, they also underscore other qualities that a ruler should possess, with the importance of wisdom and intelligence referenced time and time again. The proverbs may even deliberately minimize the importance of physical strength, otherwise the most commonly referenced and praised attribute of the ruler, in favor of emphasizing intelligence, thus reminding the ruler of the importance of the latter while also lessening the significance of the former. There are subtle shades at work with this portrayal of the king: on the one hand, the scribes responsible for these particular proverbs are

of Nanne, with Coll. 3.31 in particular following a format similar to an abbreviated royal inscription, though in a sense mirrored and focusing on Nanne’s advanced age and his uncompleted or failed tasks: “Nanne held his old age in high esteem. He built Enlil’s temple, but did not complete it. He build a wall around Nippur, but…He build the Eanna, but after it had fallen into neglect he carried it away. He captured Simurrum, but did not [destroy its wall]. He never saw mighty kingship (nam-lugal ka-a-ga). Thus Nanne was carried away to the Netherworld with a depressed heart”. See Alster 1997 for full editions of all proverbs.

17. See Proverb Coll. 10.5; this proverb explicitly uses the word lugal in its text: a₂-tuku lugal ki-in-du-ka.
18. Emory 106. The two-line proverb ends with the line that the king “has built a house in the barren marshes” (ambar a-ri-a c₂ bi₂-in-du₂).
19. See Proverb Coll. 2.155.
20. See Strawn 2005. Even when we see the proverbs assert the limitations of mortal men, the connection to the lion is still stressed, as in one proverb that states that even though the “tallest one cannot reach the heavens with his hand; even the broadest one cannot encompass the earth…but you – when you roar like a storm – may you establish yourself like a lion” (Coll. 22 vi. 38-44).
21. See Porter 2009, 204-206. In addition to images of the king on campaign, the lion hunt was selectively defaced, with hunting implements in particular rendered useless. In one panel of the relief that featured the king tugging on the tail of a lion, the tail was deliberately targeted for erasure, as if to uncouple the power of the lion and the ruler.
continuing to praise aspects of the king, but they do so in a way that emphasizes the importance of wisdom. Given the strong connection between the scribal arts and wisdom, these texts also elevate the learned intellectual traditions to which the scribes themselves belonged.

This preferencing of intellect over strength – or at the very least, the caution that intelligence should not be neglected in favor of strength – is couched in terms that range from overt to covert, but each instance establishes the importance of wisdom and the power of words, whether spoken or written. Among the more overt examples, one proverb remarks that “being strong does not compare with having intelligence” (Coll. 9.4a6), while another proverb, somewhat more cagily, states that “it is from a man’s mouth that strength comes” (Coll. 10.6). The former proverb requires little additional explication, while the latter proverb implies that an individual’s speech, or his words, have the greatest significance, superseding his physical strength. In general, the proverbs stress the importance of words and speech from those in positions of authority, or from figures who are otherwise reflective of authority. It assigns an independent agency to those words, as can be seen in the following two connected proverbs:

Whatever the one having authority said, it is not good. Whatever one having authority said, it was not right. (Coll. 10.1-10.2)

When the authorities are wise, and the poor are loyal, it is the effect of the blessing of Aratta. (Coll. 10.3-10.4)

Although the importance of speech, as well as the power inherent in words, is clear for each of these two proverbs, different facets of this concept are emphasized in each. The second (Coll. 10.3-10.4), a complicated proverb that appears in several copies, positions wisdom as both a blessing and an expected consequence of the proper ordered functioning of society. The first (Coll. 10.1-10.2), on the other hand, divorces the authority of rule from that of speech, as an individual may possess the first (nir- gàl) without any guarantee that he will also issue words that appropriately good (sà6) or righteous (zid), as would be expected of one in authority.

Other proverbs articulate a more nuanced view on the relationship between wisdom and kingship, criticizing or even deriding wisdom if it appears in excess or to the exclusion and thus detriment of other, similarly favorable qualities. Though it is not surprising that a corpus as diverse as the proverbs could hold contradictory views among its various texts, these proverbs are not antithetical to each other. All the texts fundamentally caution against any one quality – even intelligence – holding overwhelming significance. While these cautionary remarks can be broadly applied, the proverbs choose to associate them and their resulting negative connotations with the palace as an institution and those who reside within it. One proverb remarks, for example, that “the swift one escaped, the strong one fled; he who had a ‘mouth’ (ka tuku) went into the palace” (Coll.

22. Similarly, another proverb further underscores the connection between the king and the scribal profession, by stating that “the king is a scribe, the king is a mighty bond blocking the river” (YBC 8937).
23. All translations follow those prepared in the editions in Alster 1997 and Alster 2007. For full transliteration and translation, see the appendix at the end of this article, which includes all proverbs discussed.
24. This final phrase, the “blessing of Aratta”, is difficult to fully understand, but here seems to reference an idealized society through the comparison with the fictional land of Aratta; see Mittermayer 2009, 34.
18.8). The sentiment is echoed by the proverb stating that “his hand is on the table; his tongue (eme-ni) is in the palace” (Coll. 22 vii. 6-8). In the case of the first proverb, the valued qualities of speed and strength are removed from the palace, while one possessing speech, but without any other qualities, enters the palace. The second proverb approaches this sentiment from a different angle, with one’s hand (šu) linked to physical acts, while one’s tongue (eme) is instead connected only to speech, and divorced from physical action. This proverb suggests that those who are in the palace are, to borrow a modern idiom, “all talk”.25 A ruler, then, must demonstrate wisdom, though not at the expense of strength, and similarly, possess strength, but not to the neglect of wisdom.

In addition to articulating the required qualities of an ideal ruler, the proverbs also define the proper place of the king in the universe. As one proverb dictates when stating: “by the time the sun is up, kingship is assigned” (Coll. 3.83), kingship is a station assigned by the gods, and it is to those gods that a ruler must ultimately bow. The connection is furthermore rooted not just in any deity, but in Utu, the god of the sun and divine judge. Utu carries well-established connections with both law and kingship, legitimating both institutions thanks to his role as the judge and arbiter of the gods, and we see additional, more general connections between the sunrise and the determination of destinies.26 The institution of kingship may have power, but the individual holding the position of king is not the source from which that authority is generated. This sentiment is echoed in another proverb, which states that: “the stranger is a leader in a foreign city” (gir iri kur2-ra-am1 saγ-γa2-am3 (Coll. 15.e4). Though the stranger has no standing outside of his city, within it, in his own native context, he is a leader. The description of a “foreign city” (iri kur2) is uncommon, with the other major attestations for such a term occurring primarily within the corpus of city laments.27 In each instance, the use of kur2, indicates the sense of being different, altered, or inherently alien, emphasizing the fully foreign nature of the city. In the city laments wherein it appears, the “foreign city” is seen as a destination for the forced movement of people: they are expelled from the devastated city to this location, unnamed but above all marked by its foreign nature. Given the parallel circulation of the city laments and the proverb corpus, the connection does not appear coincidental. Instead, the proverb highlights that it is the leader or ruler’s position within the city that elevates him, rather than inherent qualities of the individual himself. Other proverbs utilize analogic relationships to deliver a similar message, as in the proverb, here disconnected from direct references to kingship, that states: “in the city of the lame, the cripple are couriers” (Coll. 1.66).28 This proverb makes its point more tangentially, reinforcing social

25. Boasting is discussed elsewhere in the proverbs, as in Coll. 3.97: “‘Let-me-speak-a-word’ walks as if it had feet. Who compares with someone who has a (boasting) mouth?” ([in]im ga-ab-du11 ǧirî3-bi-gin- du-du / [K]a an-tuku-da a-ba-am3 mu-da-ab-sa2-e) and Coll. 3.103 “A fool has a (boasting) mouth” (bu-ru-um ka tuku).
27. We see this specific use in the Lament for Sumer and Ur, the Lament for Nippur, and the Lament for Ur. The description of a “foreign city” occurs on line 448 of the Lament for Sumer and Ur and line 291A. Its appearance in the Lament for Ur, on line 308, utilizes uru2 kur2 in lieu of iri, but the concept remains the same, if not heightened by the line itself describing the wailing goddess Ningal, who cries that she “sits as if a stranger with her head held high in a foreign city”.
28. This proverb essentially establishes a lower category of people whom are ruled by those who only have an advantage in contrast to the disadvantage of the other group: the Old Babylonian equivalence of the well-known adage that “in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king”. This more modern equivalent
conventions that may then be applied more directly to kingship, a tactic echoed in the proverb: “in the city of no dogs, the fox is overseer” (Coll. 1.65). Though functioning via through animal actors, an unusual feature of this particular set of proverbs, the message remains clear: the position of leadership may simply be filled by the best available option, even if it is only the best of a bad lot. Though the royal hymns assign a full range of superlative qualities to the king, the proverbs introduce the idea that a leader may be divinely selection, chosen from reasons other than any inherent qualities or natural inclination to rule. He may even be simply the best of a host of poorly-qualified options; the best worst choice, as it were.

Addressing the king

The proverbs may – and do – choose to portray the ruler in a positive light, emphasizing his martial qualities, physical strength, and his prowess as a warrior, but it is clearly not the only way by which he may be characterized. The texts also, and often subtly, offers critique on the institution of power, and we thus see a number of different perspectives on power and kingship within the entire corpus of proverbs. In the following texts, the palace is more openly and directly addressed; its qualities highlighted and its faults, when present, rebuked:

| Coll. 2.156 | The palace is a slippery place which catches those who know it. |
| Coll. 2.157 | The palace cannot avoid the waste land  
A barge cannot avoid straw.  
A freeborn man cannot avoid corvée work.  
A king’s daughter cannot avoid the tavern. |
| Coll. 2.158 | The palace – one day a mother giving birth,  
The next day a lamenting mother. |
| Coll. 11.56 | A palace will fall by its own accord. |
| Coll. 14.19 | Both the palace and the tomb require obedience. |
| Coll. 14.21 | The palace is an ox; let its tail be caught. |
| Schøyen Coll. 4.21 | There are many ignoramuses in the palace. |

These proverbs address the palace (e₂-gal) more directly, though they are careful to speak of it as a larger, less personalized entity, rather than identify specific individuals connected to it. The palace is even portrayed as not entirely culpable for its own ill fortune, as seen in the statement: “a palace will fall by its own accord” (Coll. 11.53). Here, the palace’s decline is portrayed as inevitable, even unavoidable. Indeed, both Coll. 2.157 and 2.158 depict the palace’s progression from one state to another, the final state always being one of ruin. The texts further couch that ruinous imagery as

of the sentiment expressed in the Sumerian proverb is first referenced in print in the Adagia, a 16th c. CE collection of proverbs published by the Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus.
a “lamenting mother” (ama a-nir-ra-am 3 ), an image that recalls the mourning goddess of city laments, distraught by the city's fated destruction. The palace is also depicted in more unambiguously negative terms. Proverb Coll. 2.156 describes the palace as a “slippery place”, one that catches those who enter it, creating the image of the palace as a trap, ready to infect those connected with it, and bring them down to its own level. Similarly, Schoyen Coll. 4.21, though somewhat difficult to translate precisely, describes the palace as a court filled with idiots (nu-zu), the king, presumably, numbered among them. Providing a similarly critical sentiment, Proverb Coll. 2.157 remarks on both the palace and the king’s daughter, drawing upon rooted associations between taverns and prostitution seen in Mesopotamia, for its comments on the latter.30

When the king (lugal) has been referenced within the proverbs, his qualities, as discussed, have been measured through comparisons with animals, such as the lion (Coll. 2.155), with the king directly equated to such an animal. Interestingly, the king is rarely invoked as himself within the corpus, with exception of two of the four proverbs noted below:

| Coll. 1.75 | The cities, Idibi is their name. |
| Coll. 3.86 | “Give me!” is what the king says. |
| Coll. 22 vi. 36-37 | When the heart flows over, it is lamentable; |
| YBC. 8937 | The king is a scribe, |
| | Their kings, Didibi is their name. |
| | “Do well!” is what the cupbearer’s son says. |
| | He who can keep it in his heart is a prince. |
| | The king is a “mighty bond” blocking the river. |

In all of these proverbs, the focus tends to fall either upon the palace or its more ancillary members of it, especially when any negative sentiment is expressed. For example, while the first two lines of Proverb Coll. 1.75, particularly the terms Idibi and Didibi, are obscure in meaning, the final line, where the queen is described as “No-Good-At-All” (nin-bi nu-du10-du10-ga mu-bi-im) shifts the overall connotation, reinforcing the concept that the negative qualities of the palace could easily taint the city as a whole.31 In contrast, Proverb Coll. 3.86 denigrates the king as someone who can only demand, while the son of the cupbearer, a court position, speaks on the importance of action, a dichotomy that emphasizes the lack of initiative and action demonstrated by the king. While a more perfect analogical parallel would contrast the king’s son and cupbearer's son directly, the proverb that does focus on the figure of the prince demonstrates a more favorable view of the figure (Coll. 22 vi 36-37). Though the proverb’s meaning is somewhat obscure, it cites the ability of the prince to be in control of his emotions, in contrast to those who are less disciplined or principled, a sentiment that stands at odds to the more critical expressions in the other two proverbs.

These proverbs are the most open criticisms, even rebukes, of the king that are seen in the Old Babylonian period, and perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of these texts is that they are capable of criticizing the king at all, let alone so blatantly. As we have seen, the proverbs present the

30. See Roth 2006.
31. See Selz 2010, 9 for a discussion of this proverb alongside similar examples.
concepts of authority, power, and kingship in a number of different guises, constructing the image of an ideal ruler in some examples only to deconstruct it in others. In the case of the latter, the overt criticisms of the palace and king must be placed in the context of the immense power of the ruler: though the more modern concept of ruler’s “cult of personality” is not expressed as explicitly in this period in Mesopotamia, with most kings attaining divine status only posthumously, the king still commanded immense authority. Any critique, subtly stated or not, had to contend with the authority of the king. Indeed, except for the proverbs and scattered literary examples, most other criticisms of kingship are directed against a past king, often in order to disassociate the current king from the actions of his predecessor, particularly when those actions might be seen to incite divine disfavor or wrath. These are not, then, true anti-monarchical sentiments but apologetic remarks on the impious or sacrilegious acts of a previous ruler and a retroactive shifting of guilt and blame away from the current ruler. The intent behind such examples differs considerably from what is observed in the corpus of proverbs, where the king is regarded as a position, rather than any one individual person.

The relative abundance of critique found in the proverbs is facilitated by their satirical nature. Even within the other textual categories where statements advising, rebuking, or even mocking the king can be found, we still see these humoristic and satirical qualities emphasized. As proverbs are by their own nature inherently satirical, they are well-suited to function as a method of delivery for permissible anti-monarchical sentiments, as in the examples discussed above. Though the proverbs do not universally depict either a negative or positive image of power and kingship, the image they do construct is far more multi-faceted than in many other texts, where the trend was, unsurprisingly, to unilaterally glorify the king, providing him with a number of laudatory titles. The proverbs, instead, construct a complex portrayal that includes negative qualities, without relying on the more overtly allegorical qualities seen in other proverbs, which feature the talking animals or otherwise fantastical elements that are commonly found in the broader corpus. Instead, the social commentary, pointed directly at the institution of kingship and its ancillary structures, appears to be the main narrative goal of these proverbs. While other proverbs may deliver a moral message, these proverbs use the more socially permissible nature of proverbs to deliver their critiques, when such criticisms may be found. Unlike many other examples of politically-minded satire, however, these critiques do not rely on the grotesque in order to rebuke structures of power: though he may be

32. See Derby 1999, 92. The cult of personality surrounding modern rulers is discussed in reference to dictator Rafael Trujillo, who, despite being shot dead, commanded a cult of personality that conferred upon him nearly-mystical abilities, and a new government could not be installed until his body had been clearly seen. Prior to that, despite multiple confirmations of the assassination, no one would believe him to be dead without seeing his actual corpse.

33. The most common of these textual assignment of guilt is the first millennium composition of the Sin of Sargon, composed under his son Sennacherib to both explain and excuse his father’s death on the battlefield and the subsequent failure to recover his body for the proper burial rites, both of which were terribly ill omens. See: Tadmor – Landsberger – Parpola 1989 and Weaver 2004.

34. As seen in the depictions of Huwawa in Gilgamesh and Huwawa A and B, and the clearly stated derision against potential bureaucratic or royal corruption seen in texts such as the Poor Man of Nippur, for which see Cooper 1975.
advised on proper behavior and criticized for improper actions, the body of the king and palace are not directly attacked in these texts.35

Conclusion

The choice of proverbs as the limiting criteria for this study is not by accident, but by design. While the study’s targeted nature does necessitate employing a similarly limited corpus, proverbs are overwhelmingly the textual genre where more ambiguously natured comments against the king, particularly those that may appear to deride or ridicule his authority, may be found. While there are statements that may be interpreted as remarks against the absolute authority of the king in other genres of Sumerian literature, these examples are vastly outnumbered by those that are found within the proverb corpus. Thus, the nature of the proverbs themselves facilitates their ability to deliver satirical remarks against the king – or rather, to invert this argument, remarks against the king are more easily presented when couched in humor and satire, and such forms of expression are found most easily within the corpus of proverbs, texts that were already fantastical in nature.

The proverb corpus is, of course, not a single cohesive entity but an amalgamation of many different texts, and the ways in which this corpus advises and criticizes the king are similarly diverse. Those that speak to the king directly deliver a more straightforward message, but the more oblique tactics of the other proverbs are connected to the qualities held most highly by the scribes themselves, and work not only to deliver critical, even anti-monarchical, sentiment, but also to create the picture of an ideal ruler, advising on the proper construction of kingship. Generally speaking, the proverbs praise martial ability and warrior qualities of the king, but not in excess. When such qualities are presented as overwhelmingly, it is to the detriment of other essential aspects of rule; namely, the king's intellect. In these circumstances, the palace is portrayed as a place where idiocy and authority go hand-in-hand. The proverbs, coming from an educated scribal class, emphasize the importance of intelligence, though they are similarly quick to check intelligence without action, citing such an imbalance of qualities to be as useless as strength without wisdom. Overwhelmingly, the proverbs position the importance of a well-rounded figure of the ruler: one who has the common sense to be advised by those of greater wisdom, and the strength to work with that received wisdom. This portrayal is in line with the overarching critique found across the corpus, in many representative examples: that the king, however important, is not essential or irreplaceable. Only the gods, the proverb collections assert, may hold such standing.

35. Mbembe 1992, 9-10 cites not only the power of ridicule but also the ability of the grotesque to undermine authority, describing the latter situation as a “case of ‘theophagy’; where the god himself is devoured by his worshippers” (11). Mbembe is quick, however, to point out that such strategies can turn on the populace: “if people can, even if unintentionally, dismember the gods the autocrats aspire to be and can devour them, the converse is also true” (11). The scribes of Mesopotamia seem to be taking care, with the subtlety of many of these proverbs, to avoid such a fate.
Appendix: Old Babylonian proverbs and power

| Coll. 1.23 | niği-tuku al-di şer₃-re niği₂-gig-ga-am₃ | To have and demand more is an abomination.³⁷ |
| Coll. 1.65 | iɾi₃ⁱ nu ur-gi₃-ra ka₃₃-a nu-band₃₃-am₃ | In the city of no dogs, the fox is overseer. |
| Coll. 1.66³⁸ | iɾi ad₁₄-e-ne-ka ba-za lu₂₃-kaš₄₃-a-kam | In the city of the lame, the cripple are couriers. |
| Coll. 1.74 | iɾi-a niği₂-bal-bal ba-an-ĝar šu-ku₆-r₃ de₃ šukurt₂ ba-an-dab₃-be₂-eš | In the city things may be traded, but the fisherman catches the food supply. |
| Coll. 1.75 | iɾi i-di-bi mu-bi-im lugal-bi di-di-bi mu-bi-im nin-bi nu-du₁₀-du₁₀-ga mu-bi-im | The cities, Idibi is their name. Their kings, Diidibi is their name. Their queens, No-Good-At-All is their name. |
| Coll. 2.155 | e₂-gal tir-ra-am₃ lugal ur-mah-e⁴₃-nun-gal sa-s₁₃-s₁₃-gal lu₂₃-b₁₂-du-dul-dul-e | The palace is a forest, the king is a lion. Nungal covers men with a huge net. |
| Coll. 2.156 | [e₂]-gal ki-ma-an-ze₂-er lu₂₃'-zu dab₁₂-dab₁₂-be₂ | The palace is a slippery place which catches those who know it.³⁹ |
| Coll. 2.158 | e₂-gal u₄-diš ama tu-da-am₃ u₄-diš ama a-nir-ra-am₃ | The palace: one day a mother giving birth, the next day a lamenting mother.⁴¹ |
| Coll. 3.83 | u₄ ul-e₃ nam al-tar-ra ⁴₃-utu gub-ba-ni nam-lugal mu-un-na-an-šum₂ | By sunrise, decisions are made. By the time the sun is up, kingship is assigned. |
| Coll. 3.86 | šum₂-ma-ab lugal-la-kam du₁₀-ga-ab dumu sag₁₃-a-kam | “Give me!” is what the king says. “Do well!” is what the cupbearer’s son says. |
| Coll. 3.89 | ugula a₂ giš-ĝar-ra nu-un-uzu-[a] erinz₂-na-ni sağ saq₃-ge nu-gul-e | If the foreman does not know how to assign the work, his workers will not stop shaking their heads. |
| Coll. 9.a6 | ‘usu’ igi-ĝal₂-tuku [nu-m]u-e-da₃-s₃ | Being strong does not compare with having intelligence.⁴³ |

36. Note that all proverbs follow the numbering, transliteration, and translations in the edition in Alster 1997, with reduplications noted in Alster 2007. Variants may also be found in Alster 1997, and are only noted here when they are of significance, grammatical or otherwise.

37. See duplicate in Alster 2007, 119 and the variant in UET 262, “To have and demand more is an abomination to one’s god” (niği₂-tuku niği₂ al-di niği₂-gig diği-r-rak).³⁸

38. See variant duplicate in Coll. 2.119: iɾi₃ⁱ ad₁₄-e-ne-ka / ba-za lu₂₃-kaš₄₃-a-kam.


40. Note that Coll. 2.117 and Coll. 2.118 are both heavily restored from multiple texts: see Alster 1997, 74. The edition of this proverb in ETCSL adds the final line, which is absent in the edition in Alster 1997.

41. See also edition in Alster 2007, 95.

42. The first line of this proverb is repeated twice in another proverb in Coll. 26; see Alster 1997, 279-280.

43. See duplicate Alster 2007, 105.
Whatever the one having authority said, it is not good.

When the authorities are wise, and the poor are loyal, it is the effect of the blessing of Aratta.44

The palace is an ox; let its tail be caught!

May your eye be directed towards Utu, the lord.46

The stranger is the leader in a foreign city.

Build like a lord – live like a slave!

Build like a slave – live like a lord!47

Even the tallest one cannot reach the heavens with his hand; the broadest one cannot encompass the earth; the strongest one cannot stretch out in bed. But [you], when you roar like a [storm], may you establish yourself like a lion.

His hand is on the table; his tongue is in the palace.

To eat a little is to live splendidly.

44. See duplicate Alster 2007, 104.
45. I use here a tentative translation of unu-gal for tomb. Note a different translation in Alster 1997, 218, “In the palace, the minds of the great dining hall are made to agree”.
46. This proverb, as well as YBC 8937, finds a contextual parallel in a proverb from the Instructions of Šuruppak, and, given its third millennium date, is the earliest concretely dated example under study. The line of text instructs: “The palace is a huge river, its interior is a goring ox (e₂-gal a-mah ša₃-bi gad du₇), preceded by the lines: “The canebrake is [a grass-eating goat], its interior is slander”. See Alster 1974, 17.
47. See duplicate in Alster 2007, 116-117, which also references the negative parallel to this proverb, expressing the sentiment that “it is not possible to live like a lord and build like a slave”, presumably such actions being mutually exclusive in nature.
48. This proverb finds a duplicate in Coll. 1.96, where it is isolated; here, it thematically connects to the proverb that follows it.
There are many ignoramuses(?) in the palace.

The king is a scribe, the king is a “mighty bond” blocking the river.

Property. A king’s property – it enters, but does not fill, it goes out, and does not cease.

My king, the lord made perfect in heaven, in the barren marshes he built a house.

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