

Enheduana: “The Exaltation of Inana”

Translated by Sophus Helle

Enheduana is the high priestess of the moon god Nanna in the city of Ur, but a revolt led by the usurper Lugal-ane has driven her into exile. In despair, Enheduana prays to Nanna, but the god does not answer her prayers. Instead, she turns to her personal goddess, Nanna’s daughter Inana: the Sumerian goddess of war, sex, paradox and transformation.

Enheduana attempts to convince Inana to intervene in her favor in her case against Lugal-ane, implicitly taking over Nanna’s role as a divine judge. But Inana’s heart is famously difficult to please, and to make matters worse, Enheduana has lost her poetic skills. She must regain her powers of speech if she is to persuade Inana to help her, and so save her own life.

List of characters

Enheduana, high priestess of Nanna in Ur.

Lugal-ane, usurper in the city of Ur.

Inana, goddess of war and sex.

Nanna, god of the moon, father of Inana.

Ningal, spouse of Nanna, mother of Inana.

An, god of the skies, ancestor of the gods.

Enlil, king of the gods.

Dumuzi, Inana’s lover in her youth.

I.

You, queen
of all powers,
downpour of
daylight. Strong
woman wrapped
in frightful light,
loved by heaven
and by earth. You
are the cleric of
heaven. You hold
the great crowns
in your hand, you
love the righteous
emblem of might.
You, who deserve
the highest holy

rank! You, who have
seized the seven great
powers of the gods!*

II.

My queen. It is
you who guards
the great powers
of the gods. You
lift them up and
grasp them in
your hand. You
take them in and
clasp them to
your breast. Like
a basilisk, you
pour poison on

the enemy. Like
the storm god,
the grain bends
before your roar.

You are like a
flash flood that
gushes down the
mountainside,
you are supreme
in heaven and on
earth. You are
their goddess.

Raging rainfall
of fire! You were
given power by
An. You are a
queen astride a

lion, giving orders
with the blessing
of heaven. Who
can fathom the
great duties that
befall you? It is
you who must
crush enemies,
you who gives
strength to the
storm. Enlil loves
you for teaching
the land how to
fear. An has told
you to stand by
for battle.

My queen. The

enemy bows at
your battle cry.
Humans trudge
through terror,
through splendor
and sandstorms
to stand before
you in silence.
Of all the gods'
powers, yours is
the most terrible.
Because of you,
people open the
gate of their tears.
Because of you,
they walk to the
great house of
grief. Because of

you, they yield
all they own
without a fight.

My queen. With
your might, teeth
can crush stone.*
You charge into
war like the strike
of a storm. You let
out your roar like
peals of thunder.
You shout with
the storm god. You
wear yourself out
with wind after wind,
but your feet stay
strong. Like drums

of the temple, they
strike up the beat
of a sorrowful song.

My queen. Even
the Anuna, the
great gods, flee
from you like bats
fluttering through
ruins. They cannot
withstand your
terrifying gaze.
No one can stand
up to the terror of
your eyes. Who
can calm your
raging heart? The
wrath in your heart

cannot be calmed.

Queen, who can
ease your mind?

Queen, who can
please your heart?

III.

Your rage cannot
be cooled, great
daughter of Nanna!
Queen, outstanding
on earth, who can
rob you of your rule?

The mountain tried
to flee your rule. Now,
its harvest has failed,

its city gates burn
and its rivers run
with blood, and the
thirsty must drink it.

All its soldiers march
before you. All its
troops disband before
you. All its armies
stand before you.

Their best men are
led before you in
chains, while the
wind fills the squares
where they danced.

The city that did not
say, "The country
is yours!", that did

not say: "It belongs
to your father!"—
the holy order has
been given: it is
back beneath your
feet. But something
is wrong with the
wombs of the city.
The woman there
no longer speaks
beautiful words to
her spouse. In the
dead of night she
will not converse
with him. She does
not show him what
shines inside her.

You charge like
an aurochs, great
daughter of Nanna!
Queen, outstanding
in heaven, who can
rob you of your rule?

IV.

Queen of queens,
born from a holy
womb to wield
great power, now
you surpass even
your own mother.
Wise and clever
queen of all lands,
of living beings and

the innumerable
people: I will sing
you a sacred song.
Strong goddess
destined for power,
it is daunting to
sing of your might.
Strong woman,
inscrutable and
radiant, I will
sing of your might.
I have stepped into
my holy temple.

I am the high
priestess. I am
Enheduana. I have
carried the basket

of offerings, I have
sung the hymns of
joy. But now they
have brought me
funeral gifts—do I
no longer live here?
I went to the light,
but the light burned
me. I went to the
shadow, but I was
shrouded in a storm.
My honey-mouth
is full of froth, my
soothing words are
turned to dust.

Nanna! This man
Lugal-ane, is he

to be my fate?
Give the order to
An, and An will
solve the matter. If
you give the order
to An, he will solve
it right away. He
will let that woman
wrench Lugal-ane's
fate from his hands.
She is mighty: floods
and mountains lie at
her feet, cities tremble
before her. Stand by
me, Nanna, may she
have mercy on me!

I am Enheduana. I

will pray to you, holy
Inana. I will let my
tears stream free to
soften your heart, as
if they were beer. I
will say to you: "The
decision is yours." I
cannot make Nanna
care for my case. But
Lugal-ane has defiled
the holy rites of An,
wrenching the Temple
of Heaven from the
God of Heaven. Even
the greatest god he
does not fear! He
has turned the temple
of endless joy and

infinite delight into
a home of evil. He
thinks himself my
equal, but jealousy
will plague him.

My strong aurochs:
chase him, seize him!

Is there a place for
me in the land of life?
May An desert this
rebel land, hated by
Nanna. This city: let
An crush it. This city:
let Enlil curse it.

May its mothers not
comfort their crying
children. But when

at last they do sing
their lamentation,
my queen, sail your
boat of sorrow to a
foreign shore.*

Am I to die because
of my holy song? Me!
My Nanna does not
care for me. But I
waste away in this
land of lies. Nanna
has not spoken out
in my case, and what
do I care if he speaks
out or not? That man
Lugal-ane stood in
triumph and drove

me from the temple.
I fled like a swallow
swooping through a
window. My life is
all spent, and he has
me roving through
the thorns of foreign
lands. He took the
emblem of the high
priestess from me,
and gave me a knife
and dagger instead:
“These suit you
better,” he said.

V.

Queen, beloved of

heaven! Your holy
heart is great: let it
come back to me!
Darling lover of the
dead Dumuzi, your
rule extends from
zenith to horizon.*
Even the Anuna
bow down before
you. You were born
to be just a second-
rate ruler, but now!
How far you surpass
the greatest gods,
they press their lips
to the ground by
your feet. But still
my case stays open.

An evil verdict
sneaks towards me
—is it mine? I have
not defiled Nanna's
bed of flowers, or
divulged the words
of his wife Ningal.*
I am still the shining
priestess of Nanna!

Queen, beloved of
heaven! May your
heart have mercy on
me. Nanna has said
nothing, so he has
left it up to you. Let
everyone know! Let
them know that you

are as mighty as the
skies. Let them know
that you are as great
as the earth. Let them
know that you destroy
every rebel. Let them
know that you deafen
the enemy. Let them
know that you grind
skulls to dust. Let
them know that you
eat corpses like a
lion. Let them know
that your eyes are
terrifying. Let them
know that you lift
your terrifying gaze.
Let them know that

your eyes flash and
flicker. Let them
know that you are
headstrong and
defiant. Let them
know that you always
stand triumphant.
Nanna said nothing,
so he has left it up to
you. My queen! This
has made you even
greater, this has made
you the greatest.*

Queen, beloved of
heaven! I will sing
of your wrath. I
have piled up the

coals, I have purified
myself. The Holy Inn
awaits you.* Will your
heart not have mercy
on me? The pain was
too much for me to
bear. My queen, my
lady! For you I gave
birth to it. What
I sang for you at
dead of night, a
singer shall repeat for
you at midday.* For
your suffering spouse,
your suffering child,
your rage grows ever
greater, your heart
finds no peace.

VI.

The mighty woman,
the greatest in the
gathering of gods,
has heard her plea.
Inana's holy heart
came back to her.

The daylight filled
her with joy, she
was breathing bliss
and beamed with
delight. She was
a downpour of
moonlight, she was
wrapped in beauty.

Nanna sang her
praises, Ningal
gave her blessing,
even the thresholds
welcomed her home!

What she said to her
was magnificent.*

You, who crush the
enemy, you, who
were given power
by An, my charm-
cloaked queen:

All praise Inana!

Notes to the text

You, who have seized the seven great powers of the gods! Here and elsewhere in the poem, the word “power” translates a complex Sumerian concept, *me*. In this context, the word refers to a divine sphere of influences: when a god is a god *of* something, that something is the *me* of that god. But the *me* also has a number of other connotations. It can be a building block of civilization, an activity that has to be performed repeatedly, or even a feature of existence (the word literally means “to be”).

With your might, teeth can crush stone. There is a pun in the line between *zu*, “tooth,” and *zu*, a kind of stone (perhaps obsidian).

But when at last they do sing their lamentation, my queen, sail your boat of sorrow to a foreign shore. The Sumerian tradition of lamentation songs—also

alluded to when Inana’s feat strike up the beat of a lamentation—was meant to pacify angry gods, by glorifying the destruction that they were able to wreck. In turn, the gods were expected to turn their devastation elsewhere, when their might had been recognized.

Darling lover of the dead Dumuzi. A widespread tradition in Sumerian literature concerned Inana’s love for the shepherd god Dumuzi, whose death is related in the story of *Inana’s Descent to the Underworld*.

I have not defiled Nanna’s bed of flowers, or divulged the words of his wife Ningal. This may be a reference to the fact that, as high priestess of Nanna, Enheduana would have served as the embodiment of his wife Ningal in certain rituals, symbolically standing in for the god’s wife.

This has made you even greater, this has made you the greatest. The logic of this line is that, by withholding his judgment in Enheduana's case, Nanna has effectively created a vacuum of power for Inana to fill. The decision is up to her, and so is the role of divine judge: by accepting it, she will become "even greater."

The Holy Inn awaits you. The Holy Inn is the name of a poorly known temple, probably in Ur. Inns were symbolic spaces generally associated with social transgression, eroticism, and ritual transformations.

For you I gave birth to it. What I sang for you at dead of night, a singer shall repeat for you at midday. This is a specific kind of singer, a *gala*, who according to some modern scholars belonged to a third gender. *Gala*'s mainly performed ritual lamentations, of the kind described above. Note also that when Enheduana says that she "gave

birth" to the song, the word *du* can also have several other meanings: "I released it," "I spoke it" and "I created it." The word appears in different guises in different manuscripts.

What she said to her was magnificent. The line is intentionally ambiguous, as it is unclear who is who in the line. It could refer either to Enheduana's glorification of Inana, or to Inana's order that Enheduana be restored as high priestess. The ambiguity folds them together, as they exalt each other with their words.

Further reading

For the Sumerian text of the poem, see:

– Annette Zgoll, *Der Rechtsfall der En-hedu-Ana im Lied nin-me-šara*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 246 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1997).

– Paul Delnero, *Variation in Sumerian literary compositions: A case study based on the Decad*.

Unpublished dissertation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006).

– Pascal Attinger, "Innana B (Ninmešara) (4.7.2)," 2011: <https://zenodo.org/record/2667768#XhScnRdKgWo>

For other English translations, see:

– Jeremy Black *et al.*, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 315–20.

– Benjamin R. Foster, *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 331–36.

For an analysis of the poem, see:

– Sophus Helle, "The Birth of the Author: Co-Creating Authorship in Enheduana's *Exaltation*," *Orbis Litterarum* vol. 75, no. 2 (2020): 55–72.