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 to be my fate?
sung the hymns of Give the order to
joy. But now they An, and An will
have brought me solve the matter. If
funeral gifts—do I you give the order
no longer live here? to An, he will solve
I went to the it right away. He
light, will let that woman
but the light burned wrench Lugal-ane’s
me. I went to the fate from his hands.
shadow, but I was She is mighty: floods
shrouded in a storm. and mountains lie at
My honey-mouth her feet, cities tremble
is full of froth, my before her. Stand by
soothing words are me, Nanna, may she
turned to dust. have mercy on me!

Nanna! This man I am Enheduana. I
Lugal-ane, is he will pray to you, holy
will say to you: “The
Inana. I will let my
tears stream free to
soften your heart, as
if they were beer. 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—and 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 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 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
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 wreak. 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:
– Pascal Attinger, “Innana B (Ninmešara) (4.7.2),” 2011: https://zenodo.org/record/2667768#.XhScnRdKgWo

For other English translations, see:

For an analysis of the poem, see: