

Annotations for The Princess Wife, the whole story

This page originally appeared in SumerianShakespeare.com.

(Hint: press the CTRL key when clicking on a link to make it display in a separate tab.)



Annotations for The Princess Wife, parts 1 and 2

by: Jerald Jack Starr

Abbreviations:

PW1: The original story of the Princess Wife (tablet BE 31,28)

PW2: The sequel to the Princess Wife (tablet MS 3228)

PW3: The whole story of the Princess Wife (tablets BE 31,28 and MS 3228 combined)

[x-] = Missing or damaged text {...} = explanatory comments

The first half of this translation and the annotations were copied from the original story of [The Princess Wife](http://ThePrincessWife.com).

The Princess Wife, the whole story (PW3)

The story opens in the royal palace. Mulu and Zuzu have recently returned from a campaign of plundering the countryside. The scene is set in the banquet hall. Mulu has just sat down to enjoy his victory feast. A servant girl waits in attendance.

**[x,x] . . . with sweet words on her lips the servant without equal bows
down before Mulu, the powerful [x, x].**

Keep your eye on the servant girl. She is up to something.

She says, “Earth and the heavens feel worried when the strong man is not near.”

It sounds like the servant is reassured by Mulu's safe return, but she is just flattering him, lulling him into a false sense of complacency. Although she flatters him, her "sweet words" are actually a veiled insult. Mulu is right in front of her when she bows down and tells him, "the strong man is not near."

Mulu is named for the role he plays in the story. *Mu-lu* is Emesal dialect for *lu2*, meaning "man, person, ruler." It can also mean "someone or anyone." Any of these definitions could apply, but his identity remains a mystery until his name is literally translated. *Mu-lu* literally means "man-abundant" (in size and possessions). Mulu is the Abundant Man, fat and rich.

Zuzu, with much plundering, has become a wealthy man.

So... Zuzu is a man of plunder. You should keep your eye on him too.

He says to Mulu, “Behold the lord! You are a contented man of riches.

**“You are a trusted man of authority, a man generous with his rations and
his verdicts.”**

None of which is true, of course. Mulu will never be satisfied with his riches, he will always want more. No one really trusts him, and he's not at all generous. He's just greedy.

Rations refer to the system of allocating rations of food, beer, and other necessities to workers in lieu of wages. The Sumerians lived in a time before money was invented so they didn't have metal coins or printed currency. Instead, wages were paid in rations, and business was conducted through bartering. This story is all about rations and barter.

Like the servant girl, Zuzu is flattering Mulu with the same kind of veiled sarcasm, lulling him into the same kind of false security. Meanwhile, Mulu is only hearing what he wants to hear, that he is a great and wonderful prince, much beloved and admired.

Flattery has always been the language of a royal court, but in Mulu's court, the flattery is honey laced with venom.

It's easy to feel sorry for Mulu. He has just sat down to dinner and he is already surrounded by conspirators.

Mulu eats his food like a pig. He divides his captured fodder, and with his hands he crams it into his mouth and chokes it down.

Mulu's true nature is suddenly revealed by his deplorable table manners. He is a glutton.

Notice that Mulu is eating his captured "fodder," the food of animals. That's because Mulu is not just a wealthy prince, he is also a donkey (jackass). He is The Great Fatted Donkey, just like Lu-mah, [The Great Fatted Bull](#).

The titled characters in the two stories are part man, part animal. Sometimes Mulu is a man, sometimes he is a donkey, and sometimes he is both at once. On the other hand, the women in both stories are just normal women; *real* women, as you will soon find out.

“My flanks grow fat!” he brays, while eating all the food his hands can grab.

When Mulu talks he brays like a donkey. Lu-mah bellows like a bull.

Mulu is happy, without a care in the world.

Night comes. His rivals wander in by themselves. One of the men is stealing a bowl of malted cakes.

The bowl of malted cakes is a clue.

{Someone in the darkness calls out to Mulu}

“The people’s rations will make you bray with great burning indigestion!”

So now we hear that the Great Fatted Donkey has been eating the people's rations. This is a very serious charge, and it's about to give him an upset stomach ...

“Permanently!”

Permanent, as in death. Someone is going to murder Mulu.

Nose to his fat nose, the “man not his servant” {rebel, enemy} throttles the lord.

In *The Great Fatted Bull*, Lu-mah and his assailant throttle each other. It's a reciprocal thing, because Lu-mah fights back, he attacks his attacker. In the story here, the enemy is the only one who does the throttling. The fat prince does not manfully defend himself. In this way, both men stay true to their animal natures. A bull is violent, a donkey is not.

So... who is trying to kill Mulu? And why?

Mulu opens his mouth and swears two oaths to his adversary.

He gasps, “All this malt and fodder ... to abandon! This great eating to diminish!”

Mulu manages to save his own life by promising to give up his gluttonous ways, but it is already too late. He is about to lose everything else.

In the people’s judgment he is not lordly. The god Enlil does not support him.

The people don't like it when someone steals their rations. They don't like it at all.

Enlil is the chief Sumerian god, so it's pretty bad when Enlil himself turns his back on Mulu.

**His wife decides to split his grain between her female servants
and his slave women.**

He gets one single twig of his henbur grain.

It's the wife's way of saying, "Consider this a divorce."

He cries out, “Why? For what reason?” His stomach knows a great hunger.

All this has come as a big shock to Mulu. He can't imagine why anyone would do this to him. After all, he has always been a wise and beneficent ruler, in his own mind at least. Mulu's problem is he always believed people when they told him how great and wonderful he was, even when they didn't mean it.

Filled with wine, he clutches his single twig of grain while his heaps of plunder are spread out before the happy slave women.

So the Great Fatted Donkey is not just a glutton, he is a drunkard as well.

This is one of the best lines in all of literature.

Mulu goes to work acting like a defeated man. He has been brought low.

The former prince Mulu has been “brought low” because now he has to work for a living.

He walks in the manure of the countryside. He has become a pauper.

This is bad, really bad. The Great Fatted Donkey is completely defeated. He lost his wife and his women, his food, his wealth, and his kingdom. He also lost the love of the people and the respect of the gods. Now he stumbles around in the pasture through piles of sh*t, literally, just like any other barnyard donkey.

Filled with wine, he clutches his single twig of grain while his heaps of plunder are spread out before the happy slave women.

How the mighty Mulu has fallen!

Like a storm, Mulu flies to the wife of Bantu, the Supreme Lord.

In PW1, Bantu the Supreme Lord is Mulu’s father. In PW2, he is the father of the princess. As will later be explained, this considerably changes the dynamics of the situation because now the princess, as the daughter of the Supreme Lord, is operating from a position of power.

The wife of Bantu is (of course) the mother of the princess. Like all good mothers, she thinks it is her duty to interfere in her daughter’s life.

She tells Mulu, “This will open her pure heart. Behold these jewelry beads of stone.

Princess Pureheart? We shall see about that.

“These you can barter for baskets of food.”

Sumerians didn't have precious gems like rubies, diamonds, and emeralds. Instead, their jewelry is made of carved stone beads, mostly agate, carnelian, and lapis lazuli. Although simple in design, Sumerian jewelry is quite beautiful, as shown in the [Jewelry](#) section.

{Mulu returns to his former wife. He shows her the beads and he tells her...}

"Behold the great gifts I made for you! I fashioned them to be so splendid

"and magnificent. They are not from the marketplace."

Full of false hope, Mulu attempts a reconciliation with his wife. We know this because he presents the beads as handcrafted gifts, and not just items to barter for food. He might have met with some success if he hadn't lied about it. So now we know that Mulu is a liar, and not a very good liar at that. It was foolish of him to add the unnecessary detail that the beads were not purchased in the marketplace, since he already said that he made them himself. It's like he's trying much too hard to be convincing. So his wife, who has heard him lie many times before, immediately becomes suspicious. She's thinking, "Marketplace? Who said anything about a marketplace?"

A princess knows all about jewelry. It's easy to imagine that she takes one look at the beads, then she looks at Mulu and says:



"Really? You really thought you'd get away with that?"

The wife does not give her princess heart to the hero.

Things don't always turn out the way they do in fairy tales.

As we will soon discover, the wife is not a fairy tale princess; and as we already know, Mulu is no Prince Charming.

The word "hero" is meant sarcastically, by the way.

Getting back in good with the wifey could solve all of Mulu's problems, but at this point, Mulu is beginning to suspect that his scheme for a reconciliation is starting to unravel. So he decides to change his tactics. He acts pitiful, trying to gain sympathy from his former wife.

"I am not a hero. I am not a great man... and I have no heaps of grain."

His wife already knows the plan of the man who is not a hero.

She says, "You're planning to get back your barley and your princely robes,

"Princely robes": Mulu doesn't just want the food. He wants to be the prince again.

"but my trusted servant girl has told me all about your lack of character."

This is the same servant girl seen at the beginning of the story, bowing before Mulu and whispering sweet nothings. I told you she was up to something. The "servant without equal" has been spying on Mulu all along, reporting every sordid detail back to the princess wife.

In this story, and in the story of The Great Fatted Bull, *all* of the women are quite formidable, including the servants and the slave women.

**“The price of one *sila* of grain {for each bead} also reveals that my father
“gave you these stones.”**

Something about the price of the beads has confirmed to the wife what the servant girl has already told her – that Mulu got the beads from her mother, who in turn got them from Bantu (the father of the princess), who got them from the marketplace.

The princess is not fooled by any of this. She knows the true value of the beads, so now she makes a counter offer.

“I will purchase them for a half basket of [x x...]”

Due to the damaged signs on the tablet, we cannot know the contents of the basket, but it is probably a basket of something worthless.

The wife is driving a hard bargain. Mulu initially asked for a basket of food for each bead, but the princess offers a *half* basket of something worthless in exchange for *all* of the beads. This is an insulting low-ball offer that will humiliate Mulu if he accepts it, which he must. He has no other choice.

"So you don't know beads . . .

Mulu was unwise to think he could fool a woman about jewelry.

“And you don’t know women!” –

These are the last words heard by many a man, right before the door is slammed in his face. It's the wife's way of saying, "We are still divorced!"

{Then, quite suddenly...}

The “man not his servant” {the enemy} strangles Mulu.

??!! This is the second time that Mulu is attacked, and this time he is murdered. He was throttled once before, but his life was spared when he promised to give up his gluttony. The same thing

happened to Lord Lu-mah. He was also throttled. There is something quite comical in the way the men were “throttled.” It’s like cartoon violence, where no one really gets hurt. This time, events take a sinister turn. Mulu is not just throttled, he is strangled to death. After this, he is never heard from again.

The first attack happened under the cover of darkness, so the identity of the assailant remained a mystery. This latest attack occurred in broad daylight.

As will soon be revealed, Zuzu is the one who attacked Mulu both times.

Here’s how events unfolded: The first time Zuzu attacked Mulu, it was at the behest of the princess wife. They plotted together to overthrow Mulu. Perhaps she planned to merely scare Mulu, hoping he would quickly renounce his princely title in order to save his own life (she knew her husband well). That was Plan A. If Mulu had resisted, then Plan B was to kill him – because the princess wife meant to be rid of Mulu one way or another. In any case, it wasn’t necessary to kill Mulu because he promised to give up his grain and his gluttony. The princess wife was satisfied to merely banish him from her house and from the royal court. In effect, Mulu was deposed, kicked out of office. He ended up having to work for a living.

Everything was fine until Mulu “circled back around” and tried to wheedle his way back into his marriage and his princely title. When Zuzu saw this, he immediately regretted his earlier clemency. He knew if Mulu was successful in winning back the princess, then he (Zuzu) would be left with nothing. So he decided to take matters into his own hands (as it were) and resolve the situation once and for all.

The murder of Mulu was entirely Zuzu’s own initiative. The princess had nothing to do with it. She was taken completely by surprise.

Notice, however, that she did not shriek at Zuzu, “Oh my god! What have you done?!” Neither did she run from the room screaming in terror. Instead, she quickly adapted to this sudden turn of events.

The wife says to Zuzu, “– But *you* are a very strong man!”

The total surprise of the princess is indicated by the fact that she starts her sentence with the word “– But”. Zuzu strangled Mulu while the princess was still talking about the beads. Zuzu basically interrupted her in mid-sentence. She was telling Mulu, “You don’t know beads and you don’t know women –” Then Zuzu suddenly strangled Mulu. The princess resumed her sentence by telling Zuzu, “– But *you* are a very strong man!”

In the corresponding line of *The Great Fatted Jackass*, the wife says, “– But I love you. You are a strong man! [x, x...]” On the PW2 tablet, the signs are damaged and unreadable but it doesn’t appear that she says she loves Zuzu.

Nonetheless, she is clearly enamored with Zuzu and his new “take charge” attitude.

She decides that Zuzu would make a suitable lord and husband.

Remember, Mulu is still lying dead at her feet (!)

{The wife continues . . .}

“All women are prostitutes for men who rob and plunder.

The inference is that women are willing prostitutes for men who plunder – because they’re the men with all the money. In this way, all women are prostitutes for rich men because the women “sell” their sexual favors (within and without marriage) in exchange for money. This line also occurs in PW1 and in *The Great Fatted Jackass*.

This line made more sense in PW1, where the princess wife had no wealth of her own (as explained below). In PW2 and PW3, she already has plenty of money, so there is something else going on here. She seems genuinely attracted to the “Bad Boy” Zuzu.

The princess has just gotten rid of one man of plunder and now she is marrying another. Apparently, swashbuckling men are her “type.” The princess is a strong woman looking for a strong man, and she thinks that she has finally found one.

“So I decree that the baskets of food will go to the person

“who can strike and kill with his hands.”

We will hear more about Zuzu's hands later on in the story.

For his elder brother’s possessions, Zuzu brays like a happy replacement donkey.

What’s this? Zuzu is Mulu’s brother?! This is a surprising twist to the plot, to say the least. It wasn’t mentioned at the beginning of the story when Zuzu was introduced. This means that Zuzu, like his brother, is also a donkey, which was shockingly revealed by his sudden braying.

A replacement donkey is a fresh donkey that is rotated into a yoked team to replace another donkey that is worn out (or in this case, dead).

Wait a minute... That means Zuzu has just murdered his own brother! This is beginning to sound like a Greek tragedy.

The princess practically steps over Mulu's dead body to propose marriage to Zuzu.

The princess says, "I shall give you a royal house, and you will be

"a gentleman with an *ašag* field, who gives orders but does not work.

Ašag fields (pronounced "a-shag"): These are fields of farmland that were allocated to state officials and temple administrators. The revenues produced from the crops were used as a kind of stipend or salary.

**"Zuzu, you are destined to be a powerful man! You will be my princely companion,
"and the Lord of the Cake Rations. And I will be your Princess of the Fodder,
"forever and ever and ever again!"**

There is a lot being said in these three sentences:

1) The sign *lirum2* means "strong, powerful." An alternative definition of the sign is *rum*, meaning "perfect, ideal." Perhaps the princess is not saying, "you are destined to be a powerful man." Perhaps she is really saying "you are destined to be a perfect/ideal man." In this case, the princess sounds like an excited young woman in love. She imagines being happily married to Zuzu "forever and ever and ever again!" This gives us some insight into the feminine side of the princess. I personally believe the scribe intended the sentence to be read both ways. Otherwise the scribe would have simply used the sign *kalag*, which unequivocally means "strong and powerful," rather than *lirum2* which has a double meaning.

2) The princess wife acts differently depending on her circumstances:

In PW1, Bantu the Supreme Lord is Mulu's and Zuzu's father. They're the ones who had all the power. The princess, as merely a wife and a daughter-in-law, had no real power of her own. Her wealth and her status entirely depended on her husband's royal title. Therefore she could not simply depose Mulu (or kill him) because then she would be left with nothing at all. That is why the princess *had to* marry Zuzu in PW1. This is also why I suggested she had an affair with Zuzu, so she could lure Zuzu into being a convenient replacement donkey for Mulu. By marrying Zuzu immediately after Mulu had been deposed, the princess

maintained her wealth and her royal title. Zuzu had bumped his elder brother from the line of succession, so he became the heir apparent to Bantu, the Supreme Lord. At some time in the future when Bantu passes away (or meets with an unfortunate accident, god forbid) then Zuzu will become the Supreme Lord and his wife will be the Queen.

In PW1, even though the princess was in a subordinate position, she still managed to manipulate events so that she came out on top. She thus created her own destiny.

In PW2 (and here in PW3) the princess is the daughter of the Supreme Lord, so now she is operating from a position of power. Now her husband's wealth and power entirely depends on his marriage to her. She can marry whoever she wants. This time she marries Zuzu because she wants to, not because she has to. Technically, her parents have the final word on whom she marries, but the princess doesn't even bother to consult them. She doesn't need their permission. She makes her own destiny.

The princess always gets what she wants, not because someone gives it to her, but through her cunning and her careful planning, and with a certain amount of ruthlessness, she gets it for herself.



A Sumerian king and queen sit at a banquet, attended by their servants. The royal couple hold date clusters, symbolizing their divine to rule. Notice, however, that the queen is drawn taller than her husband to indicate her greater importance. She also wears a crown, but her husband does not. She is the reigning monarch in this picture, not her husband. This means she inherited the kingdom from her father. She didn't become a queen by marrying a king; she was already a queen. Clearly, she has retained her royal prerogatives and the right to rule the kingdom (see [An Unknown Sumerian Queen](#)). The princess wife does the same thing. She sees Zuzu as a "companion" rather than a co-ruler. The princess may be in love, but she's not stupid. She keeps most of the real power for herself.

3) This is more than just an ordinary murder plot. It isn't merely a case about a woman trying to knock off her husband. Nor is it a case of simple assault when two brothers are fighting. This is a coup d'état, an abrupt change of government. It is a matter of state. A royal prince has been deposed and then murdered. Now a new prince has been named as his "replacement." One government has been violently overthrown and another one has been put into its place. Now someone new will dispense the royal verdicts and allocate the people's rations (subject to his wife's approval, of course).

The coup d'état was the result of a risky plot that required secret meetings, careful planning, and covert surveillance. In this conspiracy, Zuzu is the muscle of the operation, the servant girl is the spy, and the young princess is the mastermind.

Although the princess did not order the death of Mulu, she accepted it as a *fait accompli*. Then she married Zuzu, her husband's killer. In this way, she "ratified" Zuzu's coup d'état, making it legitimate.

Make no mistake, the princess wife is the one running the show. She is the mastermind of the operation. She's the one who set the plot in motion and she's the one who makes the final decisions.



"Princess of the Fodder" and "Lord of the Cake Rations" may sound like hokey titles to some people, but in this kingdom, grain and fodder, and control of the people's rations, symbolizes wealth and power.

If the royal princess doesn't have a brother, when her father dies then she will become the supreme ruler of the kingdom, just like [Queen Pu-abi](#) and the Unknown Sumerian Queen. If the princess *does* have a brother, then he may end up like Mulu. I'm just saying.

4) Remember the malted cakes at the beginning of the story? There's only two times when the cakes are mentioned. The first time is when they were stolen, and then now, when Zuzu is so conveniently named the Lord of the Cakes. This proves that Zuzu stole the cakes. It puts him at the scene of the crime, so it also proves that he's the one who throttled Mulu the first time around. See, I told you it was a clue.

Why did he steal the cakes? Did he steal the cakes so he could return them to the people? After all, the cakes are part of the people's rations. When he called out to Mulu and said, "The people's rations will make you bray with great burning indigestion!", Zuzu sounded very democratic, quite egalitarian.

Is he a new kind of prince, one who actually cares about the welfare of the common people?

Not really. He stole the cakes simply because he has a sweet tooth, with a fondness for malted cakes in particular.

Here's what I think happened: Imagine Zuzu lurking in the darkness, waiting to strangle his own brother. You'd think he would be very tense and nervous, with his stomach in a knot, but Zuzu is thinking, "Mmm, malted cakes. I think I'll have a little snack."

Zuzu was a virile, slender young man, but with all of his grain, he quickly became a very very fat man.

For the record, I predicted that Zuzu would grow fat. Five years ago, in the Annotations for PW1, I wrote, "The court ladies say Zuzu is quite handsome, 'though tending towards fat.' They say that Zuzu reminds them of Mulu, who at one time was also very handsome, just like his brother."

It seems that Zuzu is another Mulu in the making.

{Zuzu has recently returned from another campaign of plundering the countryside.}

He heaps up his captured grain, his newly captured henbur grain.

Zuzu's possessions, his authority, and his stolen heaps of grain,

will soon come to an end.

The princess has decided to replace Zuzu, who is not a man of the people.

Zuzu seemed like a man of the people when he rebuked Mulu for eating the people's rations. However, Zuzu's egalitarian pose was merely a pretense. He only pretended to be a

man of the people so he could win over the princess wife. “A man of the people” is a common expression in the modern era. The princess wife is “a *woman* of the people.” She is the first one in world history.

His land and his barley are turned over to his slave women.

In PW1, and in the stories of *The Great Fatted Bull* and *The Great Fatted Jackass*, the princess wives also share their bounty with the servants and the slave women. It seems that Sumerian princesses had an unusually close relationship with their female servants and with the unfortunate slave women who belonged to the men.

Zuzu doesn’t get the grain that he plundered from the countryside.

Zuzu, like Mulu before him, will soon be left with absolutely nothing.

For all you men out there, the moral of the story is clear: "Don't piss off the wifey."

The royal woman has decided against his destiny.

The princess wife had earlier decreed a bountiful destiny for Zuzu, but he messed it up. Now she will decree a different destiny for him, one he will enjoy not nearly so much.

The princess wife is about to lower the boom on him:

The princess declares, “Zuzu is not a man of The Land! {of Sumer}.

The Sumerians had a proud tradition of enlightened government. Their rulers were the “shepherd kings,” the guardians and protectors of their flock, the people.

“For the devastation done by his hands, Zuzu will be banished!”

The princess wife is a “king maker” and a “king un-maker” in quick succession.

Zuzu’s hands got him the job of being a prince, but then his hands got him fired. Zuzu’s greedy hands are mentioned three times in the story. It is a minor theme in the narrative. The same is true for the story of *The Great Fatted Bull*.

{Zuzu is banished from the royal court.}

**After the sale of his possessions, Zuzu, who was not a man of the people,
is left with nothing.**

The verdict of the princess is that “the man with no land” must work with his hands.

The irony of this sentence is that Zuzu is a “man with no land” because his princess wife took it away from him.

Zuzu enters into debt slavery.

He becomes the new member in her father’s team of workers.

Zuzu will be an indentured servant/slave until all of his debts are paid off.

Debt slavery was a common practice throughout much of Mesopotamia.

This is a very clever (and unexpected) twist to the plot. It is one of the first known uses of a plot twist in all of literature.

The princess wants Zuzu to make reparations to all the people whose grain he has stolen.

Zuzu stole *a lot* of grain, so he will be in debt slavery for a very long time.

**He measures out the fields, he sows the grain and threshes it,
for wages that go to his wife.**

This is poetic justice. Zuzu has to grow all the grain that he plundered.

Remember earlier, when Mulu had to go to work, acting like a defeated man?
That’s because the princess wife had also consigned him to debt-slavery (!)

Zuzu had already seen what happened to Mulu, so he should have known better than to disillusion the princess wife.

It is easy to imagine the wife’s bitter disappointment in her husband(s). I earlier said,
“the princess always gets what she wants,” but there is an exception to this rule.
She is a strong woman looking for a strong man, but in this regard, she’s had no luck at all.

Hmm... perhaps Zuzu has a brother.

[x x x]

[Unknown number of lines missing]

The princess wife is a very complex woman. It is difficult to understand her completely.

In the Annotations for PW1, I asked the reader to decide whether the princess wife is a good princess or a bad princess. I wrote, “Maybe she really is Princess Pureheart, a kind woman working selflessly to rid the kingdom of a greedy tyrant that is plundering the countryside and stealing the people's rations. On the other hand, maybe she is The Bad Princess, an evil and conniving woman who cynically manipulates everyone in her single-minded pursuit of wealth and power. You decide which version to believe.”

Did the princess use sex to get what she wants? Did she truly love Zuzu? or Mulu?
Is she really a “woman of the people”? or is she merely looking after her own self-interest?
Is she a warmhearted woman? or just a coldblooded killer?

People may disagree on her character and her motives, but one thing is for certain:
The princess wife is the most extraordinary woman in all of ancient literature.

March 2021.