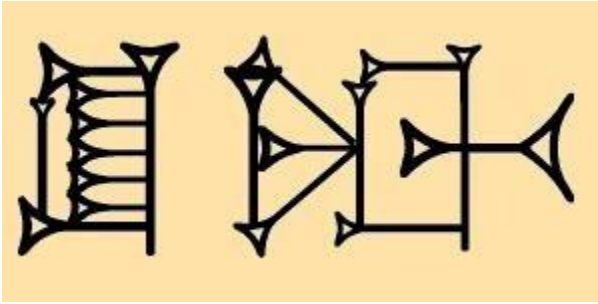


Princess Wife sequel, notes on the translation

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.)

Notes on the translation of tablet MS 3228 in the Schøyen Collection



Princess Wife

Sumerologists have a saying about translating cuneiform tablets: “Context is everything.”

That’s because all cuneiform signs have multiple meanings, so the writing is not instantly recognizable at a glance, like it is in English. You pretty much need to know the context (subject) of the writing before you can read it. You need to know what you're "reading to."

In this way, you can eliminate the many alternative definitions of the signs and concentrate only on the meanings that fit within the framework of the story. Therefore, trying to read a cuneiform tablet is something of a Catch-22. You need to know the context of the writing to read the signs, but you have to read the signs to know the context (!)

The “dialog” context.

In November 2015, I heard it through the grapevine that Jana Matuszak, a graduate student in Germany, inherited the papers of Miguel Civil, a renown Sumerologist. Among the papers were notes and line-drawings about several previously untranslated tablets that were supposedly “Dialogs Between Two Women.”

I wrote to Ms Matuszak. Here is a paraphrase of the email:

“I have translated the stories of The Great Fatted Bull and The Princess Wife. Both of the stories were originally classified as Dialogs Between Two Women. They are actually political satires that use "trick signs" and clever wordplay to disguise the meaning of the texts.

“I understand you are working on some ‘dialog tablets’. I think these tablets may actually be variations of The Great Fatted Bull or similar stories.

“The fact that many of the tablets remained untranslated for more than a hundred years, despite the efforts of the best minds in the business, leads me to believe that ‘female dialogs’ is not the correct context.

“If you have any transliterations or line-drawings of the tablets, I would greatly appreciate it if you would send me a copy.”

Ms Matuszak did not reply. I can understand why she didn't want to share her proprietary information with me, but she should have listened to me about the rest of it. I really did try to warn her.

Four years later, in May 2019, I saw a podcast featuring Jana. It showed a picture of a tablet (MS 3228). She called it a "Dialog Between Women." It also included a partial translation. As soon as I saw the tablet, I knew her translation was completely in error. I immediately recognized the tablet as a version of The Princess Wife, line for line and sign for sign. When I read her translation, my suspicions were confirmed. The language is very awkward, labored, and forced, the hallmark of a wrong context.

I again wrote to Jana asking for a copy of her complete translation. She replied that it would be available when she published her dissertation “sometime next year.”

So I had to wait for another year. In the meantime, I felt bad for Jana because she was receiving many awards and accolades for a translation that was completely erroneous. I decided not to say anything about it. So long as she did not claim that my version of The Princess Wife was a female dialog, then I would keep silent.

In December 2020, the CDLI (the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative) took away my publication credit for Tablet #36 and assigned the credit to “CDLI Literary 000771, ex. 027” (guess who). They also labeled Tablet #36 as a Dialog Between Two Women (!), along with tablet BE 31,28, the story of The Princess Wife. A quick search revealed that “CDLI Literary 000771, ex. 027” had received publication credit for more than 60 tablets that were now classified as dialogs between women.

I figured that Jana's impending dissertation had resurrected the concept of female dialogs. Apparently the CDLI was planning to give publication credit to Ms Matuszak even before her dissertation was published in an academic journal. I wasn't a bit surprised, because that's how they roll at the CDLI (see [The Great Fatted Bull and the CDLI](#)).

In January 2021, Jana Matuszak published her dissertation, *Und du, du bist eine Frau?!*, “And you, you are a Woman?!” It is a “Dialog Between Two Women.” Her translation of tablet MS 3228 is the centerpiece of the dissertation.

I had previously seen only the front of the tablet, so I “fast forwarded” through hundreds of pages in her dissertation and found a copy of the back. I was delighted to see that it added a whole new chapter to the story of The Princess Wife. Tablet MS 3228 is the “sequel” to the story.

Jana's dialog is a “composite text,” meaning it is composed of several different tablets. One of tablets looked familiar. I realized with dismay that it is tablet BE 31,28, the story of The Princess Wife. Jana was claiming that it is actually a dialog between two women. What's worse, she claimed that the story of The Great Fatted Bull is also a female dialog (!) She even included the fragmentary tablet SEM 114, the story of The Great Fatted Jackass.

Jana Matuszak is basically saying that all of my translations are dialogs between women. In other words, all of my translations are completely wrong.

The stories of The Great Fatted Bull, The Princess Wife, and The Princess Wife sequel,

are literary masterpieces. If Matuszak has her way, then all three masterpieces will be destroyed in one fell swoop.

I cannot let this happen. I was going to keep silent, but now I must defend my work because if Jana is right, then I am wrong (and I'm not wrong).

So the question is: Who are you going to believe, me or Matuszak?

There are several factors to be considered

First and foremost:

1. There is no such thing as a Dialog Between Two Women.

I have yet to see a creditable example of a female dialog.

The CDLI page for Tablet #36 lists the sub-genre as: "ETCSL 5.04.05 Dialogue between Two Women B," but this dialog doesn't show up on the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature. Instead, the ETCSL has the following two entries:

5.4.04 A dialogue between two women (Dialogue 4)

5.4.05 A dialogue between two women (Dialogue 5)

but no translations are given.

The CDLI lists 84 "dialogs between women." However, most of them are fragmentary tablets where too little of the writing remains for the context to be positively identified. Of the 84 female dialogs, only 6 have been translated. These translations are very fractured and nonsensical, a sure sign that the wrong context was chosen.

"Dialog between two women" is a catchall category for any tablet that the experts could not translate. A dialog format is presumed because a dialog doesn't need a discernable storyline with events moving in a logical sequence. It can simply be one non-sequitur after another.

I suggest that if there was any such thing as a Sumerian Dialog Between Two Women, then everyone would already know about it, because it would already be famous, here in the Feminist Era.

2. A dialog? between two women?

Jana's dialogs are not really dialogs, they are more like monologues; and there are not two women, only one. Supposedly the tablets are about two women having an argument. However, in Matuszak's translation of MS 3228 (see below) there seems to be only one woman talking. Even when Jana strings all the tablets together, the story still does not have two identifiable women. They are not known by name. Jana calls them Woman A and Woman B, but they do not have different personalities or distinctive points of view. Their argument does not progress in a logical fashion. It is all very jumbled and chaotic.

Debates were a well-established genre in Sumerian literature. The ETCSL lists six "debate poems." These are debates between Bird and Fish, Copper and Silver, Summer and Winter, etc. They all have a clear storyline with distinctive characters who are engaged in a logical back-and-forth dialog.

3. An artificial construction.

As previously stated, Jana's Dialog Between Two Women is a composite text, meaning it is composed of several different tablets. This is a common practice in Sumerology. Sometimes one tablet can provide the lines that are missing or damaged on a different tablet. However, this only works if the tablets are written about the same subject.

Jana's composite dialog is actually an "artificial construction." She selects random lines from the various tablets and strings them together to make a dialog. It would be okay to create a *modern* literary composition in this manner, except none of the tablets are dialogs. Jana doesn't offer a complete "stand alone" translation for any of the tablets as a dialog. If she had, then she wouldn't need to resort to this artificial method to create one. The proof of a correct context is that it yields a *complete* translation for the tablet.

On the other hand, The Princess Wife (the whole story) is a true composite text. It is composed of two tablets, BE 31,28 and MS 3228. Both of these tablets offer complete "stand alone" translations. They also have the same plot and the same characters. The story progresses in a logical fashion and transitions smoothly from one tablet to the other.

I suggest that many of the so-called Dialogs Between Women are actually political satires that use trick signs and clever wordplay to disguise the meaning of the tablets. The scribes disguised the meaning of the stories because it was dangerous to ridicule great lords and kings. The scribes risked everything to write these political satires (the shepherd brother gets flogged for saying what is written on Table #36). That is why the tablets were written in code.

This leads to another very important consideration:

4. How could Jana translate these tablets when the best Sumerologists could not?

Marcel Sigrist, Miguel Civil, Bendt Alster, Stephen Langdon, and Edward Chiera tried to translate these tablets without success. They were brilliant Sumerologists, the best in the world. They could read anything written in the Sumerian language. They could literally read a tablet just as well as any Sumerian scribe.

Therein lies the problem: They read the tablets literally, just like a Sumerian. These are "trick tablets." They cannot be read literally. By introducing *just a few trick signs*, a scribe could obscure the context of the story, making it difficult (but not impossible) to read the tablet. However, once the trick signs are understood, then the context of the story is revealed. Trying to translate one of these tablets without knowing the trick signs is like trying to unlock a door without using a key.

That is the *only* reason why I was able to read the tablets when the other Sumerologists could not. I realized that some of the signs cannot be read literally. For example, I spent weeks trying to translate Tablet #36 without making any progress. When I finally figured out the trick sign *Lu-mahX*, the "king" context of the story was revealed and I was able to translate the rest of the tablet (see the notes on the [Transliteration for Tablet #36](#)).

Jana read the tablets literally, just like all the other Sumerologists. How could she translate the tablets when the other Sumerologists could not? These tablets have been around for a hundred years. If the tablets could be translated *literally*, then the other Sumerologists would have done it long before Jana ever got the chance.

Of the Sumerologists listed above, none of them published their translations as dialogs because they knew the translations were not yet proven. For instance, Stephen Langdon thought that tablet BE 31,28 (The Princess Wife) was a "Dialogue between fPN and fPN," where fPN means "female Personal Name, which shows how little of the tablet had been translated since not even the names of the two protagonists was known. Langdon was a brilliant Sumerologist, but he could not translate this tablet using a dialog context.

Bendt Alster thought Tablet #36 was a Dialog Between Two Women. I challenged him to a "Sumerian Showdown," my translation against his. I was deliberately rude and obnoxious about it. I wanted to provoke him into disproving my translation, or failing that, be forced to confirm it. So Alster was *highly* motivated to prove me wrong by converting Tablet #36 into a Dialog Between Two Women, but he couldn't do it. He therefore did not to publish a translation of Tablet #36 using a dialog context because he knew it was in error.

Anyone who wants to believe Jana's translations will need to explain how a mere graduate student was able to translate these tablets when the other Sumerologists couldn't do it with 200 years of collective experience between them.

Anyone who doesn't believe my translations will need to explain how I could so egregiously misread the signs to thus impose these wildly implausible (but highly cohesive) contexts on four tablets that were supposedly written about something else. Like I said before, I was able to do it only by decoding a few trick signs that revealed the secret context of the tablets.

5. An incorrect transliteration.

As previously mentioned, Jana labeled Tablet #36, the story of The Great Fatted Bull, as a Dialog Between Women. Unfortunately, Jana used Robert Englund's ATF as the basis for her transliteration, which means her efforts were doomed from the beginning because the ATF is riddled with errors (see [Robert Englund's Error List](#)). That is why she was unable to offer a complete and cohesive translation of Tablet #36. No one can produce a usable translation of Englund's ATF – not even Englund could do it.

6. An unclear transliteration format.

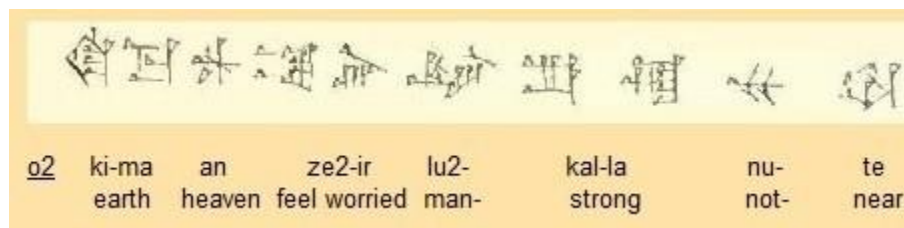
Ms. Matuszak uses the following format for her transliteration:

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=====N9, N12, N13, N14, N17, N18, K1?, X2, X4
G/N (4)
56   lu2 saĝ ir-ra nu-nus sikil du3-a
57   e-ne-eĝ3 sig gu7-gu7 saĝ-du tibir2 ra-ra
58   aĝ2-kur2 du11-du11 KA lul-la bala-bala
59   e2 e-ne zi2-iĝ3-zi2-iĝ3 lu2 e2 lu2-ka nu-tuš

60 (d) u3 ze4-e lu2-lu7(lu)-me-en
      (a) u3 ze4-e ša3 nu-nus-e-ne-me-en
      (f) u3 ze4-e na-aĝ2-lu2 Aš-e-eš
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The N, K, an X numbers are abbreviations for the various tablets that she used in her transliteration. This makes it difficult to discern which one was used for any given sentence.

On the other hand, I use the following format:



Shown above is my *simultaneous* translation / transliteration for line o2 of The Princess Wife.

I show a picture of each individual sentence on the tablet. Beneath each sign is the Sumerian word. Beneath each Sumerian word is the English word. So far as I know, I am the only one who routinely uses this format for all of my transliterations, making it easy for *anyone* to check my work. I can use this type of self-evident format because my translations are absolutely irrefutable.

7. A different perspective.

Jana frames her translation as an example of “misogyny and the ideal Sumerian woman.” I believe the opposite is true. The story of the Princess Wife is actually very “pro-feminist.”

In my translation, the princess wife is a smart, strong, independent woman, the first one in all of world literature. This is one of the many reasons why I think the story was written by a female scribe – almost 4,000 years ago.

March 2021

8. A comparison of the two translations.

Addendum (June 2025):

Jana Matuszak recently posted a complete translation of her *Dialog Between Two Women*. It is titled “Are You a Woman?” The full translation is available on ORACC (the Open Richly Annotated Cuneiform Corpus). Here is the link:

<<https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dsst/Q000771>>

On the left, the “Sources” list 63 tablets (!?) from which Jana cherry-picked various sentences to create the nonsensical translation that is shown on the right. I was surprised to see this type of composition posted on the ORACC (with 63 sources for a single translation) because there is nothing else like it in the annals of Sumerology. The Sources include the tablets for The Great Fatted Bull and The Princess Wife (parts one and two). These masterpieces were ground into the mix with all the other tablets to create the artificial construction of the Dialog.

In Jana’s translation it is difficult to tell where one tablet ends and another tablet begins. There is a lot of overlap. Tablet #36 (The Great Fatted Bull) occurs in lines 11 - 47. The tablets for The Princess Wife (parts one and two) occur in lines 29 - 61 and lines 43 - 69 respectively.

You can read Jana's translation on the ORACC page (lines 11 - 69) but for the sake of convenience I have included some excerpts that are shown below:

“Are you a Woman?”

Even though you have dolled yourself up, it will be me (who) will have pushed you under water (i.e. triumphed over you?). Look, look!”

Slave girl of the (entire) city quarter, at everyone’s service, everybody’s child!
Serving as factotum, unable to sleep for (worry about) their (her masters’) catering!

Robber of her own house! Dog of her own trough!
Mongoose of her own basket! She has heaped up the catch of the fisherman (therein).
Shaking the ..., (her) hand is smeared with blood.
Opening the storehouse; she has repeatedly approached the slaves.
(She is) someone who always brings the ladder instead of the spindle into the house!

Half (her) skull being shorn, lips being rubbed with salt!
Having no shame, child of scorned people!
(Leading others down a) slippery slope, always scorning (them) among people (i.e. in public?)!

Devouring soup, burning (entire) beams (instead of brushwood), wasting oil,
opening the mouth wide!

Always pressing oil, permanently roasting barley, constantly baking
deceptively big breads!

Her (ever so) pure womb is finished – (it means) financial loss for her house!
Always buying beer, always eating ready-made food!
Don’t you say “everything is plenty,” (even though in reality) you’re incurring losses?
...

Does it really make any sense?

If you were to write a dialogue between two women, would it sound like this?

Notice that it isn’t really a dialog, it is a monologue. It doesn’t sound like two women arguing different points of view, instead it sounds like only one woman who is talking. There is no discernible plotline and the debate does not progress in a logical fashion. The sentences can be randomly rearranged without affecting the overall meaning of the story. This is what happens when you impose an incorrect context on a tablet that is written about something else.

Now compare it to my translation of [The Princess Wife](#). Both tablets in this story have the same plot and the same characters (Mulu, Zuzu, and the princess wife). The action and dialog progress in a logical sequence and they transition smoothly from one tablet to the other.

A story about the great fatted donkey, his princess wife, a murder plot, and a coup d’état, is a wildly improbable context to begin with. If I were trying to impose this context on a tablet that was written about something else, I could not have translated two consecutive sentences. The fact that my translation for this complicated story is so complete and coherent proves that it is the right context for the tablet.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, the wrong context for a tablet yields a translation that is fractured, labored, and forced. You therefore don't need to be an expert on the Sumerian language to know which translation is correct.

For anyone who wants to check my work, I provide complete transliterations for [The Great Fatted Bull](#) and The Princess Wife (parts [one](#) and [two](#)). I also provide detailed Sign Lists for [Tablet #36](#) and [BE 31,28](#).

I urge everyone to read the translations of The Great Bull and The Princess Wife (the whole story). Then read the Annotations. I'm sure you will agree that both stories are true literary masterpieces, the first in the world.

These ancient tablets are world's first political satires, the first dark comedies, and the first murder mysteries. They are also the first time in history where women are the heroes of a story. These tablets are parables for all of humankind.

I believe the scribes who wrote these wonderful stories deserve the proper credit for their invaluable contributions to the world's great literature. I'm just saying.

