



Below Either/Or: Rereading Femininity and Monstrosity Inside *Enuma Elish*

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Zairong Xiang

Abstract

Often seen as a typical *Chaoskampf*, the cosmic struggle between Marduk and Tiamat in the Babylonian epic of creation, *Enuma Elish*, looked at closely belies this reading that has been dominating scholarship since the nineteenth century. Through a close-reading of the epic’s narrative against its modern/colonial reception, the article argues that *Enuma Elish* provides a rich and complex narrative in which motherhood and monstrosity do not oppose each other (as some early feminist critiques would like), nor do they run together with each other (as misogynist readings would like). The textual, historical and philological analyses, as well as reception-critiques, ultimately serve to theorize from within the ancient cosmology an immanent and decolonial logic that is beyond ‘either/or’.

Keywords

Tiamat, monstrosity, femininity, *Chaoskampf*, reception

No more powerful than the way I loved her

Sethe

What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil

Friedrich Nietzsche¹

The Babylonian epic of creation written in cuneiform, also known as *Enuma Elish*, opens its wor(l)d with two mingling waters, the salt water Tiamat and the sweet water Apsu,

When skies above were not yet named

Nor earth below pronounced by name,

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1. Morrison T (2004) *Beloved*. New York: Vintage Books; Nietzsche F (2012) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Madison, WI: Cricket House Books.

Corresponding author:

Zairong Xiang

Email: zaixiang@uni-potsdam.de

Apsu, the first one, their begetter
 And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
 Had mixed their waters together,
 [...]
 Then gods were born within them²

The story goes that the gods who are born within them ‘would meet together/And disturb Tiamat/ [... and] stirred up Tiamat’s belly’. We learn that ‘However bad their ways, she [Tiamat] would indulge them’. However, Apsu cannot bear the noise and ‘spoke to Tiamat in a loud voice/[...] “I shall abolish their ways and disperse them!”’. Knowing Apsu’s intention of murder, Tiamat furiously opposes her ‘lover’. Now we learn that Apsu and Tiamat are lovers, gendered respectively as male and female.

In this article, I will closely study Tiamat, through a critique of the receptions that have touched upon her/it from the nineteenth century to today, drawing upon studies in mythology and feminist theology. We shall see how Tiamat has become stabilized as a recognizable monster, allegedly symbolizing the order-menacing chaos through her scholarly reception. I will then analyse a particular issue concerning Tiamat, that is her monstrosity, which will be investigated with an examination of the complex interplay between monstrosity, femininity, and motherhood, as constructed within and without the epic. The last section will further complicate and negotiate the issue of motherhood and monstrosity through a rereading of Tiamat’s battle with Marduk in *Enuma Elish* against its various receptions.

I beg the reader to bear in mind that the whole creation story, often too quickly simplified as the so-called ‘Chaoskampf’, happens inside Tiamat (and Apsu). Adherent to this ‘within-ness’ of Tiamat(-Apsu) and the epic’s narrative, I propose an immanent feminist rereading beyond, or more precisely, *below* the logic of either/or.³

Tiamat is Not Born a Woman: *Enuma Elish* and Its Modern Receptions

Enuma Elish, also known as the ‘Babylonian Epic of Creation’, begins with two primordial waters: Apsu, the fresh water, the ‘husband’, and Tiamat, the salt water, the ‘wife’⁴. They mingle together and several generations of gods are born *within them*. At this point,

2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes of *Enuma Elish* are taken from the English translation by Dalley S (2008) *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 233–77. As the research mainly concerns the first several pages of the epic, I will not provide pagination for the sake of clarity. When there are discrepancies on the translation of key words, I will refer to the other versions in English and French.
3. This article tries to re-read *Enuma Elish* in a way that does not reproduce the logic of either/or. I choose to address this attempt through a slightly awkward phrasing: ‘below either/or’ to avoid the transcendental (or the ‘either/or-ness’) of the more obvious and common phrasing: ‘beyond either/or’, which still operates in a logic of succession that ‘goes beyond’.
4. David Toshio Tsumura points out that ‘apsu’ in many Mesopotamian languages means water/sea, similar to ‘tiamat’, which is of Semitic origin (1989: 60–62).

scholars already have different opinions about how many ‘waters’ there are at the outset of the epic because of the figure ‘Mummu’. ‘Tiamat’ is written as Mummu-Tiamat. Mummu is also the ‘vizier’ of Apsu. Alexander Heidel regards Mummu as ‘the personified fog or mist rising from the waters of Apsu and Tiamat and hovering over them [which in] mythological language [...] could easily be called the “son” of the two primeval deities’.⁵ Apsu’s ‘vizier’ who appears later and who counsels him is also called Mummu, which might or might not be the same ‘Mummu’ as in ‘Mummu-Tiamat’.

The Creation Story in Enuma Elish

The mingling primordial waters personified as Apsu and Tiamat (perhaps also Mummu) give birth to several generations of gods, among them the most important being the patrilineal Anshar-Anu-Ea. Ea later gives birth to Marduk, the patron god of *Enuma Elish* and Babylon. The story goes that the newly born gods ‘stirred up Tiamat’s belly’ and their grievous behaviour is very annoying for Apsu. For this reason, while Tiamat ‘would indulge them’, Apsu suggests to Tiamat that they should kill the young gods. ‘I shall abolish their ways and disperse them!’ shouted Apsu. Tiamat angrily rejects his plan: ‘How could we allow what we ourselves created to perish?/Even though their ways are so grievous, we should bear it patiently’.

Apsu is upset and his ‘vizier’ Mummu ‘did not agree with the counsel of his/earth mother’ either.⁶ Thus Mummu comforts Apsu, hugs him and kisses him. They have planned the infanticide together, which is overheard by Ea. He casts a spell on Apsu, makes him sleep, finally kills him and chains Mummu. Ea builds his residence and ‘rested quietly inside his private/quarters’ which he ‘named [...] Apsu’. Some suggest that ‘Ea overcame both his adversaries [Apsu and Mummu] and divided Apsu into chambers and laid fetters upon him’.⁷ Here we have a pun between Apsu the personified deity and ‘the Apsu’ the primordial ocean.

Marduk is born to Ea and Damkina in their newly constructed dwelling built on (the) Apsu. ‘Inside pure Apsu, Marduk was born’. With the birth of Marduk, Apsu as the primordial ‘father’ becomes obsolete in the epic. The epic proceeds with a detailed description of Marduk’s powerful attributes: the ‘nurse’ ‘reared him [and] filled him with/awesomeness’ and Anu, his grandfather ‘created the four winds and gave them birth, /Put them in his (Marduk’s) hand, “My son [*sic.*], let them/play!”’ pretty much in the same manner as today’s *sons* are instructed on how to play, with aggression as an initiation to toxic masculinity. Marduk ‘fashioned dust and made the whirlwind carry it;/He made the flood-wave and stirred up Tiamat’.

Tiamat again does not react but ‘heaved restlessly day/and night’. This time, it is some of her children who cannot bear the noise of young Marduk.⁸ They accuse Tiamat: ‘Are you

5. Heidel A (1948) The meaning of Mummu in Akkadian literature. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 7(2):104.

6. Nowhere else is Tiamat, the personification of the salt-water sea, represented as an earth mother.

7. Budge EAW (1921) *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation and the Fight between Bel and the Dragon (As Told by Assyrian Tablets from Nineveh)*. London: The British Museum, 34.

8. Note that all generations of gods including Marduk seem to be living inside Tiamat’s belly, which is also, given the primordial mingling, inside (the) Apsu.

not a mother? You heave restlessly/But what about us, who cannot rest? Don't you/love us?' Their words seem to be effective. Tiamat agrees to take action. She gathers great weapons and venomous monster-snakes. Ea, father of Marduk is afraid of Tiamat, yet tries to downplay her power: 'However strong a woman's strength, it is not/equal to a man's'. Anshar, Anu's father (that is to say Ea's great-grandfather) asks his great great-grandson Marduk for help. Marduk agrees to make war against Tiamat. He 'made a net to encircle Tiamat within it' and introduces evil winds that 'advanced behind him [Marduk] to make turmoil *inside*/Tiamat' (emphasis mine). Then we hear a speech from Marduk addressing Tiamat,

Why are you so friendly on the surface
 When your depths conspire to muster a battle
 force?
 Just because the sons were noisy (and)
 disrespectful to their fathers,
 Should you, who gave them birth, reject
 compassion?

Marduk cunningly transforms the conflict between him and the other irritated gods who seek help from Tiamat into a generational conflict between the homogenized 'sons' and their homogenized 'fathers', and accuses Tiamat the mother of not protecting 'the sons'. Marduk abuses Tiamat's indulgence of the disturbances of her belly, and his words do seem to finally antagonize Tiamat. 'When Tiamat heard this,/She went wild, she lost her temper'. A cosmic combat between Marduk and Tiamat begins. In the end, Tiamat and her allies are destroyed by Marduk, who 'sliced her in half like a fish for drying;/Half of her he put up to roof the sky'. Since all the gods, including Marduk himself, have always been inside the watery spaces of Tiamat (and Apsu), Marduk's slaughtering of Tiamat in two seems to be still haunted by her omnipresence.

Representing Tiamat in Scholarship

The tablets of *Enuma Elish* were first published as *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* by George Smith in 1876, followed by several excavations made in the Nineveh, Ashur and Kish by British, German and US-American archaeologists at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ From the late nineteenth century to today, despite their disciplinary differences, almost all scholars seem to have agreed on one thing: that Tiamat is a dangerous and chaos making monster seeking to oppose Marduk, said to represent order.

In 1893, George A. Barton published an article entitled 'Tiamat', introducing the Babylonian figure while drawing possible parallels with the biblical serpent, Leviathan and other mythical figures in Mesopotamia. He identified Tiamat as 'a female dragon, queen of

9. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a complex historical moment imbued with colonial practices in the 'Near East'. See Said EW (1978) *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

a hideous host, who are hostile to the gods, and with whom Marduk fights, conquers them, cuts their leader [i.e. Tiamat] in two, and of one part of her body [Marduk] makes heaven, of the other the earth'.¹⁰ Towards the end of the article Tiamat is alleged to have 'opposed creation, *at every step resisted God, tempted and seduced man*' and the author believes that she/it 'was the popular personification of hideousness, *arrogance and evil*'.¹¹

One year later, 'The Babylonian Account of Creation',¹² also compared *Enuma Elish* with the biblical Genesis, stating in the language of Christian theology: 'Light and Darkness, chaos and order, are ever struggling one against another'.¹³ The author believes that the 'victory of light and order is described [...] in the fight between Bel-Merodach [Marduk] the principle of light, and Tiamat, the principle of darkness, represented as the dragon, the wicked serpent'.¹⁴ After the establishment of a dichotomy between Tiamat and Marduk, the author argues that 'the victory of Marduk over Tiamat ... [is] order over anarchy'.¹⁵

Some years later, Ross Murison analyses the figure of the snake in the Bible by drawing a comparison with the great mythological snake figures in other cultures. In order to support his claim that '[e]vil has thus always taken a definite form, preferably that of a serpent', he adds a footnote describing Tiamat as 'a dragon of most hideous aspect'.¹⁶

By 1905, when the article by Murison was published, a full transcription and translation of the Epic was not yet available. The classical study by Leonard W. King was only able to translate very fragmentarily the following lines of the epic: '(Thus) were established and [were ... the great gods (?)]/But T[iamat and Apsu] were (still) in confusion [...]/They were troubled and [...]/In disorder (?) ... [...]'.¹⁷ Several lines after Apsu's suggestion to Tiamat to kill the gods, we read, 'When Tiamat [heard] these words,/She raged and cried aloud [...]/[She ...] grievously [...]'.¹⁸ In *The Babylonian Legends of Creation: Fight between Bel and the Dragon* published in 1921 by the British Museum, the line describing Tiamat's endurance of the pain caused by the gods was not yet translated or even available.¹⁹

Nevertheless, Tiamat's anger at Apsu's infanticide plan was clearly translated. 'Tiamat on hearing this/Was stirred up to wrath and shrieked to her husband./ ... unto sickness. She raged all alone'.²⁰ What is more, in the footnote the editor reminds us, 'Tiamat's wrath was roused by Apsu, who had proposed to slay the gods, her children. She took no

10. Barton GA (1893) Tiamat. *Journal of American Oriental Society* 15(1): 12

11. Barton GA (1893) Tiamat. *Journal of American Oriental Society* 15(1): 27, emphasis mine.

12. Muss-Arnolt W (1894) The Babylonian account of creation. *The Biblical World* 3(1): 17–27.

13. Muss-Arnolt W (1894) The Babylonian account of creation. *The Biblical World* 3(1): 19.

14. Muss-Arnolt W (1894) The Babylonian account of creation. *The Biblical World* 3(1): 19.

15. Muss-Arnolt W (1894) The Babylonian account of creation. *The Biblical World* 3(1): 20.

16. Murison RG (1905) The serpent in the old testament. *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 21(2): 128, n.35.

17. All the quotes from King LW (1902) *The Seven Tablets of Creation*. London: Luzac and Co., contain square brackets which are all original. King LW (1902) *The Seven Tablets of Creation*. London: Luzac and Co., 7–8.

18. King LW (1902) *The Seven Tablets of Creation*. London: Luzac and Co., 11.

19. Budge EAW (1921) *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation and the Fight between Bel and the Dragon (As Told by Assyrian Tablets from Nineveh)*. London: The British Museum, 33.

20. Budge EAW (1921) *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation and the Fight between Bel and the Dragon (As Told by Assyrian Tablets from Nineveh)*. London: The British Museum, 33.

part in the first struggle of Apsu and Mummu against the gods, and only engaged in active hostilities to avenge Apsu'.²¹

Now we turn to some more recent studies of *Enuma Elish*. By their date of publication, we could expect that fuller translations of the Babylonian tablets were available. The renowned Assyrian and Sumerian historian, Thorkild Jacobsen, published an essay entitled '*Enuma Elish* – "The Babylonian Genesis"' included in 'The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man'.²² Envisaging the epic from the perspective of the creation of cosmic order, he summarizes the disturbance of the gods in Tiamat's belly, Apsu's plan to abolish them, Ea's killing of Apsu and Marduk's battle with Tiamat, quoting extensively from the original myths.²³ Throughout the whole essay, however, we cannot see a single line mentioning the moment when Tiamat endures the pain caused by the gods inside her belly and how she furiously refuses Apsu's infanticidal plan. The endurance of Tiamat is translated as 'and Tiamat is silent'.²⁴ The same author notices the benevolent side of Tiamat in his later work *The Treasures of Darkness*. He briefly analyses the 'parricide theme' of *Enuma Elish* rightly stating that 'while the aspect of parricide is [...] mitigated both by making the parents remote ancestors and putting them plainly in the wrong, part of this effect is countered [...] by the stress on Tiamat's motherliness'.²⁵ He believes that:

[s]o odd is this sympathetic treatment of the archenemy, Tiamat, that one can hardly escape feeling that the author is here in the grip of conflicting emotions: love, fear, and a sense of guilt that requires palliation.²⁶

Jacobsen's influential work does not seem to prevent other scholars that follow him from overlooking Tiamat's benevolence. In the detailed examination of mythological traditions and the Bible, *Myths in the Old Testament*, *Enuma Elish* is summarized in a way that entirely ignores Tiamat's caring characteristic.

Chaos ruled among the gods, and *chaos is, above all in the figure of Tiamat*, represented by the menacing and destructive waters. Ea, however, gives birth to Marduk, who *dares to take up the battle against the goddess of chaos, Tiamat*.²⁷

Born to Ea the father and Damkina the mother in the epic, Marduk is said here to be only born to Ea. It smuggles motherhood from Damkina and creates quite literally a 'homosocial patrilineage'. Tiamat, is quite straightforwardly represented as the chaos.

21. Budge EAW (1921) *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation and the Fight between Bel and the Dragon (As Told by Assyrian Tablets from Nineveh)*. London: The British Museum, 33, n.1.

22. The version I have access to and quote from is included in Munitz MK (ed.) (1965) *Theories of the Universe: From Babylonian Myth to Modern Science*. New York: The Free Press.

23. Munitz MK (ed.) (1965) *Theories of the Universe: From Babylonian Myth to Modern Science*. New York: The Free Press, 12–14.

24. No information is given in the essay as to which version of *Enuma Elish* the author uses.

25. Jacobsen T (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 187.

26. Jacobsen T (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 187.

27. Otzen B, Gottlieb H, and Jeppesen K (1980) *Myths in the Old Testament*. London: SCM Press Ltd, 13–14, emphasis mine.

With the two more recent examples that follow, we can trace a tradition of what I call ‘the monstification of Tiamat in scholarship’. It systematically erases Tiamat’s endeavour to endure the childish disturbances, to protect them from paternal infanticide, and to punish the bullying peer (Marduk). The long reception history that essentializes Tiamat as *the* archenemy seems to have even exerted influences on some studies that bear feminist and gender perspectives in mind.

Rivkah Harris, for example, published a gender theory-informed study on the generational conflicts in the Mesopotamian myths in 1992. An author who writes extensively on gender in Mesopotamia from a feminist perspective, Harris nevertheless reduces *Enuma Elish*’s pantheon to ‘images of the good father (Ea) and the bad father/progenitor (Apsu), of the good mother (Damkina) and the bad mother/progenitrix (Tiamat)’.²⁸ Tiamat *is* aggressive but she/it is not only that. There is abundant evidence as we have seen, to show her gentleness and indulgence, which is again and again overlooked.

Published in 2012, Gregory Mobley’s *The Return of the Chaos Monsters – And other Backstories of the Bible* explicitly states ‘[w]ho are the bad guys in the *Enuma Elish*? There is Tiamat, a feminine personification of saltwater, and the gang of eleven monsters’.²⁹

Victor A. Hurowitz, who scrutinizes the philological aspect of Akkadian, touches upon the issue of the representation of Tiamat. He follows Piotr Michalowski’s suggestion on the possibility that ‘mummu’ in ‘Mummu-Tiamat’ means ‘noise’, and translates the first lines of the epic as ‘Noisy Tiamat, birther of their noise’.³⁰ Hurowitz’s following argument represents the best example of scholarly distortion of Tiamat. He declares, rather stunningly that:

[u]nnnoticed by Michalowski, this hidden meaning adds significant irony and even a bit of tragedy to the comic story given the decisive role of noise in the rest of the myth. Tiamat and Apsu are disturbed by their children’s noisy frolicking and seek to destroy them. Giving Tiamat herself a name that means “noisy” would imply that by trying to rid herself of noise she is self-hating and bent on destroying herself. At the very least, calling her “birther of their noise” makes her, rather than her children, responsible for her own suffering.³¹

In a nutshell, Apsu’s plan becomes that of both him *and* Tiamat. The whole scenario of Tiamat’s benevolence, indulgence and protection is not only erased but distorted as some kind of self-punishment. I cannot find in the epic where it is possible to read that Tiamat ever even tried to ‘rid herself of noise’ and ‘seek to destroy them [the gods]’. It is ironic to

28. Harris R (1992) The conflict of generations in ancient mesopotamian myths. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34(4): 631.

29. Mobley G (2012) *The Return of the Chaos Monsters: And Other Backstories of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 18.

30. Hurowitz VA (2000) Alliterative allusions, Rebus writing, and paronomastic punishment: some aspects of word play in Akkadian literature. In: Noegel SB (ed.) *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 63–113. Dalley’s translation as we have quoted earlier has, ‘And maker Tiamat, who bore them all’, see Dalley S (2008) *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

31. Hurowitz VA (2000) Alliterative allusions, Rebus writing, and paronomastic punishment: some aspects of word play in Akkadian literature. In: Noegel SB (ed.) *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 78.

see how scholars of the twentieth century have used the same allegation Marduk makes in the story, confusing Tiamat and Apsu and accusing her of rejecting motherly compassion when the sons are ‘disrespectful to their fathers’ and of having planned infanticide. It is difficult to understand either, how this epic, full of love, hatred, pain, violence and death, can ever be interpreted as a ‘comic story’. What is more, Tiamat, the victim of unbearable disturbance and violent slaughter is charged as ‘responsible for her own suffering’.

Monstrification/Feminization of Tiamat

Through more than one hundred years of study, ranging from archaeologist, philologist, biblical and feminist studies, only a few seem to have noticed the benevolent aspect of Tiamat. Even those who are aware of gender issues like Harris³² tend to regard Tiamat at best as a figure of the demonized *femme fatale* easily found in ‘patriarchal’ mythologies. Certainly, some authors have not turned their eyes completely away from the possibility of *not* seeing Tiamat as the ‘bad guy’, such as in Murison³³ and Jacobsen.³⁴ Almost all of them agree, however, that Tiamat is feminine and that ‘she’ represents a destructive force that opposes order, represented by Marduk.

After the short survey of the reception history of Tiamat starting from the nineteenth century, I hope I have shown that scholarship is largely responsible for having essentialized Tiamat as the feminine chaos monster. Tiamat is not born, but *becomes* a (monstrous) mother. Meanwhile the relationship between monstrosity and femininity is also complex and worth further analyses. This review of the monstrification of Tiamat is by no means suggesting that Tiamat might be essentially ‘good’. Some feminists have approached this issue from different perspectives. Notably those of New Age Spiritualism and the Goddess Movement have argued that the feminine Tiamat has been monstrified both within the course of *Enuma Elish* and through its reception history.

The problem of imagining a matriarchal past (in our case, represented by the primordial mother figure Tiamat), later replaced by patriarchy (represented by Marduk’s victory over Tiamat), has been criticized by Carol Meyers with ‘biblical archeology’,³⁵ and Zainab Bahrani³⁶ from art history and the question of representation. The problem of explaining the monstrosity of Tiamat as largely a later distortion, either by the Babylonian cosmographers or by modern scholars, is that it fails to see the contingency of Tiamat’s femininity as feminization, that is, as construction through a process of monstrification. Feminization and monstrification do not exist in an additive but in a mutually

32. Harris R (1992) The conflict of generations in ancient mesopotamian myths. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34(4): 621–35.

33. Budge EAW (1921) *The Babylonian Legends of the Creation and the Fight Between Bel and the Dragon (As Told by Assyrian Tablets from Nineveh)*. London: The British Museum, 33, n.1.

34. Jacobsen T (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 187.

35. Meyers C (2007) Contesting the notion of patriarchy: anthropology and the theorizing of gender in ancient Israel. In: Rooke DW (ed.) *A Question of Sex? Gender and Difference in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

36. Bahrani Z (2001) *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*. London: Routledge.

constructive relationship in the case of the epic and its reception. It is problematic to assume that Tiamat is essentially a ‘woman’ and later monstrified. Feminization/monstrification assumes a strong logic of ‘either...or’ especially in modern scholarship, often heavily imbued with the nineteenth century colonial dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘light’ and ‘darkness’, ‘we’ and ‘they’. The next section of this article will analyse this quandary in Tiamat’s modern reception.

‘Cutting Tiamat in Two’: The Monstrification and Feminization of Tiamat

He placed her head, heaped up []
 Opened up springs: water gushed out.
 He opened the Euphrates and the Tigris from her
 eyes,
 Closed her nostrils, []
 He piled up clear-cut mountains from her udder,
 Bored waterholes to drain off the catchwater.
 He laid her tail across, tied it fast as the cosmic
 bond,
 And [] the Apsu beneath his feet.
 He set her thigh to make fast the sky,
 With half of her he made a roof; he fixed the earth.
 He [] the work, made the insides of Tiamat
 surge,
 Spread his net, made it extend completely.
 He ... [] heaven and earth.³⁷

This fragment from the epic recounts the creation of heaven and earth by Marduk after defeating Tiamat. The so-called heroic act of Marduk is extremely violent. This horrific dismembering of the feminine-identified Tiamat does not seem to have attracted attention from previous studies which all seem to consent to it in light of the so called *Chaoskampf*. In their eyes, the violent slaughtering seems to be merely symbolic/metaphorical and therefore negligible. This selective blindness is supported by a dichotomous logic that neatly separates good and evil, cosmos and chaos, younger and older generation, activity and passivity, masculinity and femininity. Marduk’s ‘cutting Tiamat in two’ reminds us through this section that dichotomization of these allegedly oppositional pairs is always a violent act of ‘cutting in two’ of living and organic continuities.

Tiamat in the early stage of *Enuma Elish* at least, can be regarded as a caring mother who indulges her children and protects them from the father’s anger. This moment is largely if

37. The square brackets are original.

not completely or successfully erased in scholarly works that eagerly represent Tiamat as 'a huge dragon of chaotic water that resists order',³⁸ or one of 'the bad guys in *Enuma Elish*'.³⁹

Before it runs to the irrevocable conflict after four pages and almost at the end of Tablet I,⁴⁰ the epic never portrays Tiamat as monstrous or frightening. The gods inside the text and inside Tiamat's body do not fear her. They disturb Tiamat and stir up her belly, but she silently accepts it: 'However grievous their behaviour to her,/ However bad their ways, she would indulge them'. We are presented, in contrast to a 'bad mother/progenitrix',⁴¹ with a compassionate, benevolent and even indulgent mother figure. However, she is not only passively suffering. When Apsu, the impatient father goes to tell Tiamat of his plan to kill the gods, she becomes furious, actively protecting her children from the paternal infanticide.⁴²

Apsu reveals his plan of killing, 'I shall abolish their ways and disperse them!', suggesting mutual benefit for Tiamat: 'Let peace prevail, so that we can sleep'. As could be expected from a protective mother, Tiamat after hearing this plan 'was furious and shouted at her lover'. These are her words: 'How could we allow what we ourselves created to/perish?/Even though their ways are grievous, we/ should bear it patiently'.

This could be the first time in the epic when we might, despite the benevolent intention, sense a certain degree of 'monstrosity' due to her dreadful rage which has even 'suppressed the evil in her belly'. This is also the second moment when we see the enactment of Tiamat's motherliness. The third time comes after the death of Apsu and before the dawn of the final combat with Marduk. The epic recounts that Ea casts a spell to kill Apsu and capture Mummu. Tiamat seems mercilessly indifferent to the death of her 'husband' Apsu, who at the beginning of the epic has already mingled with her. The birth of Marduk follows. 'And inside Apsu, Marduk was created;/ Inside pure Apsu, Marduk was born'.

At this time Apsu has already been de-personified and becomes the freshwater ocean again. The epic runs several lines to make us believe how superior this newly born god is. 'Four were his eyes, four were his ears; [...]/ Highest among the gods, his form was outstanding'. The masculine cult of exalting power with concrete manifestations is at its best/worst in this representation. Like any macho lad, especially being encouraged by his indulgent grandfather who gives him the weapon wind to play with, Marduk is bound to do something naughty: 'He made the flood-wave and stirred up Tiamat./ Tiamat was stirred up, and heaved restlessly day and night'. Again Tiamat indulges the wrong-doings of the younger grandson. This time, it is some of the child gods who cannot bear this younger brother or nephew's restlessness,

They addressed Tiamat their mother, saying,
'Because they slew Apsu your lover and

38. Evans PS (2011) Creation, progress and calling: Genesis 1–11 as social commentary. *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 13: 155–88, especially 160.

39. Mobley G (2012) *The Return of the Chaos Monsters: And Other Backstories of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 18.

40. The version I am using contains seven tablets.

41. Harris R (1992) The conflict of generations in ancient Mesopotamian myths. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34(4): 631.

42. Why Apsu needs to ask Tiamat's permission at all remains an interesting question especially if we hold that the Babylonian poets were promoting patriarchy through myth making.

You did not go to his side but sat mute,
 He has created the four, fearful winds
 To stir up your belly on purpose, and we simply cannot sleep!
 Was your lover Apsu not in your heart?
 And (vizier) Mummu who was captured? No
 wonder you sit alone!
 Are you not a mother? You heave restlessly
 But what about us, who cannot rest? Don't you
 love us?'
 [...]

Tiamat listened, and the speech pleased her.

Tiamat is pleased by an appeal that is similar to the one Apsu made to her which, in that instance, had enraged her; so pleased that she decides to fight against the Marduk band for the same reason that Apsu had given her: 'I cannot rest'. While she rejected Apsu, the father's plan earlier, she 'was pleased' this time to act for her children despite their extremely insulting strategy of mocking her. This time we can indeed associate monstrosity with Tiamat for 'she bore giant/ snakes,/Sharp of tooth and unsparing of fang (?)/She filled their bodies with venom instead of blood'. 'Whoever looks upon them shall collapse in utter/ terror!' However, should we take it superficially to thus conclude that Tiamat *is* essentially a monster? Should we ignore the fact that this 'utter terror' is meant to protect her innocent children from the bullying of the disturbing gangs led by the four-big-ear-and-eye Marduk? Should we consent to the sheer monstrosity of Marduk just because the epic intends to elevate him as the hero, the representative of order, even to the extent of glorifying his battle with Tiamat as 'the template for all subsequent epic showdowns between monster and hero'?⁴³

What is unfortunate is that if the first protective act of the children against the father's infanticide was ignored, the second insurgence prompted by a desire to protect one's bullied children has been misrepresented as her personal revenge for the murder of her lover Apsu. For example, Black and Green summarize Tiamat's 'revolt' as: '[w]hen Ea slew Apsu, Tiamat determined to be avenged and created eleven monsters'.⁴⁴ Tiamat's threat to order is only banished through Marduk's 'heroic contest'. Jacobsen, even though he has rightly argued that 'when she [Tiamat] is finally roused to fatal action, it is by appealing to her motherly instincts of protection – not from lack of patience or forbearance on her part',⁴⁵ represents the conflict as follows:

43. Mobley G (2012) *The Return of the Chaos Monsters: And Other Backstories of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 18.

44. Black J, Green A (1992) *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*. London: British Museum Press, 177.

45. Jacobsen T (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 187.

their [the young gods'] fathers were in their eyes acting unjustly toward them when Apsu sought to destroy them; and now she, their mother, hates them and is bent on attacking them, as is abundantly clear from her standing here in the midst of an army fully armed by her.⁴⁶

This binary opposition takes the form of generational conflict. The young gods, both those who oppose Marduk and the Marduk gang are grouped together in opposition to the 'older gods', who are Apsu, the one who seeks to annihilate the young gods, and Tiamat, the one who only acts against Marduk, not an undifferentiated 'them'. The internal discrepancies of the 'same generation' are reduced for the sake of neatly dichotomizing 'order/young versus chaos/old'. The plot is most misleadingly summarized as follows in Takayoshi Oshima's introduction to *Enuma Elish*,

However, Ea, of the fourth generation from Apsu and Tiamat, learns *their* plan [to exterminate them] and kills Apsu by means of an incantation [...]. After having been accused for coolly allowing the death of Apsu, Tiamat decides to wage war against her children.⁴⁷

These instances in scholarship univocally read the Tiamat-Marduk battle as one between two antagonistic groups, Tiamat versus her grandsons, allegorically, woman against man, chaos against order. However, some feminist works do not seem to follow this dichotomous reasoning. They believe in a primordial mother goddess and find their support in the Ancient Near East, which is said to be the home of a matriarchal past suppressed or distorted by patriarchy. Here Tiamat is taken as one of the most eminent matriarchal mother goddesses and *Enuma Elish* is consequently read as a story of patriarchy defeating matriarchy or goddess worship.⁴⁸ Bettina Knapp, for example, suggests that the genuine 'good mother' at the outset of the myth and her 'transformation into a negative and destructive personality type during the course of the myth signals a sharp cultural and psychological shift from a [*sic.*] quasi-matriarchal to patriarchal tendencies in Babylonia'.⁴⁹

This kind of reading is equally problematic. The good intention of salvaging a mythical figure from her *femme-fatale* rendering in fact also arbitrarily divides, that is, violently cuts Tiamat into two supposedly incompatible characteristics between motherliness and monstrosity (just as much as between heaven and earth, made from her slaughtered body parts according to *Enuma Elish*). What is sacrificed is the complexity of Tiamat the mother figure who is both caring and monstrous. Therefore, a critique of the 'patriarchal monstrification' of Tiamat continues the cut-her-in-two between the Tiamat as the loving mother-goddess

46. Jacobsen T (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 178.

47. Oshima T (2007) The Babylonian god Marduk. In: Leick G (ed.) *The Babylonian World*. New York: Routledge, 348–60.

48. We can also find similar arguments in many blogs of the Goddess movement, see for example: 'The essence of this story (*Enuma Elish*) is the violent conflict between the older mythologies of the Mother Goddess, *Tiamat*, representing prehistory fertility worship of gods and goddesses and the new myths of the father gods, struggle for supremacy between the two with the eventual birth of patriarchy', available at: <http://reclaimingthedarkgoddess.blogspot.de/2011/07/tiamat.html>. Last accessed December 6, 2012. See also, <https://journeyingtothegoddess.wordpress.com/2012/07/30/goddess-tiamat/>. Last accessed March 26, 2016.

49. Knapp BL (1997) *Women in Myth*. New York: State University of New York, 21.

and the Tiamat as the lethal monster allegedly after a ‘misogynist distortion’. Regarding this matter, the ancient text leaves an immense ambiguity, precisely through the blending between motherliness and monstrosity, watery space and personified embodiment.

Motherhood and Monstrosity: The Irreducible Complexity

I do not challenge the argument that *Enuma Elish* historically served a highly sexist ideology of the Babylonian state, which we can read in the epic in its overtly misogynist statements, examples of which include: ‘However strong a woman’s strength, it is not equal to a man’s’ or ‘My son, (don’t you realize that) it is Tiamat, of/womankind, who will advance against you with/ arms?’ Ruby Rohrlich argues that the formation of the state in Mesopotamia early in Sumer and later in Babylon ‘was a complex interaction among the processes of class stratification, militarism, patriarchy, and political consolidation’.⁵⁰ The colonial undertone of *Enuma Elish* is revealed through the legitimization of Marduk’s supremacy. The patron god of Babylon, ‘May your utterance be law,/your word never be/falsified. [...] Wherever they have temples, be established for/your place’.

Takayoshi Oshima argues that ‘as political power of Babylon grew, so did the position of its national god, Marduk, who was also gradually elevated within the polytheistic religious system of Babylonia’.⁵¹ The political meaning of Marduk’s petition for supremacy in compliance with a patriarchal logic that literally suppresses what is taken to be at once feminine and chaotic, cannot be clearer. But could/should one therefore assume that such a phallocracy is successfully erected in the epic? Should one automatically identify with Marduk because of the so-called ‘order’ he claims to represent? Should one conflate the volitive pronouncement of Marduk’s supremacy, which actually had to be renewed every year in the New Year Festival through reiteration and repetition, with the indicative reality of the narrative of the epic as to how things really were?

Even if we can safely accept the misogyny of *Enuma Elish* despite its necessity of renewal, which implies potential failure or constant threat, the theory that sees the monstrosity of Tiamat as merely patriarchal monstrification-distortion is still bought at a price, that of depriving Tiamat of her own agency and her own decision to be evil. Cutting Tiamat into either the ‘bad monster’ who kills, or the ‘good mother’ who protects, two supposedly incompatible entities, is a result of modern/colonial categorical logic, unable to fathom the coexistence of two supposedly oppositional characteristics.

Richard Rorty in a different context asserts: ‘one cannot find anybody who says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good’.⁵² The alleged incompatibility of ‘motherliness’ and ‘monstrosity’ does not permit them to be ‘equally good’ in one figure, Tiamat. She/it has to be *either* a lethal monster *or* a loving mother. The misogynists choose to accept the former while the ‘Tiamat-worshippers’ stick to the latter. The ‘either/or’ logic

50. Rohrlich R (1980) State formation in Sumer and the subjugation of women. *Feminist Studies* 6(1): 98.

51. Oshima T (2007) The Babylonian god Marduk. In: Leick G (ed.) *The Babylonian World*. New York: Routledge, 348.

52. Rorty R (1982) *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 166.

requires the researchers to either univocally ignore the benevolent Tiamat and reiterate her monstrosity, or look for the reason why the essentially good mother is later monstrified. If the former readings are explicitly sexist, the latter counterarguments examined closely have also reproduced the same dichotomous logic, typical of the patriarchy that they seek to oppose.

We have seen the continuous efforts to interpret the battle between Tiamat and Marduk as the battle between chaos and order and Marduk's victory as the defeat of chaos, an interpretation that can be traced back to the first modern studies of the epic. The early feminist effort to read the epic as a textual reflection of the historical shift between (quasi-)matriarchy to patriarchy is designed to counteract the naturalization of patriarchy which presents itself as inevitable. This 'colonizing epistemological strategy that would subordinate different configurations of domination under the rubric of a transcultural notion of patriarchy'⁵³ is contested in archeology. Studying artistic representations in ancient Babylonia, Bahrani in her *Women of Babylon* argues that 'prehistoric matriarchy is a mythic construction which is part and parcel of the same narrative of patriarchy it wishes to overthrow'.⁵⁴

What is more unfortunate is that the readings in favour of, or in opposition to Marduk, have unfortunately subscribed to the same dichotomous logic and helped the accomplishment of a phallogentrism which is *far from* being successfully installed in the epic. The repetition of the epic's creation story both in Babylonia and through scholarly works that confuse volition with actuality, has performatively 'attributed and installed' the 'patriarchy' that the former wishful pronouncement anticipates and later feminist critiques seek to oppose. However, the 'split' of Tiamat in *Enuma Elish* and in reception history is never and can never be completed. The 'monster' always comes back.⁵⁵ For this very reason, the Babylonian kings deemed it necessary to reiterate and renew Marduk-qua-Babylonia's supremacy every year.

Beyond the allegedly patriarchal distortion of Tiamat, let us read closely this particular moment after which she goes into battle against Marduk and reexamine the seemingly incompatible characteristics of Tiamat. Perhaps, at this stage, I should emphasize that this reading attempts to go *below* rather than beyond the previous readings that I see as being caught in the logic of 'either/or'. 'Below' circumvents the transcendental and supersessionist undertone of 'beyond' and more importantly, it suggests an adherence to the 'queer' space that is *inside* Tiamat (and Apsu). We read, 'Inside pure Apsu, Marduk was born'. He begins to make noise inside Tiamat's belly as the other gods have done before. That is to say, while he is 'born inside Apsu', he also remains in Tiamat's watery body, which should not be surprising because Apsu's and Tiamat's waters have been mingled into one since the beginning. If we stick to this primordially mingling water as it is eternally present, the efforts to separate them and destroy their unity, either by Marduk's mighty winds or by modern/colonial categorization, are doomed to fail.

53. Butler J (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 48.

54. Bahrani Z (2001) *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*. London: Routledge, 17.

55. For more discussion on the return of the monster in different contexts, see Cohen JJ (1996) *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; Levenson JD (1988) *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers; Mobley G (2012) *The Return of the Chaos Monsters: And Other Backstories of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

So Marduk's turbulence inside Tiamat annoys the other gods. It leaves us wondering, where are the gods? Aren't they all still inside Tiamat? Jacobsen wonders about the reason for the annoyance and suggests that '[t]hese objecting gods [those against Marduk] were a group of deities who for some reason or other were siding with Tiamat'.⁵⁶

The disturbed children selfishly accuse their mother of betraying her 'lover' and coldly mock her, 'no wonder you sit alone'. Yet, 'Tiamat listened, and the speech pleased her'. Is this a reaction one could expect for a 'female dragon, queen of a hideous host, who are hostile to the gods'?⁵⁷ The young gods clearly know that they are not facing an evil monster but an indulgent mother who would not get angry as she did with a similar complaint from Apsu. She is even so pleased to hear their childish petulance as to follow their petition to punish the bullying Marduk. If we keep in mind the inseparability of Apsu and Tiamat, Tiamat's anger towards Apsu would get an unexpected twist. We could ask if this anger is directed towards what Julia Kristeva calls, *étranger à nous-mêmes*. Even for Marduk and his father Ea, it is surprising that *mother* Tiamat should prepare war against them,

Ea listened to that report,
 And was dumbfounded and sat in silence.
 [...]
 And began to repeat to him everything that Tiamat had planned.
 "Father, Tiamat who bore us is rejecting us!
 She has convened an assembly and is raging out
 of control.
 The gods have turned to her, all of them,
 Even those whom you begot have gone over to
 her side"

In the French translation, 'Tiamat who bore us' is translated explicitly as 'Tiamat, notre mère, nous a pris en haine'⁵⁸ Finally the battle is reported to Ea's great great-grandparents: 'Lahmu and Lahamu listened and cried out aloud./All the Igigi then groaned dreadfully.'⁵⁹ They ask, 'Qu'avons-nous fait de mal pour qu'elle ait pris à notre égard une telle décision?'⁶⁰ Ea is confused and remains silent. The Marduk troop also refers to Tiamat as 'our mother'. They are shocked, silent and sad with tears because their mother who once indulged their noise and saved them from Apsu's anger now 'collected battle-units against the gods his/offspring [and] did even more evil for posterity than Apsu'. Even

56. Jacobsen T (1976) *The Treasures of Darkness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 173.

57. Barton GA (1893) Tiamat. *Journal of American Oriental Society* 15(1): 12.

58. 'Tiamat, our mother came to hate us', my translation, See Talon P (2005) *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma Eliš*. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 83.

59. 'Lahmu and Lahamu' are the very first ones born to Apsu and Tiamat, that is to say, the great-grandparents of Ea, father of Marduk. 'Igigi' are the gods in general.

60. 'What have we done wrong so that she would have made such a bias decision against us', my translation.

Marduk is surprised to find out that Tiamat ‘transgresses’ her role as the mother who indulges her children’s wrongdoings. He states: ‘Just because the sons were noisy (and)/disrespectful to their fathers,/Should you, who gave them birth, reject/compassion?’⁶¹

Inside Tiamat’s body, inside the epic, both groups assume the motherliness of Tiamat. They all remind Tiamat, ‘are you not a mother?’ The young gods, both those who side with her and those who side with Marduk and oppose her, in no sense, see her as essentially a threatening primordial chaos/monster. The pun ‘(m)other’ that is, mother as other, that only works in the English language, is at best only partially true in *Enuma Elish*.

The studies that identify Tiamat as essentially monstrous have assumed the (m)other economy so that the benevolent ‘motherly moments’ before the final battle between Tiamat and Marduk would be accepted as internal contradictions to be overlooked. If the essential nature of femininity is seen as monstrous (and the monstrous as feminine) that seeks to oppose the order allegedly represented and restored by Marduk, then the benevolent moments at the outset of the epic could only be seen as a temporary deception. Alternatively, these benevolent moments are read as her ‘real’ identity, only later distorted in the epic. In Bettina Knapp’s analysis, ‘Tiamat [...] is not depicted as a monstrous force at the outset in the myth, she is maligned by mythologists, philosophers, critics and literati after she assumes a confrontational position’.⁶²

Marduk seems to have already set the rules of the game for the mythologists (and to some extent, also some feminist interpreters). Listen to what he has to say to Tiamat, about this ‘discrepancy’ in Tiamat, ‘before’ and ‘now’: ‘alors qu’avant tu manifestais de bons sentiments,/maintenant ton coeur complete-t-il de lancer l’assaut?’⁶³ The problem with those misogynist interpretations is perhaps not the fact that they have intentionally monstrified Tiamat in a kind of patriarchal conspiracy. A theory of the essentially monstrous femininity that menaces the masculine order does not need *Enuma Elish* to support its claim. In this scenario, any evidence contrary to the monstrous rendering of Tiamat would have been either erased as irrelevant or simply overlooked.

Conclusion

In this article, I have offered a complex narrative of *Enuma Elish*, especially its ambiguity regarding the ‘mother’ figure Tiamat and her relationship with ‘Apsu’ her lover, and the younger gods, her children. I focus on modern reception that has largely simplified and essentialized Tiamat. I argue that the complex figure that is at once the primordial salt water already mingled with the fresh water and the personified primordial mother ‘who

61. The French version has: ‘Les enfants ont crié (c’est vrai), ils ont malmené leurs pères/mais toi, leur mère à tous, tu as rejeté toute pitié!’ taken from Talon P (2005) *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma Eliš*. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. [The children made noises (it’s true), they have gone against their father/but you, mother of them all, you resented all mercy! (my translation)].

62. Knapp BL (1997) *Women in Myth*. New York: State University of New York, 21.

63. ‘While you showed goodwill before/now your heart is plotting to mount an attack’, my translation, see Talon P (2005) *The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth Enūma Eliš*. Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 93.

bore them all' has been consolidated in scholarship as *the* monster. The benevolent 'motherly' moments of Tiamat have been either ignored by those who eagerly associate her with chaos or over-simplified as her 'true identity', notably by the goddess feminists who hold that the evil representation of Tiamat is a result of misogynist distortions. Neither interpretation is satisfactory. By assuming the separability of the allegedly incompatible characteristics of Tiamat, both antifeminist and feminist critiques have continued Marduk's violence of cutting Tiamat in two. However, the split of Tiamat *inside* the epic is hardly successful, if we follow closely the narrative which *all* happens within Tiamat(-Apsu), and if we situate the epic in its renewal ritual of the New Year Festival. The other kind of split of Tiamat, in her/its scholarly reception is not completed either. As I have shown, the 'good/motherly' – 'bad/monstrous' dichotomy imposed on Tiamat is primarily sustained by the categorical logic of modernity/coloniality, rather than by the epic itself.

Last but not least, if I have nevertheless 'cut' the mingled water Tiamat-Apsu in two, so that they are linked with a hyphen instead separated with a slash, I did so consciously. The mingling water(s) of Tiamat and Apsu is/(are) at once separated and united, yet profusely inundating the whole epic, *below* the logic of either/or. This is not to be confused with the undifferentiated mixture of the two distinct waters. Studies that equalize Tiamat with Apsu often do at the price of charging her with the same infanticidal cruelty of Apsu. The challenge that Tiamat-Apsu poses is how to move below not only the 'either/or' logic of exclusivity that previous critiques seek to either overthrow or reverse, but also below the quick solution of the swampy 'both...and'. *Enuma Elish*, distinct from the modern/colonial logic of insurmountable differences, offers us rich insights into rethinking a 'feminist politics now resistant to any fixed difference as well as to any indifference to difference',⁶⁴ rethinking beyond both 'either/or' and 'both...and' and *below* the transcendental 'beyond'.

Adhering to the luxuriant within-ness of the mingling Tiamat-Apsu the fusing waters of *Enuma Elish*, at least in the case of Tiamat, motherliness and monstrosity do not in nature oppose each other (as some feminist analyses would have it) nor do they run together with each other (as the misogynist readings would have it).

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