



# ENHEDUANA

THE COMPLETE POEMS OF THE  
WORLD'S FIRST AUTHOR

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## INTRODUCTION

ENHEDUANA IS THE FIRST POET WHOSE NAME WE know. There are stories and poems far older than hers—as much as five hundred years older—but they are all anonymous. In the annals of world literature, Enheduana marks the earliest known appearance of authorship: the idea that there is a person behind the text, speaking to us across time. And yet, despite her pride of place in history and despite the exceptional beauty of her hymns, the world has forgotten about Enheduana. Western literary history instead begins with Homer, a man who sang his songs some fifteen hundred years after her death. Today, Enheduana is known only by a small circle of academics and enthusiasts, but she deserves better.

Enheduana lived around 2300 BCE, and it can be hard to grasp the gap in time that lies between us and her: Julius Caesar lived closer in time to *us* than to Enheduana. It is nothing short of miraculous that this ancient woman's voice has survived the passing of centuries, if only as an echo etched into clay, revised and rewritten over many generations. Enheduana served as high priestess in Ur, a city nestled in the southernmost corner of the country we now call Iraq. She was the daughter of Sargon of Akkad, an emperor who would be remembered for millennia as the paragon of kingship. She lived through a period of profound transformation; the world she was born into was not the same as the one she left behind. Sargon founded the first empire that history had ever seen, and he and his successors worked hard to reshape the cities they had conquered. Enheduana's installment as high priestess in Ur, one of the largest cities in the empire, was probably part of this



political overhaul. But the new empire was also highly unpopular among the old Sumerian nobles, and Enheduana's life would have been beset by constant revolts. The story of one of those revolts is told in her best-known poem, *The Exaltation of Inana*.

All the poems attributed to Enheduana are hymns. They were not meant to be bedside reading; they do not seek to enlighten or entertain. Hymns are a strange sort of poetry, full of power and persuasion. Their goal is not to describe the world but to change it by invoking the gods and enlisting their help. To properly praise the gods, the writer of hymns must bring out their terrifying strength, so to read Enheduana's poems is to enter a world ruled by the violent whims of reckless gods. The hymns that we now label literature were in fact a way for ancient people to defend themselves from the mood swings of the gods: their lavish praise might soothe the heart of an angry deity and so keep its wrath at bay, at least for a time. Enheduana was a master of this genre until she lost her gift: The *Exaltation* tells us that she was ousted from her temple when a usurper named Lugal-Ane seized power in Ur. The text summons a world riven by rebellion, in which Enheduana struggles to regain her place of power. She prays for help to Nanna, the moon god, whom she had served as high priestess, but to no avail. Nanna ignores her petition, and it seems that Enheduana has lost command of her famous eloquence. "My honey-mouth is full of froth," she writes; "my soothing words are turned to dust" (ll. 72-73). Without those soothing words, she cannot rally the gods to her side, and this leaves her powerless in the face of the revolt. In despair, Enheduana turns instead to Nanna's daughter Inana, begging her to intervene in the Moon God's stead.

Inana is the single most complex and compelling goddess of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> Also known as Ishtar, she was the patron deity of war, sex, change, and destruction. She was said to break every rule and flout every norm. Two of Enheduana's poems, the *Exaltation*

and *The Hymn to Inana*, sing the praises of this awe-inspiring figure. That is no easy task, for as Enheduana herself says to Inana in the *Exaltation*, "It is daunting to sing of your might" (l. 64). Inana is too puzzling and capricious to be captured in words: in one text, she is a love-struck girl pining for the young shepherd Dumuzi, in another, she is a ruthless warrior grinding skulls to dust and feasting on the corpses of her enemies.<sup>2</sup> But in the *Hymn*, Enheduana finds a way to bring out the central character of the goddess—paradox itself. Through a long litany of contradictions, Enheduana conveys the terrifying and unpredictable power of Inana:

To destroy and  
to create, to plant  
and to pluck out  
are yours, Inana.  
To turn men into  
women, to turn  
women into men  
are yours, Inana.  
[.....]  
To step, to stride,  
to strive, to arrive  
are yours, Inana.  
To turn brutes  
into weaklings  
and to make the  
powerful puny  
are yours, Inana.  
To reverse peaks  
and plains, to raise  
up and to reduce  
are yours, Inana.  
To assign and allot

the crown, throne,  
and staff of kings  
are yours, Inana.

(ll. 119–21, 139–42)

*Enheduana rules the world*  
In both the *Hymn* and the *Exaltation*, Enheduana makes clear that Inana is not a deity like any other but the ruler of the universe. By designating Inana as the queen of the gods, Enheduana makes a statement not just about religion but about reality more broadly: since the gods controlled the cosmos, their position in the pantheon reflected how the universe was organized. In elevating Inana, Enheduana shows that the world is ruled not by a predictable and everlasting order but by change, conflict, chaos, and contradiction—and not least by a stubborn and defiant female force, to whom even the greatest gods must bow.

That is the goddess to whom Enheduana turns for help in the *Exaltation*, asking her to intervene against Lugal-Ane. Enheduana's hymn grows increasingly desperate, since her survival depends on Inana's grace, something the goddess rarely grants. Enheduana wanders through the thorns of foreign lands and bemoans her fate before describing how her despair led her to compose a song to Inana—that is, the very poem we are reading. Enheduana depicts herself meeting Inana at the dead of night and metaphorically giving birth to the text. In this climactic scene, the poem essentially turns back on itself: in the narrative equivalent of a snake biting its own tail, the text ends by showing us how it came into being. In the epilogue that follows, we are told that the hymn succeeded in exalting and appeasing Inana: the goddess heard Enheduana's prayer and restored her as high priestess. Through this act of self-reference, the poet thus shows us what hymns can achieve when they are sung with eloquence and force. The *Exaltation* is a poem about poetry, about what beautiful words

can do and what it means to write them. Not only is Enheduana the world's first known author, her poems also include a complex and self-reflective account of authorship, as she depicts herself stepping into literary history.

That history has since come to be dominated by white men, so the fact that the first known author was a "woman of color"—to use a deliberately anachronistic phrase—comes as an empowering revelation to many modern readers.<sup>3</sup> Even today, female authors continue to be labeled "women writers," as if they were anomalies in an inherently male profession. But Enheduana's authorship overturns that assumption: the concept of authorship began with a woman. Her hymns are a rare flash of female voice in the ancient world, and they treat themes that are as relevant today as they were four thousand years ago: exile, social disruption, the power of storytelling, gender roles, the devastation of war, and the terrifying forces of nature. In this book, the first to include a complete translation of Enheduana's poems from the original Sumerian, I seek to do justice to this overlooked figure.

The *Exaltation* and the *Hymn* are both addressed to Inana, and they combine a celebration of the goddess with an account of Enheduana's own troubled life, though in the *Hymn*, the "autobiographical" section has unfortunately been lost. A third text attributed to Enheduana is a collection of poems known as *The Temple Hymns*: forty-two short odes to the temples, cities, and gods of ancient Sumer, all described in a rich and intensely metaphorical language. By guiding the reader through the sights of ancient Iraq, the collection offers a whistle-stop tour of the long-lost world in which Enheduana lived. There are two more texts, both short and fragmentary, that mention Enheduana: both are hymns to the Moon God, though at least one of them seems not to be told in Enheduana's own voice, instead addressing her as a

character in the text.<sup>4</sup> Some modern scholars have also assigned a sixth poem to Enheduana, *Inana and Ebih*, the story of Inana's raid on a mountain that failed to honor her. While *Inana and Ebih* is a fascinating poem in all sorts of ways, the grounds for attributing it to Enheduana are extremely slim, so I have not included it.<sup>5</sup> That being said, allusions to Inana's battle against Ebih are scattered throughout the *Hymn* and the *Exaltation*.

Besides these five poems, we have several other traces of Enheduana's life, most notably a limestone disk inscribed with her name that shows her presiding over a ritual sacrifice to Inana. The inscription on the back of the disk identifies Enheduana as the daughter of Sargon and the high priestess of Nanna, proving beyond doubt that she was a real historical figure. But what the disk cannot tell us is whether she composed the hymns that were attributed to her by the ancient Babylonian scribes, and philologists have long grappled with the possibility that the hymns may have been written after her death.<sup>6</sup> In "Enheduana's World," below, I return to this argument and lay out the evidence for and against it. The poems may indeed have been written much later, perhaps as a way for Babylonian poets to celebrate what was to them a famous figure. According to this view, the *Exaltation* and the *Hymn* are to be read not as autobiographical accounts but as a kind of ancient historical fiction, dramatizing the life and poetic struggles of Enheduana. If they were later compositions, the poems may have built on a real memory of Enheduana as a gifted orator devoted to Inana, embellishing that memory into a fictional tale. For now, we cannot tell one way or the other.

Regardless, the fact that the ancient scribes saw Enheduana as the author of these poems is significant: in this case it really is the thought that counts. The *idea* of authorship, the notion that a poetic text could be traced back to a named and identifiable individual rather than to a collective and anonymous tradition was born when these hymns were ascribed to Enheduana, and that

is true regardless of whether the attribution was correct. It is in Enheduana's poems, and especially the *Exaltation*, that authorship was born. Today we take the importance of authors for granted, as we sort books by the names on their covers, bestow prizes on poets, and interview novelists about their intentions. But a historical view that stretches back to and beyond Enheduana reveals that the literary world can be—and once was—organized differently. I like to think that history can make the present strange. A knowledge of the past overturns the conventions we usually take for granted, be they gender roles, national borders, or the ordering of literature, by showing that conventions like these are neither natural nor necessary but instead are accidental and liable to change. Authorship is not a fixed feature of tales and texts, but a practice that arose at a specific moment in time. Enheduana's poems were a key part of that process, so if we want to understand the history of authorship, we must begin with her.<sup>7</sup>

But precisely because we live in the modern world, where authorship has become such an established fact of life, we feel an urge to know for sure: Was she or was she not the author of these texts? What in these poems is real and what is fiction? Where do we draw the line between not man and myth but woman and wonder? The debate about the truth of Enheduana's authorship has gone back and forth over the past forty years, and it has yet to come to any meaningful conclusion. Not only has the debate failed to produce agreement, it has also caused collateral damage. Because philologists have spent so long arguing about the dating of the hymns, they have paid little attention to their poetic power or popular appeal.<sup>8</sup> This is one reason why Enheduana's hymns are not better known. Philologists in general have been reluctant to proselytize her poems because they are dogged by the suspicion that they may not really be *her* poems. This must stop. The hymns are a stunning poetic achievement, and regardless of whether they are by or only about Enheduana, they are enough to make her a

fascinating figure, one who deserves much greater fame than she currently enjoys. True, we cannot always separate life from legend when it comes to Enheduana: she did, after all, live more than four millennia ago. But the texts that circle around her paint a compelling portrait, and rather than trying to decide whether she is the author or “merely” the main character of the poems, we should be tracing her transformation over time—from real priestess to remembered poet.

The philologist Gina Konstantopoulos has laid out a useful framework that sidesteps the question of Enheduana’s authorship and so gives us a much better starting point for studying her life, legend, and literary heritage. As Konstantopoulos puts it, drawing on a phrase coined by the historian Eleanor Robson, Enheduana has led three lives.<sup>9</sup> In the first life, she was a powerful priestess in Sargon’s empire. In the second, she was a literary star in the Babylonian schools. The third life is the one she leads now: that of an ancient poet in the modern world. We can follow Enheduana’s transformation from one life to the next without faulting her for the changes she underwent. The Babylonian students of the eighteenth century BCE, for example, prized her poems for the insights they yielded into a dead language: Sumerian, in which the hymns are written, had died out in the intervening centuries. The Babylonian students grew up speaking the Akkadian language, so for them, studying Sumerian would have been like our studying Latin today, and Enheduana was a prime example of eloquent Sumerian. Meanwhile, some modern readers see in Enheduana’s celebration of Inana something like a proto-feminist statement: an unstoppable goddess who defies all norms and forces the older gods into submission is a compellingly inspirational figure in the fight against patriarchy. Neither approach would have made sense in Enheduana’s own lifetime, when the Sumerian language was still alive and feminism had not yet been born. But that is the way of all literature. Texts are transformed by those who read

them. Enheduana’s status as an exemplar of Sumerian and female empowerment was grafted on to her retroactively, long after her lifetime, but it cannot be rooted out now. These readings have become an integral part of her long history, growing around her memory like rings on a literary tree.

Enheduana’s twenty-first-century revival has a distinct political edge, as she illuminates by sheer contrast the dearth of female and nonwhite voices in what currently passes for literary history. But as some aspects of Enheduana’s story are brought into the limelight, others are overlooked. When we celebrate the subversive force of her poetry, we tend to ignore her historical role as an apologist for empire and her poetry’s frankly disturbing glee at the crushing of revolts. To modern feminists, Enheduana can seem like a “wish-fulfillment figure,” in Robson’s words, but for that same reason her less savory qualities are often pushed to the side, downplaying the complexity of her history.<sup>10</sup> One way to approach that complexity is to note that in each of her three lives, Enheduana has stood at the heart of a community that reshaped her in its image. As high priestess, she was the center of the religious and political community in Ur, including the empire founded by her father and the networks of the temple. In her second life, Enheduana became obligatory reading for would-be scribes: the *Exaltation* was a central part of the school curriculum that future priests and civil servants were made to learn. The elite leaders of ancient states and temples would have been able to swap references to Enheduana’s poetry, and their shared learning bound them together in a cultural clique.<sup>11</sup> And today, in her third life, Enheduana is being rediscovered by communities of readers all over the world. So to understand Enheduana’s poems, we must understand the wider social world in which they were, and continue to be, embedded and read. Since we know so little about her, Enheduana’s story must also be the story of the people who have sought to make sense of her legacy.

Each in its own way, these communities have used Enheduana to define themselves.<sup>12</sup> In return, they have sustained her memory and ensured her continued relevance. The poets whose works last longest are often those who can tap into several communities, so that their words continue to circulate even after a particular community has faded away—as the community of Babylonian scholars faded away. In Enheduana's case, it is particularly noteworthy that she can continue to reach and touch her readers four thousand years after her death. Following the philologist Sheldon Pollock, I would argue that the best understanding of Enheduana is achieved when we keep these three perspectives in mind at the same time: one rooted in her historical life, one in the ancient reception of her work, one in the modern world.<sup>13</sup> But as a result of this threefold understanding, the meaning of the name "Enheduana" will often shift and grow. According to context, I find myself using it to refer to the historical priestess, the cultural memory she left behind, the character and narrator of the poems, and the author who wrote them. Only sometimes do I explicitly distinguish between these various meanings of "Enheduana." This practice may be confusing to the reader, but, as I argue below, it is a confusion that the poems themselves generate and play with.<sup>14</sup>

What the poems attributed to Enheduana have in common is that they overwhelm the reader with a torrent of images. There is an intensity to her work, a condensed fervor which even today feels like an explosion, and which I have done my best to convey in translation. Line after line, the reader is bombarded with metaphors and similes, often focused on reversals and the destructive forces of war and nature. The link between one image and the next is often unclear. In one line, Inana is compared to a giant chain that holds the gods in place, in the next, the awe-inspiring splendor that surrounds Inana's body is said to cover the mountains

like a shroud and still the noise of busy streets (*Hymn*, ll. 9–10). The jump from one image to the next, from chain to splendor, comes without warning, and the reader is kept sprinting to catch up while the text just as quickly moves on. Any sense of narrative progression in the poems must be reconstructed from hints that are strewn throughout the text. What the hymns give us, at least at first glance, is not a carefully constructed argument but a blizzard of disturbing scenes.

This strategy is partly a reflection of the confounding nature of Inana herself. When reading about ancient gods and goddesses, we find it easy to pigeonhole them in our minds, reducing them to a handful of episodes in the mythological tradition and a list of their main functions—"the god of justice," "the goddess of fertility," "the patron of merchants," and so on. The deities of the ancient world can seem to be quaint characters, each equipped with a convenient set of symbols and stories. But the ancient gods were complex, colossal, fathomless figures, difficult to grasp and still more difficult to soothe. The power of the gods was everywhere, and even a far-famed priestess like Enheduana could not be sure of commanding their attention. No one exemplifies their fickle and violent nature better than Inana, as shown by the *Hymn's* list of contradictory qualities.

What makes a text like the *Hymn* even more confusing is that it has not reached us intact. Enheduana's poems are written in a script called cuneiform, which was most often incised on tablets made of clay. As I discuss in "Enheduana's World," below, the poems survived because they were copied out by ancient students learning the Sumerian language, providing us with plentiful but also fragmentary manuscripts, since dried clay is prone to breaking. So not only was the *Hymn* written long ago in a now-dead language, and not only does it allude to myths the ancient scribes knew well but which are obscure to modern readers, the text also comes to us in an incomplete state, with large breaks



that interrupt the already puzzling flow of the poem. This is a common conundrum facing readers of literature from the ancient Near East. The *Exaltation* is an exception to the rule that Sumerian and Babylonian poems are always full of holes. Those holes can be frustrating, but they can also be beautiful, for they infuse the text with a sense of mystery, forcing modern readers to guess at what missing lines might once have held. Further, new manuscripts of Sumerian poetry are constantly being discovered, filling these holes one by one. But as our knowledge of Sumerian language and literature grows, our understanding of the poems changes too. The field of Sumerology is still young and unsettled: fierce debates about key aspects of Sumerian grammar continue to rage. The translations given in this book are necessarily temporary. Within the next decade, the philological interpretation of Enheduana's poetry will probably change, because it is always changing, and updated translations will have to be produced. This is an exciting prospect. In her third life, Enheduana is still in the process of being born.

One example of a Sumerian word that is central to Enheduana's poems but is still poorly understood is me, traditionally pronounced with a long, open vowel, so as to rhyme with Spanish *que*.<sup>15</sup> (Note that Sumerian words are conventionally given in bold, while Akkadian words are given in italics.) It is a crucial component of the Sumerian worldview, but its exact meaning remains a source of doubt.<sup>16</sup> Since the instances of **me** (which is both singular and plural) often denote the influence of a god over the human world, I have consistently translated it as "power," allowing readers to track its repetition and varied use across the poems. I discuss the word at greater length in "The Honeyed Mouth," below, but a simplified way of explaining the **me** is that if a god was a god of something, that something was a **me**. Justice was a **me**, kingship was a **me**, war was a **me**, and so were the various professions practiced by the Sumerians—farming, carpentry, metal-

working, and so on. But the **me** also included victory and defeat, honesty and deception, comfort and strife, sex and labor, fire and its extinction. The **me** were the building blocks of civilization in both its positive and its negative aspects, and those blocks were controlled by the gods. In many texts, including the *Exaltation*, the **me** are depicted as physical objects that the gods could hold in their hands.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of the **me** to Enheduana's poetry is shown by the fact that the word appears in the first line of the *Exaltation*. The line also serves as its Sumerian title: this was standard practice in cuneiform cultures. Like an auto-named Word file today, compositions were known by their opening words, which are called the *incipit* of the text. The *Exaltation of Inana* and *The Hymn to Inana* are both modern names. In the ancient world, the *Hymn* was known as **innin ša gura**, "Queen of vast heart"; and the *Exaltation* as **nin me šara**, "Queen of all the me."<sup>18</sup> More often than not, the opening words of a cuneiform poem also give us a hint for how to read the text that follows, and the *Exaltation* is no exception. The phrase **nin me šara** spells out the gist of Enheduana's message. Inana is depicted not as one goddess among many but as the ruler of all the world's fundamental elements. To be the "Queen of all the **me**" was to hold the cosmos in one's palm. Crucially, this was not a universally accepted view of Inana.<sup>19</sup> Though she was of course a celebrated goddess in Sumerian culture, she was generally considered inferior to the main male deities of the pantheon: Enlil, An, and Ea. The *Exaltation* sets out to change this by making Inana supreme among gods, and this aim is emphatically announced in the first three words of the text.

The case of the **me** shows just how difficult it can be to translate even a single Sumerian word, let alone the fast-paced and fragmentary drift of the text as a whole. In my translation, I have taken a number of liberties to render the Sumerian diction in a way that makes the poems compelling to modern ears. That

does not mean that I want the poems to fit neatly into modern expectations—that would kill their strangeness and poetic force. I have done my best not to tame the text, but neither did I want to produce an exact word-for-word translation that might convey the sense of the lines but none of their magic. I wanted to do justice to the myriad verbal games that are found in the Sumerian originals, which teem with puns, wordplay, and double meanings. To take just one example, in the *Exaltation* we find a couplet that in a phonemic transcription and a literal translation would read:<sup>20</sup>

biluda galgala niĝzu aba munzu  
kur gulgul ude a baešum

Who can understand the great rites that are your possession?  
Destroyer of the enemy land, you give force to the storm.

(ll. 16–17)

This literal translation gives no hint of the elegant construction of the original. The word *galgala*, “great,” in the first line is echoed by *gulgul*, “destroyer,” in the second, just as the word *aba*, “who,” is echoed by the phrase *a baešum*, “you give force.” The first line repeats the syllable *zu* in two different meanings, “your” (in *niĝzu*, “your possession”) and “understand” (in *munzu*). Meanwhile, the second line contains an allusion to the myth of Inana’s destruction of Mount Ebih, since the word *kur*, “enemy,” can also mean “mountain.” Finally, the lines display a delicate patterning of vowels, which becomes particularly clear if they are split into half-verses. The sequence runs as follows: i-u-a-a-a-a / i-u-a-a-u-u // u-u-u / u-e-a-a-e-u, revealing both symmetries (i-u-a-a) and contrasts (u-e-a | a-e-u). In my translation, I have tried to re-create these sound games through alliteration: “Who can fathom the great duties that befall you? It is you who strike down the enemy, you who give the storm its strength.”

A major challenge of translating Sumerian poetry is the compactness of the lines. Consider again this couplet: it consists of ten words in Sumerian, but more than twice as many in both the literal and the free English translation. Lines that are short and succinct in Sumerian often become bulky in English, simply because the translator must unfurl at length what is rolled up in a few Sumerian syllables. I wanted to replicate this feeling of close-packed intensity, so I decided to deviate from the line breaks of the original, splitting the text into much shorter verses. At first I was afraid that these short lines would interrupt the flow of the text, but I found that they actually helped me read the hymn as a steady stream of words and images, which is how I experience it in Sumerian. However, when I turned to the *Temple Hymns*, I opted for a different strategy. There I wanted to make each hymn stand as a separate building, not a stream of words but a series of houses. For this text, it seemed more fitting to keep the line breaks where the ancient scribes had put them. For those who want to go beyond these translations and explore Enheduana’s world and poems in more depth, a number of excellent online tools are available.<sup>21</sup>

Special characters are used to represent Sumerian and Akkadian words. The letter *š* is pronounced like *sh* in *ship*, the letter *ĝ* like *ng* in *song*, though in Sumerian it can also stand at the beginning of a word, as in *ĝipar* (the home of the high priestesses). When transliterating cuneiform signs (as opposed to transcribing how those signs may have been pronounced, which is what I do above), subscript numbers are used to distinguish signs that have the same meaning: the sign *kur*, for example, means “mountain,” while *kur<sub>2</sub>* would mean “different.” The pronunciation of Sumerian is difficult to reconstruct, but some evidence indicates that stress was placed on the final syllable of a word: *ĝi-PAR*, Enhedua-NA.<sup>22</sup> Because cuneiform can be transcribed into Latin letters using different conventions, the name Enheduana is

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sometimes rendered Enheduanna, but the former is now more common. Likewise, Inana can also be spelled Inanna, and some scholars have recently argued that it should be spelled Innana.<sup>23</sup> These variations rest only on the technicalities of transcription; they do not indicate different figures.

It is my hope that by making Enheduana's poems available in English and by unpacking her history in the essays that follow the translations, I can help recall this fascinating figure to new life. Restoring Enheduana to her place at the beginning of literary history is important not least because of the light she would shed on later poetry. What would the history of Western literature look like if it began not with Homer and his war-hungry heroes but with a woman from ancient Iraq, who sang her hymns to the goddess of chaos and change?

## POEMS

## THE EXALTATION OF INANA

THE EXALTATION IS THE MOST CELEBRATED OF ENHEDUANA'S poems, and the most complex.<sup>1</sup> Its Sumerian title is *nin me šara*, literally "Queen of all the me"; it is also known as *Inana B*. The poem begins with a hymnic invocation of Inana, dwelling on her powers of destruction and the cruelty with which she crushes all who oppose her, including a mountain she invades and a city that rebels against her rule. About halfway through the hymn, the narrator reveals her own identity and explains her reason for invoking Inana. Enheduana says that she has served faithfully as high priestess to Nanna, the moon god, but now a rebel leader named Lugal-Ane has seized power, ousting Enheduana from the city and defiling the temple that Inana shares with An, lord of the heavens. The conflict between Enheduana and Lugal-Ane is depicted as a court case, with the gods as judges and the two humans as opposing claimants.<sup>2</sup> Enheduana interprets her own ambiguous situation—exiled but still alive—as proof that the case has not been resolved. "Still my case stays open," she says. "An evil verdict coils around me—is it mine?" (l. 117). It becomes clear that Enheduana has already tried praying to Nanna, but to no avail, and that this is why she now turns to Inana.

As I understand the story—and scholars disagree on how to interpret it—Enheduana confronts a triple challenge as she invokes Inana.<sup>3</sup> First she must convince Inana to rule in her favor, which is difficult enough in itself: the goddess's wrath is implacable. Enheduana fears that Inana has become angry with her, and prays desperately for the goddess to let go of her fury: "Will

your heart not have mercy on me?" (l. 138). Second, Enheduana must convince Inana to rule at all. As noted in the Introduction, the supreme status that Inana is given in these hymns was not a matter of course in the Sumerian world; as Enheduana herself says to Inana, "You were born to be a second-rate ruler" (l. 114). But once more, Enheduana engages in some clever interpretation. She claims that because Nanna has not resolved her ambiguous situation one way or the other, he has effectively passed the matter on to Inana, who can now step into her father's role as ruler among gods: "Nanna said nothing, so he has left it up to you. My queen! This has made you even greater, this has made you the greatest" (ll. 133-34). In other words, Nanna's silence leaves a vacuum of power for Inana to fill, and Enheduana urges the goddess to seize her chance.

Enheduana's third challenge is to make the other gods and the human population recognize Inana's might. Without that recognition, her verdict will be meaningless. Inana's power must be widely accepted for her words to carry weight.<sup>4</sup> This is why the poem combines an autobiographical section detailing Enheduana's plight with a hymnic section extolling Inana's might. The fate of the two women is wound together. Only if Inana's rulership is widely recognized will the goddess be able to judge Enheduana's case and restore her as high priestess. That is, the hymn must convince the audience of Inana's awe-inspiring power if Enheduana is to extricate herself from exile.

As Enheduana faces these challenges—swaying Inana's heart, convincing her to take Nanna's place, and elevating her in the eyes of the audience—words fail her: "My honey-mouth is full of froth, my soothing words are turned to dust" (ll. 72-73). Her eloquence disappears at the moment she needs it most. If Enheduana is to save herself, she needs to regain her command of language. In a sense, the *Exaltation* is a poem about itself, about whether Enheduana will succeed in elevating Inana, overcoming her loss

of eloquence, and so saving her own life. As noted by the philologist Louise Pryke, the first known story of a writer is also the first known story of a writer's block.<sup>5</sup>

The poem culminates with Enheduana inviting Inana to join her in a nighttime ritual, in which she composes a song to the goddess—that is, the text we have been reading. Having been at a literal loss for words, Enheduana at last succeeds in recapturing her poetic gift, as shown by the beauty of the poem itself. In a short epilogue, we are told that the hymn had the intended effect. Inana accepted Enheduana's prayer, she was exalted among the gods, and Nanna approved of her new powers. Tellingly, the final epilogue is told in the third person. It is as if Enheduana, who narrated the preceding events in her own voice, steps out of the text and hands it over to others. When she says that the poem was sung on the next day by a ritual lamenter, she is transformed from "I" to "her," from character to composer.