

Ancient Fanfiction: Enheduanna

By Celine Baumbach

“I guess I just don’t quite understand why you would write down your name in a poem like this” Nasaqu said, turning my clay tablet over in her hands as she thought. “I’ve never seen anyone do that before.”

“But why shouldn’t I do it? People would know it’s from me anyway, I might as well name myself.” I grabbed a date from the table, then lounged back on the divan.

Nasaqu’s criticism didn’t bother me, but I also didn’t quite understand why she thought this was a problem.

“I guess you have a point, Enheduanna.” She stopped spinning the tablet. “It just bothers me because this seems so personal. I get writing down temple hymns to distribute them across the empire, but this is very...intimate, I guess? I don’t know, it just feels like it should be something you recite to friends, in private, not something you engrave onto clay. Especially since you talk about yourself.”

I shrugged, not sure what to say. “Maybe I’ll start a new poetic trend. But I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being proud of my work, is there? So why shouldn’t I claim it as mine?”

Nasaqu didn’t reply to that, and for a while we just sat in silence, eating dates, drinking wine, and each lost in our own thoughts. There wasn’t much more to say. I had written the poem, and the words were etched into the clay, made permanent when I put it in the fire last night, not waiting to hear her — or anyone else’s — thoughts on the matter. I could break the tablet, pulverize what I’d written, but that would be an even bigger waste of resources than writing my own name in a poem had already been, according to Nasaqu.

I’d written a poem about myself, using my own name, and there was no going back from that now.

“Enheduanna?” Nasaqu asked quietly.

“Yes?”

“How long do you think these clay tablets will survive? How long until time renders them illegible and breaks them?”

I thought for a moment. How long indeed? I had no answer. “Forever,” I said. “Or maybe they won’t last a year after my death.”

“Forever would be kind of beautiful,” Nasaqu said.

I didn’t answer her. I couldn’t imagine people in a thousand, two thousand, maybe even more years, looking at my writing and understanding it, much less thinking it was important. There was something self-aggrandizing about putting my name in a poem, but even I didn’t think myself important enough to resist the forgetfulness of time. Yet Nasaqu was right: There was a kind of beauty in forever.

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Quotes:

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Context:

Enheduanna isn’t just the first female poet known to us, she is also the very first poet whose name we know in general. She was the daughter of Sargon the Great, who appointed her as the head priestess of the temple of Inanna in Ur, after he conquered all of Mesopotamia and created an empire more than four thousand years ago. Enheduanna’s job was to unite the empire through

religion, melding the different gods of the different peoples into one pantheon. She succeeded, not only altering the way people thought about the divine but also founding several literary traditions that prevailed throughout the ancient world.

Resources:

Article: <https://www.ancient.eu/Enheduanna/>

<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/who-was-the-world-s-first-author-soraya-field-fiorio>

<https://medium.com/med-daily/enheduanna-the-worlds-first-writer-68a70b29638f>

<https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/293415>