

H. L. J. VANSTIPHOUT: AN APPRECIATION

The scholarly work of H. L. J. Vanstiphout, known as Stip to his friends, reads as a persistent, stubborn meditation on one central theme: the importance of Mesopotamian literature as *literature*, that is as verbal art. The importance of this literature is paramount for any assessment of the thoughts, ideas, and ideologies of ancient Mesopotamians, and as a demonstration of their artistic and scholarly know-how. Moreover, Vanstiphout argues, this literature is our earliest, and is therefore of critical importance if we are to understand literature as such. In the nineties of the last century the Mesopotamian Literature Group met three times in Groningen, at the initiative of Vanstiphout and Dr. Marjan Vogelzang. These lively meetings and their proceedings established Groningen as the world center for the study of cuneiform literature.

Vanstiphout's contributions to the field of cuneiform literary studies may be classified under three closely related headings: structure, interdisciplinarity, and popularization. The emphasis on structure indicates a shift in attention from *what* the texts tell us—all too often understood as directly reflecting the ancient reality—to *how* they produce their message. Vanstiphout's studies of the literary disputes are excellent examples of this aspect of his scholarship, demonstrating that these texts exhibit a more or less fixed pattern, from (mythological) introduction, to verbal exchange, to verdict—a pattern that may be used and altered creatively to achieve special effects. Vanstiphout's consistent emphasis on structure further implies a shift in attention away from individual words and phrases towards an understanding of literary works, genres, and indeed the whole corpus of cuneiform literature as integrated, meaningful wholes. His various contributions to the problem of genre and the curricular background of Sumerian literature may be seen in this light.

The concept structure as employed by Vanstiphout has its roots in the Prague Linguistic Circle and in the related French structuralist movements of the last century. The introduction of such ideas, concepts, and research methods from other disciplines, including linguistics, literary theory, and mediaeval studies, is a remarkable constant in his work. An outstanding example is his “Un Carré d'Amour

sumérien,” a discussion of several Sumerian poems about love pursuits of the gods, in which he successfully applied concepts and analyses first introduced by the famous French medievalist E. Le Roy Ladurie. Co-operation with scholars from a variety of disciplines led to a number of meetings that resulted in edited volumes on *Dispute Poems*, *Aspects of Genre*, and *Cultural Repertoires*—all of them (co-)edited by Vanstiphout and inspired by the idea that interaction with non-cuneiformists enriches our knowledge and results in a whole that is more than the mere accumulation of its parts. The pursuit of interdisciplinary studies is never easy, since it requires extensive knowledge in an array of scholarly fields and sometimes invites skepticism, if not worse, from colleagues who are not willing to go beyond traditional notions of philology. But Vanstiphout has always based his literary analysis on solid philological foundations: he has authored or co-authored a number of primary text editions, and has always worked closely with original sources. Indeed, he is a frequent visitor to the Babylonian Section of the University Museum in Philadelphia, where he works on deciphering, identifying, and collating ancient tablets from the school rooms of Nippur.

Vanstiphout's intense interaction with scholars from various disciplines created the necessity and obligation to make the primary evidence available to the non-specialist. Over the last decade he has published four volumes of translations; three in Dutch and one in English, all of them provided with introductions that draw attention to the literary structure and qualities of the texts translated. True popularization eschews simplification, and thus the reader of Vanstiphout's Dutch translation of Sumerian heroic and mythological poems (the first such anthology in the language) is confronted with a long essay that discusses the essentials of the Sumerian writing system and language, the literary system of genres, verse and strophe, and various issues of Sumerian culture and religion. Much the same can be said about his rendition of Gilgamesh, which was greeted with much praise by the Dutch press.

The present book is a collection of studies in Sumerian literature in honor of Stip, who through his work as teacher, scholar, connoisseur, and editor transformed this field beyond recognition.

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