

## Samurai and Mythological Heroes: Rethinking *Gilgamesh's* Influence on the *Iliad*

In this paper, I will question certain assumptions made about Near Eastern influence on Archaic Greek poetry. In particular, I will take as a case study the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa's reception of Western and Classical literature and then use these conclusions to reanalyze the narrative complex surrounding Hector's slaying of Patroclus in the *Iliad*, which has been argued to betray influence both from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Greek epic tradition.

It is frequently the case that skeptical scholars argue against a Greek-Near Eastern parallel by pointing to the Greek passage's parallels with other passages in Greek literature, thereby establishing a "native" pedigree for the Greek author and challenging the importance of Near Eastern parallels for understanding Greek literature (most famously in Kelly 2008). But I would suggest that this strategy belies a false dichotomy, namely, that any given literary element in a Greek text must be either "natively Greek" or a borrowing from a foreign literature. Let us look first at Kurosawa to examine this assumption.

It is well recognized that Kurosawa was greatly influenced by the plays of Classical antiquity and Shakespeare (e.g., Watanabe 1985; Prince 1991; Cardullo 2008; Centeno Martin 2018). In particular, his *Seven Samurai* is partly modeled on Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*; *Ran* is partly modeled on Shakespeare's *King Lear*; and *Throne of Blood* is a very close retelling of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* set during the Shogunate in Japan. First of all, there is no hint in these movies that they draw from a foreign literary tradition. Second, Kurosawa blends foreign concepts with native Japanese concepts, e.g., Greek *heroes*/Japanese samurai (*Seven Samurai*). In other words, Kurosawa's reception of foreign elements does not announce explicitly the

borrowing but rather adapts foreign borrowings seamlessly into his art by blending them with “native” Japanese elements.

We can observe a similar phenomenon occurring in the *Iliad*. The most famous achievement of Neo-analysis has been the realization that Homer borrowed the complex surrounding the death of Patroclus and Achilles’ subsequent revenge on Hector from the *Aethiopis*, in which Memnon kills Antilochus and then Achilles kills Memnon in revenge (e.g., Kullmann 1960). But this sequence also betrays important parallels with the death of Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, most famously the nearly identical lion simile used to describe the grieving Achilles and Gilgamesh (e.g., West 1997; Haubold 2002/2003; Currie 2012; Clarke 2019). Indeed, thematically the *Iliad*’s sequence is closer to *Gilgamesh* since in both epics the complex deals with questions of the hero’s mortality and treats the friends’ deaths as surrogates for the respective hero – themes missing from extant treatments of Memnon. In other words, Homer has blended elements both from the native Greek epic tradition with material from Near Eastern literature, without explicitly announcing his indebtedness to any tradition. In conclusion, the comparison of Kurosawa’s reception of Classical and Western literature casts doubt on the validity of arguments that seek to impose an artificial divide between Greek and Near Eastern literatures.

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