

Achilles beside Gilgamesh

It is widely recognised that the epics of Homer are closely related to the earlier mythology and literature of the ancient Near East, above all the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. But how should this influence our response to the meaning and message of either poem? This book addresses this question through an experiment in intertextual reading. It begins by exploring *Gilgamesh* as a work of literature in its own right, and uses this interpretation as the springboard for a new reading of the Homeric epic, emphasising the movement within the poem – beginning from a world of heroic action and external violence, but shifting inwards to the thoughts and feelings of Achilles as he responds to the certainty that his own death will follow that of his best friend. The book will be of interest both to specialists and to those coming to ancient literature for the first time.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48178-6 — Achilles beside Gilgamesh
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Mortality and Wisdom in Early Epic Poetry

MICHAEL CLARKE

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025,
India
79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108481786
DOI: 10.1017/9781108667968

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Clarke, Michael (Michael J.), author.

Title: Achilles beside Gilgamesh : mortality and wisdom in early epic poetry / Michael Clarke.

Description: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2020. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019038343 (print) | LCCN 2019038344 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108481786 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108667968 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Homer. Iliad. | Achilles (Mythological character) – In literature. | Gilgamesh (Legendary character) – In literature. | Gilgamesh.

Classification: LCC PA4037 .C494 2020 (print) | LCC PA4037 (ebook) | DDC 883/.01–dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038343>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019038344>

ISBN 978-1-108-48178-6 Hardback

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Fig. 1 Westmacott's statue of Achilles (1822).

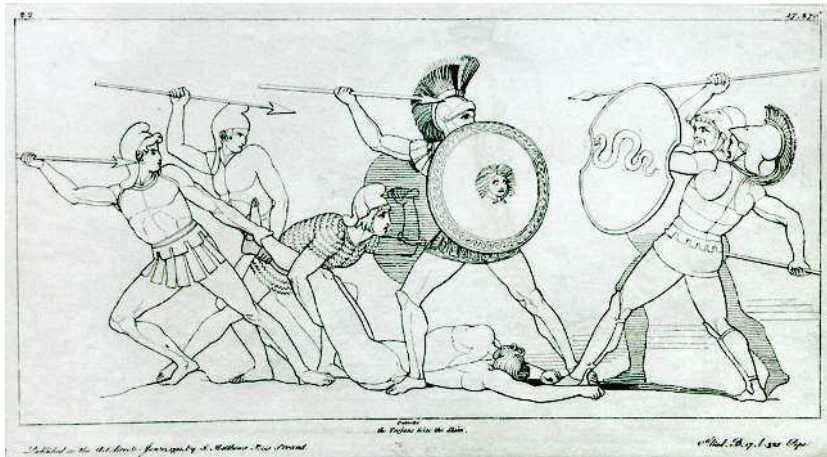


Fig. 2 Illustration after Flaxman to Pope's *Iliad* (1793).

Preface

Westmacott's statue in London's Hyde Park (Fig. 1) still catches the eye: Achilles naked with sword and shield, depicted with a severe simplicity that recalls Flaxman's illustrations to Pope's translation of the *Iliad* (Fig. 2). The statue, cast from the metal of captured enemy cannon, was set up by public subscription in 1822 to honour the Duke of Wellington's victories over Napoleon.¹ To choose Achilles to commemorate a commander who defeated a foreign tyrant might seem conventional, even obvious: such is the strength of the assumption, both today and two centuries ago, that the central figure of the *Iliad* is essentially praiseworthy, a symbol of patriotic courage. I believe that by taking this perspective for granted we are liable to distort and stultify our response to the *Iliad* as a work of art in its own right. This book springs from the belief that the fundamental business of the poem is less to celebrate heroic ideals than to probe the darkness in the thoughts and values of warlike men.

Despite all the learning and insight that have been applied to the study of the *Iliad* in our time, and despite the growing realisation that it should be approached as a thematically unified discourse rather than a coalescence of diffuse elements,² it is still difficult to grapple in clear words with the problem of its meaning – difficult, in a word, to say what it is *about*. Of course that phrase sounds clumsy, but the question remains insistent. It is no accident that the most powerful modern response to the *Iliad* in negative, even anti-heroic, terms is not an academic reading but a philosophical essay: Simone Weil's brilliant *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*, written in a land waiting in the shadow of the most destructive war of our age.³ A first sign of the difficulty is in the necessary choice of vocabulary: many of the likely key words – *warrior*, *glory*, *valour*, *hero*, *fame*, even *epic* – are hardly ever heard today in non-academic English except when talking about matters of fantasy and imagination. But this uneasiness points to a deeper problem: the problem of estrangement, the feeling that the vision and values of this poetry may be so distant as to be unknowable.

¹ See Busco 1988. ² On the history of these opposing approaches see Kim 2000: 1–8.

³ Weil 2005 [1945].

It has become increasingly widely accepted that the literatures preserved in cuneiform tablets from the ancient Near East, particularly Mesopotamia – roughly modern Iraq, but generally known in the scholarship by the Greek name used by travellers and politicians up to the early twentieth century⁴ – have the potential to revolutionise our understanding of early Greek literature and thought. Over the past twenty years or so, a series of increasingly closely nuanced studies have brought this from the level of a polemical assertion to a relatively uncontroversial fact about cultural history. In this book I will focus on one extraordinarily close experience of confluence between Greek and Mesopotamian literature, aligning the story of Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* with that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. I believe that the relationship here is so close that it has the power to launch an overall interpretation of the *Iliad* – provided that we begin by appreciating *Gilgamesh* as an integral unity, not just a source of individual elements to be cherry-picked and listed piecemeal as parallels for elements in the Homeric poem. The plan of this book, accordingly, is to *begin* with a careful reading of the Mesopotamian epic on its own terms. If this helps us to renew or adjust our perspectives – above all, if it helps us to ask more clearly why Achilles, the ‘best of the Achaeans’, brings such destruction on his own people – then it will have been worthwhile, whether or not every suggestion made in this book turns out to be sustainable.

Although I hope that aspects of this book will interest specialist scholars, it is addressed primarily to the reader who wants to engage with the ancient epics, perhaps for the first time, as documents in the history of ideas. I have treated the plots of both *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* mostly in sequential order, so as to make it possible to dip in and out of the book when working through the primary texts, and I have included as Chapter 5 an ‘Interlude’ on literary origins which can safely be skipped by anyone already familiar with Homeric studies. Because this is emphatically not a stand-alone text-book – there are many excellent guides to ancient epic already⁵ – I have included plenty of speculation in my responses to the often puzzling and ambiguous evidence. I differ from many Homeric specialists in that I do not find it useful to appeal to theories about ‘oral poetry’, while I believe

⁴ The prevalence of the name ‘Mesopotamia’ in academic writing goes back at least as far as the late eighteenth century, when it was customary to refer to the constituent provinces of the then Ottoman Empire by the names of the corresponding Roman provinces. On early encounters with Mesopotamian studies in this period, see Lloyd 1980.

⁵ Among recent publications, perhaps the most useful are Powell 2003, Burgess 2014, and Graziosi 2016, all of which have the virtue of expressing a synthesis of opinions rather than pushing for the positions adopted by their authors in more specialist publications. The articles in Finkelberg 2011 are also useful.

wholeheartedly in the value of interpreting themes and allusions in the light of Greek evidence from beyond the Homeric corpus. My approach is much influenced by the Neoanalyst school of Homeric scholarship, which seeks to read the surviving epics against the background of the wider tradition that must have preceded them, reconstructed mostly from our partial knowledge of the other poems of the so-called Epic Cycle (for definitions see Chapter 5). Less conventionally, I sometimes draw in side-evidence from sources in different literary genres: occasionally lyric poetry, including the quasi-epic narrative poetry of Stesichorus,⁶ but more often Attic tragedy and responses to the epic inheritance by Plato and other intellectuals. Although these authors are separated from Homer by deep gulfs of time and ideas, they often provide signposts towards historically meaningful readings. In the same spirit I often put the textual evidence alongside the iconography of painted pottery, finding such comparisons more helpful than unguided speculation based on the literary evidence alone.

All Greek sources are quoted in my own translations. These may seem idiosyncratic – for example, I often try to follow the syntax and word-order of the original more closely than is usual, and I use circumlocutions for words that have no equivalents in English⁷ – but I have tried never to impose a translation tilted artificially towards the conclusion that I am trying to draw. Where there is doubt over the appropriate translation of a word that bears on the argument, I often discuss it in a footnote designed (where possible) to be useful even to the reader with little or no Greek. In view of the range and excellence of the resources that have become available for Homeric studies,⁸ it seemed unnecessary to swell the footnotes

⁶ Stesichorus may be the earliest known poet to respond to the poetic detail of Homeric epic rather than merely the outlines of plot: see discussion by Kelly 2015b.

⁷ A special difficulty attends the group of Homeric nouns that refer to the locus of mental and emotional life in the innards, principally *thumos* and *phrenes*. I have usually rendered words in this group as ‘thought’, ‘breath of thought’, or the like, rather than the conventional ‘heart’. In a previous publication (Clarke 1999, esp. ch. 4; cf. Cairns 2003b, 2014), I tried to make sense of these words in terms of metaphor and metonymy, emphasising that the fundamental process referred to is the flow of breath and bodily fluids in the organs of the upper body. In the present book, the issue of metaphorical versus literal interpretation is seldom directly relevant. More importantly, it seems to me essential to avoid the conventional translation ‘heart’ for *thumos* and related words, not only because the heart is the wrong bodily organ but also because it implies an orientation towards emotional as opposed to rational cognitive activity, and this distinction is foreign to the usage of the Greek terms in question.

⁸ By combining the now complete *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos (LfgrE)* with the resources of the Cambridge commentaries on the *Iliad* and the Oxford commentaries on the *Odyssey*, supplemented by the many excellent commentaries on individual Books that have appeared since those sets were published in the early 1990s, and more recently in the Basel

with lists of parallel passages or long treatments of the secondary scholarship, except on issues where doubt and disagreement remain extreme. However, more detailed guidance seems necessary for ancient sources that survive in fragmentary form and are relatively inaccessible, especially the poems of the Epic Cycle, for which my notes are more copious.

So much for Greek. In the case of the Near Eastern literatures, I am largely dependent on translations, having only a halting knowledge of Akkadian and less Sumerian or Hittite. Perhaps I should not have tried to write this book at all without first learning all three languages thoroughly, but I felt that there were two reasons to regard this as a counsel of perfection and no more. First, the texts and story-patterns of cuneiform culture were so widely disseminated and translated that a possible chain of influence from *Gilgamesh* onto early Greek thought and creativity may well have come by way of a translation out of the Akkadian original into another language – but it is not clear which language was involved, nor is it likely (in my view) that the surviving *Gilgamesh* texts from the Hittite world were the key intermediaries.⁹ Second, and more important, amateurs like myself now have the means to appreciate the texts and their interpretative problems on a far more fine-grained level than was possible even twenty years ago. For Sumerian, a decisive move towards accessibility has been provided by the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL) project, with the accompanying handbook by Jeremy Black and others, *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (2004), which is the source of most of the Sumerian material discussed in the early chapters of this book. For Akkadian, Foster's *Before the Muses* (3rd edn., 2005) provides trustworthy translations of a vast range of texts, some formerly inaccessible. Above all, the opportunity to engage with the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been opened up dramatically by the work of Andrew George. The magisterial presentation in his edition of 2003, and subsequent articles with material from new manuscripts, make it possible to read the diverse tradition of this epic on a level that was impossible in the past. As with the Greek Epic Cycle, the

Gesamtkommentar series, it is now easy to locate an up-to-date summary account of virtually every detailed question of Homeric interpretation.

⁹ In particular, this means that the argument will have little in common with that advanced in Bachvarova 2016. I conclude (for summary, see the final chapter) by proposing that the version of *Gilgamesh* whose immediate influence is discernible in the *Iliad* corresponds to the Standard Babylonian Version in its twelve-tablet 'edition'. This means that the Greek reception must be placed towards the later part of the second millennium BCE at the earliest – considerably later than the period of the Hittite and Hurrian *Gilgamesh* texts examined by Bachvarova, and along quite different routes of contact. It is of course quite possible that there is truth in both arguments.

fragmentary and often doubtful state of *Gilgamesh* has led me to annotate my discussions fairly densely, drawing largely on George's commentaries. I hope any specialists in Mesopotamian studies who read this book will be forgiving of my attempts to understand something of their discipline, its extraordinary achievements and its continuing controversies.

Parts of this book draw loosely on material I have published previously, especially in an early article on lion-similes (Clarke 1995), an essay on Homeric ideas of manhood (Clarke 2004), and here and there in *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer* (1999). The first half of the Introduction is largely based on a Corbett Memorial Lecture that I delivered at the Cambridge Classical Faculty some ten years ago but left unfinished at the time. The main argument of the book, however, is a new venture, and came of teaching Homer in Greek and in translation at several universities in England and Ireland while simultaneously engaged in more austere projects on the medieval development of the Trojan War legend. I am particularly grateful to students in Maynooth and Galway who have had the spirit and determination to engage with the themes of the *Iliad* and *Gilgamesh* alongside those of the Old English *Beowulf* and the Old and Middle Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. With their help I have learnt that 'heroic poetry' as a universal category is often an illusion, and I have come to appreciate more fully the unique thematic configurations between *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*.

For images of painted vases and other artefacts I am grateful to the museums referenced in the Figures, and also to Jonathan Burgess, Mario Iozzo, Thomas F. Carpenter and Alan Shapiro for help with sourcing elusive images. At NUI Galway I owe thanks to the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures for teaching relief at the crucial stage of preparation, to Edward Herring for helping me to assess painted pottery, and to other colleagues and graduate students for their encouragement and insights, especially Grace Attwood, Jacopo Bisagni, Sarah Corrigan, Ioannis Doukas, Charles Doyle, Micheál Geoghegan, Ann Hurley, Aidan Kane, Peter Kelly, Enrico Dal Lago, Pádraic Moran, Elena Nordio, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Jason O'Rorke, Mark Stansbury, Mary Sweeney, and Nick Tosh.

Long ago when I first studied ancient poetry I had the kindest of guides in John Dillon, Jasper Griffin, Stephanie Dalley, and the late Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, and to them I will always be grateful. I have also gained much from discussions with Jacqueline Borsje, Douglas Cairns, Ashley Clements, Michael Crudden, Bruno Currie, Mikael Males, Brent Miles, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, Ralph O'Connor, Michael Silk, and Chris Stray.

Bruno Currie in particular read the entire book in draft and made many expert contributions and corrections, while Chris Stray gave me great editorial help as well as personal encouragement. Cambridge University Press's anonymous readers offered invaluable guidance and criticism; Michael Sharp encouraged me to persist with the project, and Nigel Hope provided expert copy-editing. I am of course responsible for all the many errors that remain.

Most important of all, I owe great thanks to my wife Niamh and to our boys Seán, Cormac and Brian: all four of them unfailing in their support, understanding and sense of humour.

Galway, 1 February 2019

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Abbreviations

Aesch. fr.	A. H. Sommerstein (ed.), Aeschylus, <i>Fragments</i> (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 2008)
ANET	J. Pritchard (ed.), <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , 3rd edn. (Princeton, 1969)
Apollodorus, <i>Library and Epitome</i>	J. Frazer (ed.), Apollodorus, <i>The Library</i> , 2 vols. (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 1921)
<i>Atrahasis OBV</i>	The Old Babylonian Version of <i>Atrahasis</i> , cited from Foster, <i>BTM</i> , pp. 227–80
<i>BTM</i>	B. R. Foster, <i>Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature</i> , 3rd edn. (Bethesda, MD, 2005)
CAD	A. L. Oppenheim et al., <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> (Chicago, 1956–), available at www.oi.uchicago.edu/research/publications/assyrian-dictionary-oriental-institute-university-chicago-cad
CEG	P. A. Hansen, <i>Carmina Epigraphica Graeca Saeculorum VIII–V a. Chr. n.</i> (Berlin, 1983)
CTH	S. Košak and G. G. W. Müller (eds.), <i>Corpus des textes hittites/Catalog der Texte der Hethiter</i> , available at www.hethport.uni-wuerzburg.de/CTH/
ETCSL	<i>Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature</i> , available at www.etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/
Eur. fr.	C. Collard and M. Cropp (eds.), Euripides, <i>Fragments</i> , 2 vols. (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 2008)
GEF	M. L. West, <i>Greek Epic Fragments</i> (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 2003)
GEP	D. E. Gerber, <i>Greek Elegiac Poetry</i> (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 1999)
GIP	D. E. Gerber, <i>Greek Iambic Poetry</i> (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 1999)
GL	D. L. Campbell, <i>Greek Lyric</i> , 5 vols. (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 1982–92)
Hes. Cat. fr. Most	<i>Catalogue of Women</i> in G. Most (ed.), Hesiod, <i>Works</i> , vol. 2: <i>The Shield, Catalogue of Women, Other Fragments</i> (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 2007)

Hes.Cat. fr. M–W	<i>Catalogue of Women</i> in Hesiod, <i>Fragmenta Selecta</i> , edited by R. Merkelbach and M. L. West in F. Solmsen (ed.), <i>Hesiodi Theogonia Opera et Dies Scutum</i> , 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1990)
Hes.WD	
Hes. Th.	Hesiod, <i>Works and Days</i> and <i>Theogony</i> , in in G. Most (ed.), <i>Hesiod, Works</i> Vol. 1 (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 2006)
HHAL	M. L. West, <i>Homeric Hymns, Apocrypha, Lives of Homer</i> (Loeb Classical Library) (Cambridge, MA, 2003)
IEG2	M. L. West, <i>Iambi et Elegi Graeci</i> , 2 vols., 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1989–92)
Il.	Homer, <i>Iliad</i> , as edited by M. L. West, <i>Homerus: Ilias</i> , 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1998–2000)
LfgrE	B. Snell et al. (eds.), <i>Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos</i> (Göttingen, 1955–2010)
LIMC	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> (Zurich and Munich, 1981–2009)
LOAS	J. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Robson and G. Zólyomi, <i>The Literature of Ancient Sumer</i> (Oxford, 2004)
MB Boğ 1, Boğ 2, Boğ 3	Gilgamesh tablets in Akkadian from Hittite sites, edited by George (2003), 1.306–25
MB Ug 1	Middle Babylonian tablet of the opening of the Gilgamesh epic, from Ugarit, as edited and translated by George (2007a)
MFM	S. Dalley, <i>Myths from Mesopotamia</i> (Oxford, 1991)
Od.	Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , as edited by H. Van Thiel, <i>Homeri Odyssea</i> (Hildesheim, 1991)
OB II	The Pennsylvania tablet of the Old Babylonian <i>Gilgamesh</i> , as edited and translated by George (2003), 1.166–92
OB III	The Yale tablet of the Old Babylonian <i>Gilgamesh</i> , as edited and translated by George (2003), 1.192–216
OB IM	The Baghdad tablet of the Old Babylonian <i>Gilgamesh</i> , as edited and translated by George (2003), 1.267–71
OB Ischali	The Ischali tablet of the Old Babylonian <i>Gilgamesh</i> , as edited and translated by George (2003), 1.260–6
OB VA+BM	The tablet ‘reportedly from Sippar’ of the Old Babylonian <i>Gilgamesh</i> , as edited and translated by George (2003), 1.272–286
SBV	The Standard Babylonian Version of the <i>Epic of Gilgamesh</i> , ed. and tr. George (2003), 1.531–740

Sources for primary texts

Near Eastern names

Proper names have been standardised, and spellings have been simplified where appropriate with the removal of diacritical marks. Sumerian divine names are used in Chapter 2; their Babylonian equivalents are used elsewhere, with indications of the Sumerian equivalents wherever these seemed useful for clarity.

Gilgamesh texts in Sumerian

These are cited from George's Penguin translation (George 1999: 141–207) except for *Gilgamesh and Huwawa Version A*, which is cited from *LOAS* (pp. 343–52). Significant variations in the translations in the ETCSL database and in the editions by Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi are noted where they arise. For simplicity's sake, the Sumerian form 'Bilgames', used by George, has been replaced by the conventional 'Gilgamesh' throughout.

Gilgamesh texts in Hittite

These are cited from the translation by Gary Beckman in Foster (2001), 157–68, pending the appearance of Beckman's full edition of *The Hittite Gilgamesh*, whose publication was forthcoming at the time this book was finalised.

The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh

The Old and Middle Babylonian fragments, and the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, are cited from George's standard edition (2003). The discussion of the Standard Babylonian Version is supplemented where noted by the parallels to Tablet I in the Middle Babylonian text from the Ugarit manuscript *MB Ug 1* (George 2007a) and the new evidence for Tablet V in the Suleimaniyah manuscript (Al-Rawi and George 2014).

I reproduce George's editorial conventions, by which square brackets indicate reconstructed text, italics indicate conjecture, and round brackets indicate an explanatory supplement. In a few instances, for reasons footnoted in each case, I opt instead for the wording of George's Penguin translation, which admits more generous supplements where there are gaps in the transmission. (Note that in some cases the line numbering differs slightly between the two editions.) Occasionally I refer to George's score transliterations, which represent the various manuscript readings in full (www.soas.ac.uk/gilgamesh/standard/). Despite its very different aims and methodologies, Parpola's teaching edition of the Standard Babylonian Version (Parpola 1997) has been extremely useful for cross-checking and comparison.

Atrahasis

This work is cited except where otherwise stated from the translation by Foster, *BTM* 227–80, using the Old Babylonian Version wherever possible.

Other Mesopotamian texts

Sumerian literature is most often cited from Black et al., *The Literature of Ancient Sumer* (LOAS) and the associated ETCSL database, and literature in Akkadian from Foster's *Before the Muses* (*BTM*). Where indicated, I have also made use of other works such as Vanstiphout's *Epics of Sumerian Kings* and Westenholz's *Legends of the Kings of Akkade*. For wisdom literature I have drawn on Cohen's *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age* and Alster's *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer*, as well as Lambert's foundational *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*. For later texts I have made occasional use of volumes in the State Archives of Assyria series, especially Parpola's *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* and Livingstone's *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea*. Material from these volumes is available online at www.oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/corpus.

Hittite texts

Hittite texts are cited wherever possible from Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, and the collections of letters edited by Hoffner, *Letters from the Hittite*

Kingdom, and Beckman et al., *The Ahhiyawa Letters*. For the ritual texts discussed in Chapter 11, I follow the standard *CTH* numbering.

Greek

All translations from Greek are my own. Proper names are given in the forms most likely to be familiar to non-specialist readers whose first language is English.

Homer

My translations follow the texts as edited by West for the *Iliad* and Homeric Hymns (the latter in the Loeb volume *HHAL*), and Van Thiel for the *Odyssey*, as in the list above. I have made constant use of the Cambridge commentaries on the *Iliad* and the Oxford commentaries on the *Odyssey*, and of the other commentaries and editions as listed in the Bibliography.

Hesiod

For *Theogony* and *Works and Days* my references follow Most's Loeb edition except where otherwise stated; I have drawn constantly on the commentaries by West (1966, 1978). For the fragments of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, references are to Most but the numbering followed by Merkelbach and West in the standard Oxford Classical Texts edition of 1990 ('M-W') is also given wherever it differs.

The Epic Cycle

Passages and testimonia are cited wherever possible from West's Loeb volume of *Greek Epic Fragments*, and where this is impossible from West's *The Epic Cycle*.

Apollodorus

I follow the chapter-numbering system of the Loeb edition by Frazer (1921). This work, although old-fashioned, is reliable and also includes

invaluable cross-references to other ancient and early medieval sources: a copy of the translation is available online at www.theoi.com.

Other Greek literature

For authors and texts whose numbering systems are not universally standardised – notably lyric poetry – I have usually preferred the Loeb edition where a reliable modern edition exists in this series. In a few cases where this practice fails – as, for example, with verse inscriptions and recently published papyri – I have used the standard numeration from the scholarly editions as indicated in each case.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48178-6 — Achilles beside Gilgamesh
Michael Clarke
Frontmatter
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