He Who Saw the Stars: Retelling Gilgamesh in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*

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This chapter examines one seemingly small example of Mesopotamian penetration into popular culture: an appearance of the Gilgamesh mythos in one episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (hereafter, and in accordance with fan terminology, *TNG*), retold by Captain Jean-Luc Picard in a pivotal moment of his encounter with an alien other. Although the retelling, in actor Patrick Stewart's ringing theatrical voice, takes only a few minutes, it fundamentally transforms how the episode, the particularly popular and well-regarded 'Darmok' (1991), and arguably the wider Star Trek (hereafter ST) universe, should be read. In a larger sense, it is also incredibly revealing of how Gilgamesh myths have been received and creatively reused in modern popular cultures, in this case as part of a 'world literature' inheritance in which it is both strange and familiar.

 'Darmok' tells the story of an encounter by the U.S.S. Enterprise with an alien race which communicates only in metaphor, through allusions to foundational myths of their own culture, each generating complex meanings undecipherable to those unfamiliar with their cultural touchstones. It is, then, a story of coming to an alien encounter as we all come to the ancient past. As will be explored in greater detail below, the episode finds the hero Picard trapped on a desolate planet through the machinations of this incomprehensible yet, it soon becomes clear, not hostile, Other. To understand and ultimately befriend the alien counterpart with whom he is stranded, to escape the planet, and finally to produce a productive and peaceful 'first contact', Picard must reach into Earth's collective memory for a foundational myth of its own: the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The retelling of Gilgamesh here is part of the episode's wider engagement with the

question of reception and retelling of ancient and unfamiliar myths, the means by which they are deciphered, and the purposes for which they are reused—topics that I want to explore here.

This chapter examines that episode in detail and conducts from it a case study in how reception of the ancient Near East has been used to generate new meanings in the modern day. This necessarily involves a free-handed engagement with the ancient Gilgamesh—although Gilgamesh has himself always been a composite of so many different retellings across media that there is no violation of one canonical myth involved in this approach.[1] I would like to understand Picard's retelling of Gilgamesh as part of the ongoing life of the character, and to think about how such a flexibility has always been part of the mythic figures Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

In this study, I take a cue from Sarah Iles Johnston's recent work on narrative in the Greek 'mythic story world' (2015a; 2015b; 2017). Johnston has employed theories of narrative and reader interaction to understand how ancient myths helped to create and sustain belief. Some of the key characteristics of mythic narratives that she argues achieve this are: plurimediality, appearance in multiple media[2] (Johnston 2015a: 206–10, 2017: 151–4); and seriality, the ongoing, usually episodic and often interconnected nature of individual events and narratives within the story-world (2015a: 201–6, 2017: 148–50, 2015b: 297–8). These features encourage audience engagement and the development of 'parasocial' relationships with the mythic figures (2015a: 196–201; 2017: 144–8). These are 'one-sided' relationships of one figure to another who knows nothing of them or does

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[1] For a wide overview of Gilgamesh in pop-culture, particularly film, with a brief discussion of ST as well, see Turri in this volume.

[2] This certainly applies to both Gilgamesh and ST. Plurimediality for Gilgamesh: oral and written literature of various types as well as worked objects of various types. For ST: cinematic, televisual, written and graphic media, and various types of worked objects.

not return their thoughts or imagined interactions. Though initially identified in terms of those with unhealthy delusions about such relationships, it was soon recognised that these are normal ways of relating to others (celebrities, politicians, or admired but distant crushes), and more recently that people form equally intense parasocial relationships with fictional characters as with real people, with cognitive processes that function in similar ways (Giles 2010). Such a concept helps us to understand the 'reality' of mythic characters like Gilgamesh and Enkidu for ancient Mesopotamians as something we recognise and experience ourselves. Certainly anyone with even a passing familiarity with the ST fanbase will know that intense parasocial relationships with the fictional characters of the ST franchise are a defining feature of 'Trekkie' fan culture.[3] Johnston's work offers a fruitful paradigm for thinking about why and how we might study the myths and literature of the ancient world in comparison to and in relation with contemporary texts. The concept of a 'story world' as she elaborates it (2015b: 285–8; drawing on ideas first formulated by Tolkien 1947), is highly relevant both to Gilgamesh myths and to ST.

The Gilgamesh myth has a long and varied history, with the earliest, disconnected and episodic Sumerian 'Bilgamesh' stories likely originating in the late third millennium (George 2003: 7–17). The version discussed in 'Darmok' is a modified form of the Standard Babylonian version, likely canonised in the late second millennium BCE (George 2003: 28–33). Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the monsters they fought were also figures who individuals interacted with as statues, as engravings, on seals, or suddenly encountered in the entrails of animals, and presumably as

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[3] As Johnston (2015a: 196–8) makes clear however, not only mega-fans will recognise the experience of forming such parasocial relationships. In other words, it doesn't take a full Starfleet uniform and excellent spoken Klingon to qualify: anyone who has ever speculated on what a fictional character might do in a particular situation, felt sad about their deaths, or worried for their (fictional) wellbeing can understand this emotional phenomenon.

figures with whom one might have had a very close parasocial relationship, whose stories informed numerous aspects of daily life (George 2003: 91–148; Graff 2013; Lambert 1987; Howard-Carter 1983: 69–71; Steymans 2010). During the reign of Shulgi, at the very beginning of known Bilgamesh/Gilgamesh narratives (Michalowski 2008: 36–37), as at the late Neo-Assyrian court, the Gilgamesh myths were embedded in discourses about royal power and knowledge, with parallels to discrete elements of the mythology discernible in royal narratives, particularly during the reign of Ashurbanipal (Collins 2016: 48–50; Bonatz 2004: 100). The interaction with characters as meaningful exemplars of certain ideals, whose stories can be understood in various ways and used as parallels that operate on multiple levels is not something that 'Darmok' brings to Gilgamesh for the first time, but rather an element of the relationship the mythos has had with its receivers for as long as it has existed.[4] Thus, while it could be said that Picard's retelling of the Gilgamesh-Enkidu story is 'incorrect' (as will be seen, it conflates or erases elements of the Mesopotamian stories), this designation is not meaningful and would not have been meaningful in ancient contexts.

The ST universe is often spoken of in terms of 'mythology' as well. This term is used by fans for the story and world-building of all narrative worlds, mostly applied to 'genre' fiction. In this case, it is a particularly useful term for the franchise given the many narrative and contextual properties it shares with myth-worlds. The original *Star Trek* was created by Gene Roddenberry and first broadcast between 1966–1969. After its premature cancellation the franchise lived on, in novels, in an animated series, and in fans' imaginations. Eventually six feature films with the original cast would be produced. *TNG*, first aired in 1987 under the guidance of the aging

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[4] For a compelling argument for how this interaction and interpretation worked, and how different ancient understandings of the Gilgamesh mythology could be to modern scholarly studies, see Ataç 2010.

Roddenberry and ending in 1994 (after a series of other executive producers), represented the first revival of the series as a live-action television serial, with a new cast and an updated U.S.S. Enterprise, set some hundred years after the original television adventures. This would be followed by four further television series (one airing now), as well as a series of four films with the *TNG* cast, prequel films with new actors portraying the original series' cast, and numerous other licensed and unlicensed appearances of ST characters and settings in written, visual, and other media, and in fans' imaginations (in fanfiction as well as non-narrative discussion and private reflection). Like the story world of ancient myth, ST is the creation of numerous and varied 'authors' (and the power of ST fans and actors, often themselves fans of a previous generation of the franchise, to shape the direction and meaning of the ST universe cannot be underestimated). The consumer of the ST mythic story world situates any individual story within this serial world, aware of wider narrative arcs and wider messages and values.

These summaries should make clear why Johnston's definitions of certain narrative qualities are relevant. Johnston's work suggests the devices by which ancient myths themselves work as meaningful narratives, generating continued engagement from their 'receivers'. For contemporary story worlds that are similar to mythic story worlds (i.e. hyperserial and plurimedial, as ST is), these observations are particularly useful. Johnston's work can also suggest a way of looking at modern interactions with myths not as existing on the other side of one bright line between ancient and modern, but as part of the ongoing life of mythic narratives. The 'reception' of Gilgamesh has been an ongoing and formative part of the mythos for over four thousand years. It is a legitimate endeavour to think about the use of Gilgamesh in ST because this is inherently part of that mythic figure's life, as a character with whom new audiences can develop their own parasocial relationships (just as was done in an ancient context by Neo-Assyrian kings or by

anyone who interacted with a Humbaba plaque or rolled a cylinder seal with scenes of this combat).[5]

In the case of 'Darmok', all these themes are being explored at a meta level, since it is itself a story in which the Gilgamesh story is told (explicitly, as an ancient myth). Thus it explores some of the very themes that Johnston considers. 'Darmok' is itself about the cognitive and cultural reception of ancient myths, and the processes by which their meanings can be productive—of dialogue, of friendship, of diplomacy, of life-saving action.

I do not then seek to examine how Gilgamesh can be reinterpreted in light of ST, nor how ST can be better analysed through an understanding of Gilgamesh. Rather, I look at how 'Darmok' serves as a commentary on the process and possibilities of reception itself. In particular, I consider why it uses Gilgamesh in this way and what meanings the myth is understood by ST to convey. I examine how intertextual engagement with Gilgamesh and Enkidu's encounter, reframed here as a 'first contact' narrative, allows readings of 'Darmok' which complicate who is contacting whom (through who is being read as Gilgamesh and who Enkidu). I look finally at how 'Darmok' specifically, and the Star Trek universe world more widely (especially *TNG*) conceptualise cultural reception as a means of keeping peace and assimilating the alien other (of the 'Earth past' or the future galaxy) to the self.

1. Past literature

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[5] I also take cues from recent work in biblical studies to read the Bible 'as science fiction', considering it to share certain thematic and conceptual qualities such that this reading can illuminate new aspects of the oft-studied text (Uhlenbruch 2017).

Two recent notable books solely devoted to the topic of Gilgamesh's reception history have emerged from outside the field of Assyriology. *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic* by Theodore Ziolkowski (2011), who comes from the perspective of comparative literature studies and German studies, looks at the history of the reception of Gilgamesh in the academic and non-academic realm, examining its treatment in literature, drama, and art. *Discovering Gilgamesh: Geology, Narrative, and the Historical Sublime in Victorian Culture* by Vybarr Cregan-Reid (2013), examines the rediscovery of the Epic from the perspective of Victorian literature, psycho-geography and environmental studies. Ziolkowski does briefly mention the appearance of the Gilgamesh and Enkidu story in *TNG* (2011: 110–1), but does not elaborate on it in any way. Some of Cregan-Reid's observations on the discovery of the epic in relationship to historical 'deep time' are relevant in the context of Gilgamesh's deployment in 'Darmok', at the very least in illuminating how Gilgamesh has long been understood as speaking to deep antiquity, and to human links with a past more distant than other any other accepted literary pasts.

There is a relatively large body of academic literature on ST, although the nature and value of this literature has been critiqued, for instance as 'naive and fannish' (Csicsery and Ronay 2005: 503, favourably reviewing Shapiro 2004, which similarly argues against the value of previous ST scholarship). 'Darmok' specifically has been discussed in several academic contexts, usually with regards to its treatment of language, decipherment, and otherness. Of these academic treatments, some emphasise the role of Gilgamesh in the episode (notably Dimock 2013: 624–31), while others downplay or do not even mention it (Mailloux 2000; Davis 2005; McGurl 2013). This is somewhat surprising, given the central importance that Picard's retelling of Gilgamesh plays in illuminating the episode's meaning.

No academic articles looking at the question of language, rhetoric, and communication have acknowledged the *generic* importance of the central plot. In depicting a failure of the 'universal translator' to meaningfully render alien speech, the episode engages with a question that it knows its fans, and science fiction fans in many contexts, are interested in (e.g. 'Translator Microbes' 2017; 'Mission Log Podcast' 2016). Thus it must be understood that the episode's engagement with communication is taking place in a context of generic meta-examination of a valuable but controversial, often parodied, science fiction genre convention. In order to ensure that the ST universe is able to host other stories than those about first communication and language barriers, the narrative convention must normally be embraced, despite its obvious traces of the hand of the storyteller.[6]

The appearance of Picard's retelling of Gilgamesh in the context of a rare ST episode about the complexity of true decipherment is significant. The feeling that even when we can decipher words enough to translate technically, that their true meaning can escape us should be familiar to any scholar of Akkadian or (particularly) Sumerian. Indeed, the universal translator as a device raises problems immediately apparent to any scholar of the ancient world, or other cultures and languages very different from our own. The episode considers how, in absence of this universalising science fiction plot device, we can make our own meanings out of the ancient texts we encounter and retell, no less than out of the alien species we encounter.

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[6] In *Doctor Who* the device is the TARDIS's 'mild psychic field'; the conceit is famously parodied in Douglas Adams' 'babel fish' (1979). A number of science fiction stories of first contact do turn on language acquisition and decipherment, including recently the film *Arrival* (2016) and the novella it is based on, Ted Chiang's 'Story of Your Life' (1998), Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996), and Ian Watson's *The Embedding* (1973).

2. 'Darmok'

The episode Darmok is the 102nd episode (Season 5, Episode 2) of *TNG*, originally broadcast 30 September, 1991, directed by Winrich Kolbe, with a teleplay by Joe Menosky from a story by Menosky and Philip LaZebnik. It had an unusually long development history, having been in progress as a story idea for two years (Gross and Altman 1995: 228). The episode features a memorable guest appearance from Academy Award-nominated actor Paul Winfield, as the alien captain Dathon, to whom Picard, played by Patrick Stewart, narrates the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as an example of a foundational myth of 'our' Earth culture.

The episode begins with the Enterprise in orbit around the planet El-Adrel; they have come in response to the broadcast of a mathematical signal from an alien ship apparently seeking to make contact, representatives of an 'enigmatic' race known as 'the Children of Tama'. This race has been contacted by Starfleet seven times over the previous century, but no true communication has been established. Though they have apparently peaceful intentions, the race has been described as 'incomprehensible' by past Starfleet officers. Picard is optimistic: 'In my experience, communication is a matter of patience, imagination. I would like to believe these are qualities we have in sufficient measure'. It soon becomes clear why previous Starfleet teams have struggled: the Tamarians, in contact with the Enterprise over their respective ships' viewscreens, speak in English, meaning that their words *are* being translated by the universal translator. However, they seem only, as the android Lt. Commander Data explains in his helpless summation, 'to be stating the proper names of individuals and locations'. Although it is clear from their inflection, their behaviour, and the interactions between themselves, witnessed through the viewscreen, that their words have a meaningful sense to them, to the Enterprise crew it appears as gibberish. 'Rai and Jiri at Lungha', 'Shaka, when the walls fell'. The individual words ('wall',

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'at') and the semantic structure have been within the universal translator's powers, but for once it has been no true help.

It is clear that a disagreement takes place between the Tamarian captain, Dathon, and his first officer which ends in the captain making a decision: 'Darmok and Jilad, at Tenagra'. The captain Dathon draws two knives from his belt and before the Enterprise crew can act, the Tamarians have successfully beamed Picard and their own captain away from their respective ships onto the surface of the planet El-Adrel. On the Enterprise, First Officer Riker and the crew struggle to determine how to beam Picard back (the Tamarians are blocking transport to or from the planet) and what the meaning of the Tamarian communications they have received thus far could be. It seems logical to conclude that the intent must be to force a violent contest of champions.

On the planet surface, Picard assumes the same, especially as Dathon keeps trying to press a knife into his hands. Picard rejects this gift, refusing to fight. Dathon is frustrated, continually repeating 'Darmok and Jilad, at Tenagra'. As night falls on the planet, the captains sit at separate fires, within shouting distance. Dathon's is blazing, while Picard cannot get his going. Picard realises that his companion might not be hostile when he takes pity on Picard and offers him a gift of flame for his own fire, and achieves his first sense of how the Tamarian language might work:

DATHON: Temba.

PICARD: Temba? What does that mean? Fire? Does Temba mean fire?

DATHON: Temba. His arms wide.

PICARD: Temba is a person? His arms wide. [*thinking*] Because he's holding them apart in, in generosity. In giving. In taking.

Back on the Enterprise, Data and empath Counsellor Troi come to a conclusion about the basic structure of the language and its dependence on metaphor. Searching through dozens of meanings in the Starfleet computers for 'Darmok' and 'Tenagra' they find two that appear to fit together: Darmok ('a mytho-historical hunter on Shantil 3') and Tenagra ('An island-continent on Shantil 3'). Perhaps, they conclude, this is the 'mytho-historical' touchstone that underlies this metaphor. They explain their findings to the crew:

DATA: The Tamarian ego structure does not seem to allow what we normally think of as self-identity. Their ability to abstract is highly unusual. They seem to communicate through narrative imagery by reference to the individuals and places which appear in their mytho-historical accounts.

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TROI: Exactly. Imagery is everything to the Tamarians. It embodies their emotional states, their very thought processes. It's how they communicate, and it's how they think.

Yet without the same cultural touchstones, that imagery is meaningless. 'It is necessary for us to learn the narrative from which the Tamarians drawing their imagery', Data diagnoses.

Meanwhile, Picard too realises the basic structure of the language and its use of metaphor and allusion. He soon comes to realise that his new friend means well with the knife business: the aim is to ensure they work together to defeat a 'beast', an amorphous energy creature apparently native to the planet. Dathon, knowing that there was danger on the planet, has brought them here to face this adventure together. As morning dawns, Picard and Dathon are now fast friends, and have been able to communicate enough that they are just able to discuss tactics as they go up

against the beast. Picard is flush with triumph, less at the ongoing battle than at his ability to understand Dathon's metaphors. However, Dathon is mortally wounded in combat, as the beast retreats unharmed.

That night, Picard sits by the fire with Dathon and sees him through his final moments. In a touching scene (widely regarded by fans as deeply moving), Picard establishes that he understands and appreciates his new friend's sacrifice. For the sake of making contact with the other, Dathon has risked his own life. Although Dathon is fading quickly, Picard manages to persuade him to outline the basic substance of the 'Darmok and Jilad' story. Darmok, on the ocean: the 'mytho-historical hunter' alone. 'Jilad on the ocean', another mytho-historical figure, a stranger. The two of them come to Tenagra where they encounter, together, 'the beast' at Tenagra. They fight together and end 'Darmok and Jilad, on the ocean'. As Picard parses it: the ocean, aloneness, the fight against the beast, a coming together. The two people, alone and lonely on the ocean (a symbol of isolation) meet to struggle together towards a common goal, and leave together as friends. Picard recognises that he and Dathon were to play out this process, to meet as strangers, isolated, but to leave as companions. 'Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel'.

Weak as he is, Dathon asks Picard for a story in return. The entirety of the exchange is worth quoting:

PICARD: My turn? No, I'm not much of a story teller. Besides, you wouldn't understand. Shaka, when the walls fell. Perhaps that doesn't matter. You want to hear it anyway. There's a story, a very ancient one, from Earth. I'll try and remember it. Gilgamesh, a king. Gilgamesh, a king, at Uruk. He tormented his subjects. He made them angry. They cried out aloud, send us a companion for our king. Spare us from his madness. Enkidu, a wild man

from the forest, entered the city. They fought in the temple. They fought in the street. Gilgamesh defeated Enkidu. They became great friends. Gilgamesh and Enkidu at Uruk.

DATHON: At Uruk.

PICARD: The new friends went out into the desert together, where the great bull of heaven was killing men by the hundreds. Enkidu caught the bull by the tail. Gilgamesh struck it with his sword.

DATHON: Gilgamesh.

PICARD: They were victorious. But Enkidu fell to the ground, struck down by the gods. And Gilgamesh wept bitter tears, saying, 'he who was my companion through adventure and hardship, is gone forever'.

Dathon hears out the end of this tale and soon breathes his last.

As Picard buries his friend, his crew finally succeeds in beaming him away from the planet just as he himself is about to be gored by 'the beast'. Both the Enterprise and the Tamarian ship can see from their sensor readings that one of the two life signs on the planet has disappeared. Picard is beamed back to the Enterprise just in time: the Tamarians have concluded that the death of their captain was at Picard's hands and are gearing up for a fatal assault on the Enterprise. But Picard has now learned enough of their metaphorical language through his interactions with Dathon that he is able to dissuade them by successfully narrating what happened on the planet, his comradeship with Dathon, and Dathon's unfortunate death at the hands of the beast. More importantly, he is able to show that he has done what Dathon hoped for: the strangers have made contact, Picard can now speak to them and understand the meaning of their metaphor language.

He gives them the new phrase, 'Picard and Dathon at El-Adrel', to describe a tragic but ultimately meaningful encounter between strangers who become comrades.

The Tamarians leave peacefully, though in sorrow for their captain, and Picard is cautiously optimistic that if not yet friends, they are at least not enemies. The episode closes, as many TNG episodes do, with a scene in Picard's ready room. Riker finds Picard with an old leather-bound book.

RIKER: Greek, sir?

PICARD: Oh, the Homeric Hymns. One of the root metaphors of our own culture.

RIKER: For the next time we encounter the Tamarians?

PICARD: More familiarity with our own mythology might help us to relate to theirs. The Tamarian was willing to risk all of us just for the hope of communication, connection. Now the door is open between our peoples. That commitment meant more to him than his own life.

On this note the episode ends: that to die for communication, with the alien, though also through and with the past, was worth dying for, and that ancient myth should be seen as an ongoing tool in the Enterprise's exploration of alien space.

3. Why Gilgamesh?

The appearance of the works of Homer in this closing moment emphasises by contrast how strange a choice it is to feature Gilgamesh at the episode's emotional climax. Although this volume demonstrates that there has been more interaction between popular culture and the ancient Near

East than is often recognised, it is nonetheless the case that such interaction with Gilgamesh is rare enough that when it does appear, it raises questions as to why and how such a comparatively obscure myth has found its way into such a mainstream property. Screenwriter Menosky's choice to put the Gilgamesh story in Picard's mouth is an unusual and rare one.

The most likely reason why he chose Gilgamesh in preference to any other 'Earth story' is its age. Gilgamesh is frequently seen as the starting point for 'world literature'; it is the only work of cuneiform literature to appear in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature* (2012; excerpts from *Enuma Elish* and *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* appear in thematic subsections, but not in the primary chronological sequence). It is thus the oldest narrative work to be widely accounted a work of 'literature' and a part of the canon in Western world literary studies; given the prominence of the *Norton* in defining and guiding many university-level literature syllabi, it can be presumed that Gilgamesh is encountered in this way across many higher education institutions.[7] Gilgamesh suggests, then, an ancient, foundational, and primary myth. If the audience of the episode can be expected to recognise the name and the narrative (which surely is expected, in order to appreciate that Picard does not merely invent it), it is probably in this aspect.[8] Such an idea of a canonical and universal progression of literature is in keeping with the ST understanding of the past as an inheritance belonging to the Federation (that is, the United Federation of Planets, the political 'us' of the ST universe) and their (white, elite, American) members with whom the audience identifies

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[7] Cooppan, in an article discussing the pedagogy of world literature, notes that he begins his 'World Literature' course at Yale by teaching the *Norton* 'Gilgamesh' (Benjamin R. Foster's translation) *paired with* 'Darmok' (2004: 23-24).

[8] In my own American high school, Gilgamesh was also a feature of 'World Literature' teaching; I suspect that many American students will have encountered it in this way and it can be assumed to be a plausible touchstone even for those without university/college-level educations.

(discussed further below). The importance of Gilgamesh within the episode has been highlighted by Patrick Stewart and by the series' producers, with Stewart relating the use of Gilgamesh to the episode's legitimacy as 'award-worthy' art (*Mission Overview: Year Five* 2002): Gilgamesh lends (obscure) class.

Beyond its 'primacy' in the world literary canon, the story was also likely chosen because of the way that Gilgamesh and Enkidu's story can be easily read as a first contact narrative, discussed in the next section. The episode does not trace the story of Gilgamesh beyond the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's friendship. It thus remakes the central meaning of the epic, ignoring the central importance of its engagement with death and mortality (see Dimock 2013: 626–7 on the episode's modification of this theme). This sort of remaking is easily facilitated by the form and function of epics, in which individual episodes are easily extracted (Johnston 2015a: 203–4). Whatever the meaning of Gilgamesh as understood by any one ancient editor or author, it is not the only meaning that Gilgamesh has had, nor the most valid. 'Darmok' participates in that tradition by again restructuring and therefore refiguring the myth's elements. This happens on two levels: the episode's writer, Menosky, reconfigures the events of the epic for his own purposes (to offer a parallel between the story that he is telling and this much greater, much older story that will be familiar to the audience as great 'world literature'); within the episode's narrative Picard does the same for his own in-story purposes (to comfort a dying friend and to forge a deeper understanding with the alien, preventing violence).

4. Intertextual engagement: rereading Gilgamesh and Enkidu as first contact narrative

The Gilgamesh-Enkidu story, as told by Picard, does not offer an exact parallel to his own situation with Dathon (or, on another level, the episode as written by Menosky does not present an exact

parallel).[9] In fact, the relationship is tenuous, and Picard's rendition of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's adventures changes and elides elements of the Standard Babylonian version from which it derives: for instance, ignoring the role of Shamhat in Enkidu's journey to civilisation, eliding the killing of Humbaba (a parallel closer to what Picard and Dathon do in this episode) with the Bull of Heaven incident, leaving out the reason that the Bull of Heaven was sent to Uruk, and ignoring the importance of the gods at every level.

Instead, I would suggest that the episode invites the viewer to understand the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as essentially a story of first contact. 'First contact' is a topos of central importance to the ST universe, and within science fiction more broadly. The concept gave its name to a film with the *TNG* cast, widely regarded as one of the best of the franchise, and also to an episode of the *TNG* television series. Because of the obvious scope for different dramatic storytelling possibilities, a number of episodes of *TNG* feature the topos of either intentional or accidental first contact with an alien other. Retelling the Gilgamesh-Enkidu story in parallel to such a trope reframes it for a modern audience as a story that viewers of ST would be familiar

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[9] Although I will not discuss this aspect at length here, it is worth emphasising that the episode relies on our ability to grasp a whole web of parallels, operating at different levels, among both real and fictional myths. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are a good parallel to the (fictional) heroes Darmok and Jilad; their stories are mutually comprehensible to Picard and Dathon—and immediately comprehensible to the viewer, with only brief retellings. I would argue that this presentation of myth, and certainly its assumptions that its audiences will easily grasp parallels among myths, and between myths and modern stories, should be seen as essentially rooted in science fiction's love affair with the theories of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). This work of comparative mythology has been incredibly influential within genre fictions, most famously as a foundational text in George Lucas's creation of the Star Wars series. Its continued prominence in popular culture has long outlived its popularity in academic discussions of myth and narrative.

with. Seeing the relationship through a familiar topos may render it more meaningful to modern audiences, a transformation that remakes the story to correspond to our own cultural expectations.

Dathon, as the incomprehensible alien other who is gradually brought into comprehensibility through Picard's good faith and ingenuity at decipherment—of culture no less than language—can be read as an Enkidu parallel. That he is humanoid but not human in appearance equates too to the description of Enkidu as fantastically wilder than an ordinary man (Tablet I 105–14). It is significant that Dathon is played, albeit under heavy prosthetic make-up, by Winfield, a black American actor. Thus the episode inescapably calls to mind parallels of American racial division and communication across that division. The choice to cast a black actor as Dathon is likely not accidental or incidental. In ST black actors are cast as aliens with overwhelming frequency, often in make-up that deliberately obscures their human features and renders them, essentially, 'crypto' racial minorities, with racial stereotypes displaced onto their status as literal alien.[10] On *TNG* the most-prominent example of this is Worf, the Klingon Starfleet officer played by black American actor Michael Dohrn. Further, with the alien-human dichotomy reinforced by the black-white racial dichotomy, 'Darmok' participates in a long-held ST tradition, dating back to the original series in the 1960s, of (often highly clumsy) engagement with American racial issues through the lens of science fiction allegory (Golumbia 1995: 80–91, on a particularly notorious original series example). Thus the episode becomes a comment on communication or

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[10] Black actors, from *TNG* onwards, are particularly likely to play Klingons, a warrior race known for their hot heads and outsized concern for honour—the parallel to negative stereotypes of black American masculinity are obvious. A similar dynamic is at work with the Ferengi, an alien race introduced in *TNG*, who have often been noted to embody unflattering and arguably highly anti-semitic stereotypes of Jews, disguised as alien racial traits, and who are often played by Jewish actors, most prominently Armin Shimerman as Quark in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

miscommunication across racial divides, as well as a more general story of encountering and coming to know the alien other, in which Gilgamesh's forging of a relationship with Enkidu becomes equated to the Enterprise's mission to seek out and know the alien other, and this in turn with the need for black and white humans to engage in dialogue, in keeping with ST's liberal humanist principles in which dialogue alone is considered the ultimate social good. The application of an allegory derived from an ancient Near Eastern mythos to such a culturally and temporally specific American societal dynamic is indicative of how widely productive, in unexpected and unintended ways, the reuse of ancient literature can be.

However, reading intertextually, it becomes clear that there is a more salient and arguably more complex parallel at work in the Gilgamesh-Enkidu analogy than one that would equate the alien other (and by implication, black Americans) with Enkidu, discovered by our hero Gilgamesh-Picard. Over the course of the episode, it is Picard who must learn to speak with the Tamarians, it is Picard who must assimilate to their way of thought. In this sense, Picard is the Enkidu, learning to communicate with a new society whose ways at first are strange to him, moving from (in the Tamarians' eyes) wild unknowingness and incomprehensibility to civilised speech.

That Picard is able to do this accords with the tolerant generosity of the Federation he represents. While other species are often suspicious of and hostile to the alien, Picard is willing to enter into *their* traditions. Indeed, the purportedly peaceful, contact-seeking Tamarians blankly refuse to make communication easier (they are not particularly good at gesture or sign language, something Picard ultimately uses to understand the story of Darmok and Jilad). The Enterprise comes to contact ready to investigate, to study, and to decipher. His crew bring not only the skills of diplomats and scientists, but also of historians, translators, linguists—the skills of academic cultural investigation. The Tamarians, on the other hand, come just as they are and present

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themselves to be deciphered. In this sense they could be seen again to mirror Enkidu, appearing in the wilderness and passively being made sense of. Yet, despite their status as specimens to be deciphered, it is the Tamarians who engineer the confrontation that creates a lasting companionship between Picard and Dathon, and who seemingly have superior transporter technology to the Enterprise. In different ways then, each side works on the other to bring about the final state of understanding achieved by the end of the episode.

Reading back from this episode through its intertextual engagement with the Gilgamesh-Enkidu mythos, Darmok suggests an understanding of Enkidu's journey from animal world to human world not as a passive process but as an active and intellectual decipherment. If Enkidu is like Picard, he must be understood as an agent-explorer, a heroic decipherer, accommodating himself to Gilgamesh, actively and impressively learning the ways of human society. Whether this was intended in ancient readings is a different question: for our part, however, we can see that such a reading is now possible for a modern receiver of the Gilgamesh mythos. That Enkidu, in the Standard Babylonian version, certainly is explicitly created to tame the excesses of Gilgamesh is another reason this parallel might have appealed to Menosky, for the role of the Enterprise as a taming and civilising force is the primary premise of the show.

The viewer can now experience the Gilgamesh and Enkidu encounter in the light of its integration into the ST universe and a common science fiction topos, where it gains new meaning. Darmok makes an argument for reusing and reiterating elements of ancient myth (and not even the entire myth, but set pieces, type-scenes, or tropes); the episode itself demonstrates the effect of such reuse in its retelling of Gilgamesh, which moves and informs the audience (both the ST viewer and Dathon, as audience to Picard's story) and allows communication and understanding with an alien other.

5. 'You will be assimilated': Star Trek's reception of other cultures

This hopeful understanding of the universally applicable power of narrative is of a piece with ST's wider ideology, about its own purpose as an ongoing saga, and its optimistic understanding of social and historical journeys. ST is perhaps the leading utopian science fiction series of contemporary culture. It sees history as an upward progression in which people of the future-present learn from the mistakes of their past (including our present). Although many episodes focus on the inevitability of conflict and division recurring (note Picard's caution about whether the Tamarians are yet 'friends'), it posits a general upward trend. In ST's Federation there is no money: people work for their own personal betterment. Starfleet is a peaceful exploratory agency, not a military force (although unsurprisingly they are frequently engaged in 'defensive' battles). Racism and xenophobia are said to have been widely eliminated from the humans of earth (though, as discussed above, racial 'otherness' is often unintentionally or explicitly displaced onto alien species). The crew of the Enterprise are collegiate, good-tempered, kind, and, most significantly here, each engaged in extensive pursuits of personal self-betterment through cultural projects (music, art, martial arts, dance, reading, academic study).

In the future of the *TNG* universe, the values of American elitist, liberal, self-improvement have triumphed. Pursuit of culture for its own sake is considered a fundamental mark of 'advancement'. *TNG* celebrates its own optimistic sort of multi-culturalism, in which any culture, however alien, can be assimilated *to* (white, elite, liberal, human) Federation cultural norms; even before we reach the subject of exploring the (literal) alien, the culture of 'Earth' has been unproblematically collapsed into one monoculture, belonging to Picard and his fellow humans in Starfleet (all played by American or European actors). Communication and knowledge-sharing

civilises alien others who can ultimately be allied to or actually join the Federation. In ST, multiculturalism and historical and social progress occur through the assimilation of the alien to this normative identity, where other cultures can be used for self-improvement and diplomatic relationship-building. In a sense then, the Federation ideology is itself a universal translator, not just of language but of history, culture, knowledge, and values, smoothing over context and historical contingencies to render everything into American (or sometimes British-accented) English.

Undoubtedly to displace anxieties about the imperialism and xenophobia inherent in this approach, *TNG* introduced at the end of its second season a primary villain whose method of expansion is designed to contrast to the Federation: the Borg. A collective consciousness with one will, the Borg violently assimilate species, cultures, and planets, their assimilation framed also as reception: 'We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Resistance is futile' (*Star Trek: First Contact* 1996). That this is exactly what the Federation (and the ST franchise) does to numerous cultures, is at the heart of the moral anxiety the Borg produce; they are repeatedly used to provoke storylines about how humans and the Federation as an entity distinguish themselves from this dark mirror.

The assimilation that the Federation, no less than the Borg, practices includes not only alien and human 'Earth' cultures, but also the cultural products, and particularly the narratives, of the human past. In keeping with this understanding of cultural reception, Gilgamesh is 'our' Earth culture. The final scene of the episode in which Picard can be seen reading Homer to brush up for future communications is enlightening: the episode suggests that the two myth-worlds are equally prominent representations of ancient Earth culture, and equally 'ours'. In 1991, when this episode was broadcast, as today, this was not remotely true. Homer is a widely-taught, foundational pillar

of 'Western' literature and an author that American creators and viewers of ST would probably know well; Gilgamesh, despite its status in the world literature canon, is still regarded as non-Western and still relatively obscure. ST imagines a future in which contact with other planets has united (and elided) cultural differences on Earth. This is ST's central theory of contact, or as we might think of it 'theory of reception'. Contact-reception elides differences and unites different groups, intrasocially and intersocially, by its mere existence. Knowing, learning, and sharing 'culture' is productive of peace and social harmony.

Picard initially expresses hesitation in reciting the Gilgamesh and Enkidu tale: he is not in close contact with this element of the past. Indeed, Picard's retelling of Gilgamesh is not strictly 'accurate'. Nonetheless, his offer of the story is also an offer of a new interpretation to his and Dathon's own experience. In the story that Dathon hoped would explain their meeting, Darmok and Jilad leave together on the ocean, victorious. Dathon's imminent death thus invalidates this comparison. Is this an example of failure then? 'Shaka, when the walls fell', in the language of the Tamarians? By introducing Gilgamesh and Enkidu instead as a comparison, Picard suggests an alternate explanation. Beyond expressing his sorrow for his new friend, he repositions Dathon's death as something worthy. Although Picard offers no meaningful 'justification' for Enkidu's death, the very existence of a mythic precedent helps Picard and Dathon to understand his death differently; that is, to understand it as something inherently meaningful because it participates in tradition for which there is language.

That Picard would know and care about the ancient Near East is consistent with a primary aspect of the character's back story: Picard once studied archaeology and still maintains a hobbyist's interest in the topic, and in the ancient past more generally. Repeatedly, in episodes that deal with Picard's interest in antiquity, the exploration of the past is equated with the scientific and

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exploratory mission of the Enterprise in physical space, making explicit the link between contact with the geographical alien and the temporal alien. The archaeology of ST is a fantastical one, in which references to real (historical) Earth archaeology sit alongside those to the archaeology of invented alien worlds. For instance, in 'The Chase' (1993), Picard's old archaeology professor tempts him on an adventure by asking: 'What if you could have helped Schliemann discover the city of Troy, or been with M'Tell as she first stepped on Ya'Seem? How could anything compare?' In that episode, also written by 'Darmok' screenwriter Menosky, Picard finds himself engaged on a search for DNA evidence hidden on planets around the galaxy, in many diverse, seemingly unrelated lifeforms. Like 'Darmok', this episode posits that the ancient past is still vitally present in human societies (in 'Darmok' as language, in 'The Chase' as a part of the body) and should be understood as both a mechanism and a reason for connection between diverse cultures.

In both episodes, it is argued that receiving and understanding the ancient past no less than encountering the contemporaneous alien is a means for cultures to come together in peace. This is explicitly stated in 'The Chase', in which the shared DNA sequence was seeded by an ancient and dying race in the hope that a biological heritage shared across the universe would someday be discovered and lead to peace. This message of commonality is rejected by all the non-human races who have been competing to solve the archaeological puzzle. Picard is disappointed—until he receives a last-minute communication from a Romulan captain who has been thinking it over and been deeply affected (the Romulans are morally grey villains, usually doing the worst but with a better nature the audience lives in hope of seeing win out). Academic investigation of the ancient past, this episode argues, should illuminate the commonality of present people and this biological and historical discovery has a moral imperative: that people in the present should practice peace.

This explicit message echoes the way that Gilgamesh is employed in 'Darmok': because Picard, like Dathon, has access to a 'mytho-historical' past in which tales of friendship and togetherness through adversity are discussed, he and Dathon can and should make peace. The ancient past both facilitates and morally mandates that peace. In 'Darmok', the historical contingencies of the epic, the meaning and role it played in ancient contexts, are unimportant. This is naturally very different from how Gilgamesh is treated within scholarly contexts, though it offers new and contextually appropriate ways of engaging with the historical legacy of ancient Babylonian literature. The Gilgamesh mythos is transformed through its use as a tool of the humanist message (and the soft power) of the Federation, and the ST franchise.

6. In conclusion

The retelling and reception of Gilgamesh in 'Darmok' works as both a demonstration of and a commentary on the productive, living nature of ancient myth, and its openness to reuse by new receivers. The episode invokes a broader cultural understanding of Gilgamesh as the 'original' work of 'world literature'. The Gilgamesh-Enkidu encounter is presented as a first contact narrative, a lens which allows readings backwards and forwards of both Picard and his alien companion as each of the two mythical heroes. Its assimilation to the ST mythos is part of a wider conceptualisation within ST of cultural reception as inherently peace-keeping—and of all 'culture' as under its own purview. In its ability to generate new meanings and new relationships between the Gilgamesh mythos and contemporary viewers, ST has indeed remade Gilgamesh in light of its own values and interests, but in a continuation of the process that has always guided the lives of mythical figures.

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