Introduction

This short book about long poems explores the possibility of interpreting, rather than removing or explaining away, inconsistencies in ancient texts. My main argument is that comparative study of the literary use of inconsistencies can shed light on major problems in epics written by five Roman authors: Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, and Lucan – though Lucan gets only a short concluding chapter. I hope that the book offers a valuable vantage point from which to consider major recent trends in the study of Greek and especially Latin poetry, and that those who read it will find that it helps them become better readers of the poems treated, and perhaps other works as well.

This book flows from earlier work I have done on Vergil, with my perspective broadened to include the four other Roman poets, a number of Greek authors, and I hope a greater range of interpretive reflection. Too much work in Classics focuses on individual authors, without seeing them in the context of what other more or less similar authors are doing. I believe this is strikingly true for the phenomenon at the heart of this study. I attempt to trace and analyze, in several authors, something a number of scholars have been noticing in isolation in individual authors, often without mentioning work being done by anyone else. Part of the originality of this study lies in bringing these texts and problems together, and part lies in the analysis I do of these texts; the book aims both to synthesize some recent work on Greek and Latin poets and to confront more explicitly and tenaciously certain intriguing questions this work has raised.

A central argument of my book on prophecy in the *Aeneid* (O'Hara 1990) is that some discrepancies between what is said in prophecies in the poem and what either happens, or is predicted to happen, elsewhere in the poem are

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not signs of Vergil's inability to revise the *Aeneid* before his death. Rather
these inconsistencies are indications that characters within the *Aeneid* are
being deceived, and that readers may be deceived as well, or at least offered
conflicting paths of interpretation. These inconsistencies are products not
of the poet's inattention, but of his artistry. They are at least potentially
"portals of discovery," to quote a phrase used by Joyce's Stephen Daedalus,
who says that with a great poet like Shakespeare, "his errors are volitional
and are the portals of discovery." As I was finishing the prophecy book,
I realized that it was part of a quiet and for the most part under-analyzed
movement throughout classical studies, in which poetic inconsistencies were
being seen in a new light. Much of this work has appeared in the form of
studies of single authors. This book offers an extensive (though necessarily
somewhat cursory) first chapter on recent work on inconsistencies in Greek
authors, and then a comparative study of inconsistency in poems by the
five Roman authors of my title, who wrote within about a century of one
another.

The first chapter's survey of Greek material depends heavily on the work
of others. I discuss examples of inconsistency in Homer, Hesiod, lyric and
tragedy, and then certain passages in Plato and Aristotle that discuss unity or
inconsistency, before finishing with the Alexandrian poets. The Alexandrians
are treated in somewhat greater detail because of their importance to the
Roman poets both in general and in terms of their interest in inconsistencies
and mythological variants. Roman practice owes much to Callimachus and the
Alexandrians, but it is also important to note that certain practices commonly
labeled Alexandrian have precedent in archaic and classical Greek poetry.

That first chapter has a broader scope than the others, for it discusses
poems in a number of genres, while the remaining chapters are each limited
to a single "epic" poem. In part this reflects the wide range of influences that
produced Roman epic, but there is also a degree to which this first chapter
could have been the beginning of a much broader study of Roman poetry –
not limited to epic – the outlines of which this book can only suggest. I do
believe, however, that the epic texts studied in Chapters Two through Six bear
a special relationship to one another with respect to their use of inconsisten-
cies, and that the Roman epic tradition comes to create in the reader certain
expectations about how inconsistencies will be treated.

Many of the Greek texts discussed in Chapter One have a particular rele-
vance for the Roman poems that come later, but more generally, the chapter is
meant to familiarize the reader with material helpful for contextualizing my

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argument about Latin poets. Most often, I hope, knowledge of this material
will help the reader accept my arguments, but I also realize that it may allow
a reader to go beyond what I have argued in this short book, or even refute
my arguments. This is fine with me: books in this series are meant to be
"suggestive essays whose aim is to stimulate debate."

Chapters Two through Five treat Catullus 64, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*,
Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and then Chapter Six briefly
discusses Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. Each of these chapters begins with a close
reading of a passage near the start of the poem, where striking inconsistencies
have long been problematic; then I show that central interpretive questions
for each author involve how we respond to inconsistencies. Some of these
questions involve factual inconsistencies, others inconsistencies of theme,
philosophy, and political attitudes, and there may be room to criticize my
lack of interest in distinguishing these different types of phenomena. But I
believe they all profit from being looked at together, and are all united by
the way in which traditional scholarship has mishandled them. I hope that
my method will be seen to involve an imaginative search for solutions to
problems, open to the best that ancient and modern theory has to offer, but
with rigorous testing of any hypothesis against the details of the text. I do not
claim that all inconsistencies in ancient texts are of the same type, although
I do posit a common willingness on the part of ancient authors to make use
of inconsistency. I also try to acknowledge that some inconsistencies can be
produced by aspects of the production of ancient texts that make them less
interesting or valuable for the purposes of interpretation. Here too I note that
a few pages after Joyce's Stephen Daedalus pronounces that a great poet's
"errors . . . are the portals of discovery," he is asked, "Do you believe your
own theory?" and "promptly" answers, "No." (The question does not refer
directly to the statement I cite above, but it might as well have.)

For Catullus 64, the *Peleus and Thetis*, I look at the problem of the first
ship, the Argo, and the ship that sailed earlier than the first ship, that of
Theseus. I discuss the introduction to the Theseus and Ariadne panel, which
says it will be about "heroic manly deeds," as well as its content, which
involves dumping Ariadne on an island and sneaking away at night. And I
look at the conflict between the happiness predicted for Peleus and Thetis at
their wedding, and the notorious unhappiness of their marriage in the whole
literary tradition. How we as readers should respond to borrowings from or
allusions to mythological variants is a major concern here, as often in the
book.

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In Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, I examine how the initial "Hymn to Venus" is quickly contradicted by the Epicurean claim that gods do not worry about humans, in lines that many have wanted to cut from the text. I then discuss recent scholarship's attention to Lucretius' habit of briefly inhabiting his opponents' positions, for rhetorical purposes, and how this work has provided an alternative to the old theory of the "Anti-Lucretius in Lucretius." And I look at the frequent practice of scholars who brandish inconsistencies as evidence for how Lucretius should have revised or was planning to revise his text – almost as though Roman poets were working with the help of dissertation supervisors. How proems relate to the rest of a work, or even to the rest of a single book, and how a poem's apparent goals might differ from its actual impact are other issues discussed.

My Vergil chapter is the longest. It discusses inconsistencies in prophecies, the extent to which the fully polished *Georgics* also contain a number of inconsistencies, allusions to incompatible mythological variants, the complicated picture of the underworld of *Aeneid* 6, and the war in Italy of *Aeneid* 7–12, for which I focus on contradictory allusions to the myth of gigantomachy. In this chapter, and in the following chapter on Ovid, I look at ways in which inconsistencies in a poem can introduce competing perspectives, a plurality of voices, and conflicting or ambiguous attitudes, and thus can raise questions about authority and power (especially with regard to Jupiter), and create a sense of indeterminacy or uncertainty.

For Ovid's *Metamorphoses* I begin with the philosophical creation, by a rational creator god, which then yields to a world run by a particularly disorderly, un-philosophical, emotional, lustful version of the mythological Olympian gods. I also talk about chronological problems as in Catullus 64, and about Ovid's multiple origin stories for the same animal or flower, which often feature unmistakable cross references that call readers' attention to problems. I discuss Ovid's mixing of genres, and use of mythological variants, and how inconsistent passages raise questions about authority and power in Ovid as in Vergil (again Jupiter will be problematic).

I end with a short discussion of Lucan, which also serves as the book's conclusion, in which I briefly discuss the praise of Nero in the proem to the *Bellum Civile*, the poem's shifting attitudes towards the republic and principate, and the way in which "the poem is at war with itself," to cite a formulation prominent in recent scholarship. My contribution to the study of Lucan is fairly minor, and consists largely in insisting that Lucan be seen in

the tradition described earlier in the book, and so this short chapter will look back at earlier chapters as much as it looks at Lucan.

The book's goals are both text-specific and theoretical: a comparative approach can provide better understanding of the passages in question, and the tracing of similar phenomena in several authors may help to establish a framework for understanding the poetic or rhetorical use of inconsistencies in any ancient author, and perhaps in authors of other periods as well. The question at the heart of my book is perhaps this: How should we react as readers and as critics when two passages in a literary work contradict one another? Should we try to emend the text? Should we blame the inconsistency on someone other than the author, who has ruined a consistent original unity by inserting inappropriate material? If we cannot change the text, should we blame the author, and consider him a failure? We cannot overlook this option, but it is not one of my favorites. Should we excuse the author, by reason of biography, citing his untimely death (in the case of Lucretius, Vergil, and Lucan), or even his exile (in Ovid's own words)? Lucretius, the Epicurean poet, naturally says that "Death is nothing to us" (*DRN* 3.830) but is that really true if you die with your poem unfinished? And should we imagine Vergil, as he was dying, thinking with sorrow of his "List of Things to Fix After Trip to Greece"? Ovid introduces the idea in *Tristia* 1.7 that he should be cut some slack because he was exiled and did not get to polish his epic. Is he serious? Kidding? Imitating Vergil? All of the above? Or is Ovid perhaps signaling to readers that his epic contains the inconsistencies they have learned to expect in the genre? For Lucan, we know exactly when he died, and why. Before he died, had his views of Nero changed, and does this account for some of the varied views present in his poem?

My preferred way to respond to inconsistencies is to ask whether we can interpret them, and whether they are being used with some skill to make certain suggestions – whether they have been "thematized," to cite a term of Ruth Scodel's, discussed in my first chapter. These questions will not always yield a positive answer, and should not be forced, but they should always be considered. A text may be inconsistent, for example, because a character is lying, or speaking deceptively for rhetorical purposes. This solution, for which there is precedent in ancient comments on these poems, "saves" the consistency of the world being presented by the text. At times, especially in the start of a work, a poet may be temporarily adopting one attitude, before attempting to move readers to another. More challengingly, a poet may present

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relentlessly inconsistent material, and different views, with no clear guide as to which view is "right." This inconsistency may come about as a natural result of working with certain ideas in certain genres, or as a deliberate effect sought because it fits certain poetic goals, or from some combination of both factors. Plato complains in *Republic* 2 and 3 about poetry's tendency to present a fragmented voice. In the latter half of the twentieth century many critics said it was only the Vietnam War or some bizarre American fondness for ambiguity that made us see multiple voices in Vergil and other poets. But the problem is right there in the *Republic*. Bakhtin's famous and now famously inadequate claim, that the novel is polyphonic and epic is monologic, certainly does not fit the poems under view here.

Some scholars may argue that all readers or that all readers before the twentieth century would tend to construct a view of the world of a poem or novel that harmonizes or explains away inconsistencies, that concretizes or makes determinate any gaps left in the text, on the theory that the human consciousness naturally seeks unity, wholeness, and coherence. I see little reliable evidence for this either as a fact of human nature or as a claim about the history of reading. Many modern critics, on the other hand, have argued that texts tend to fly apart despite the presumed desires of their authors for them to hold together. I think we are dealing in this book with writers who know that texts tend to fly apart, and that they therefore work with inconsistencies, instead of vainly trying to produce the kind of single-voiced, unified work demanded by many twentieth-century critics.

It may well be that these polytheistic, non-Christian writers saw poems with multiple voices and inconsistent attitudes and even variant versions in one text as the best way to represent their view of the complexity of the world as they saw it. This idea has been suggested for Homer by some, for the Alexandrian poets especially, and for Lucan (and his contemporary Petronius) at the end of our period; it is implicit in much recent work on Catullus, Vergil, and Ovid. Or it may be that they thought that the function of poetry or of epic was the challengingly ambivalent depiction of conflict. A number of our texts deal with issues that can be looked at in two diametrically opposed ways, such as the role of the gods in human endeavors, the nature of heroism, or a poem's attitude toward an emperor, or they depict two-sided conflicts between complicated and flawed foes. It seems implausible to me that it is an accident, or a result of perverse late twentieth-century reading practices, that Catullus 64, the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses*, the *Bellum Civile*, and possibly even Lucretius, as well as a number of poems in other genres

written during this period, can be read in two starkly opposing ways. The
following chapters explore some of the choices that readers can make in
dealing with contradictory poems and passages. Their goal will be to make
us better readers, able to respond to more aspects of the poem than we can
when we are willing to change or distort texts in the service of anachronistic
or at least overly simple notions of unity.

CHAPTER

I

Greek versions

This chapter will offer a selective survey of work on Greek authors who
wrote before the five Roman poets to be considered in later chapters. It first
sweeps from Homer through tragedy, then stops to consider Plato, Aristotle,
and (briefly) the history of the concept of "unity," before finishing with the
Alexandrian poets. We shall look both at the poets on whom the Roman
poets schooled themselves, and also at the modern aversion to inconsistencies
that led scholars to march through the corpus of Greek and Latin authors
removing, lamenting, or explaining away inconsistencies. Thus this chapter
will demonstrate both the extent to which inconsistency appears in authors
to whom Roman poets are indebted, and the scholarly behavior pattern under
indictment in this book, in which a work is found wanting because it lacks
the simple and organic unity or univocality that came to be identified with
value and quality in poetry. Throughout, the stress will be on questions,
and in some cases even characters and myths, that recur in later chapters.
Discussions throughout the chapter must be brief. Often recent work will be
described and put to some critique, but this chapter will present arguments
for consideration more than it will analyze them in depth, although there will
be a little more detail when we reach the Alexandrians. I leave more extended
examination for later chapters.

From Homer to tragedy

Homer is the apparent founder of the genre at the heart of this study, and
Homeric scholars are largely the originators of the type of criticism of incon-
sistencies that became so instinctive and natural to classicists. Modern clas-
sical scholarship began with Wolf's study of the "Homeric question" and the

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work that followed it, which offered a model for the analysis of texts that maintains a powerful hold on the imagination of classicists. Inconsistencies were seen by "Analysts" as reliable clues for identifying layers of redaction in the Homeric poems and other texts, always with the assumption that those texts were originally tightly unified, non-contradictory, and as well organized as a properly supervised dissertation. "Unitarians" often sought to explain away perceived inconsistencies, and later, "Neo-analysts" offered a unitarian view of the poems as a whole, but explained many of their odd features by reference to their origin rather than their function in the poems we have: for them, inconsistencies "point to sources the Homeric poet has adapted in a new composition."[1] More recently, many scholars have offered a number of interesting – if not always fully convincing – suggestions about different ways to deal with inconsistencies in Homeric epic. One tactic has been to argue that strict standards for consistency are inappropriate. Todorov's classic piece on "primitive narrative" describes "laws" that have been wrongly applied to the *Odyssey* concerning verisimilitude, stylistic unity, the "priority of the serious," noncontradiction ("cornerstone of all scholarly criticism"), non-repetition, and digression.[2] Classical scholars have not always accepted the notion that Homer is "primitive," but oral theorists have often argued, fairly plausibly, that texts produced or encountered orally are more likely to contain certain kinds of consistency problems.[3] Throughout this book, we shall have to consider whether apparent inconsistencies in a text can be traced back to the method of composition, incomplete revisions, or textual problems in the manuscript tradition.

Ruth Scodel's monograph on verisimilitude in Homer and tragedy (Scodel 1999) has offered a number of useful ideas. At times her method is like that of Unitarians defending Homer by explaining away inconsistencies, but she is open-minded about whether problems can or should be explained away. Readers or an audience, she argues, can minimize the effect of inconsistencies; to maximize their own pleasure, they can cooperate with the poet to downplay an inconsistency or implausibility through a "principle of inattention," a similar principle of "generosity," or through "naturalization." With "naturalization,"

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[1]   Scodel (1999) 22; cf. Katz (1991) 13–16, with further references.

[2]   Todorov (1977) 53–6. For a recent attempt to use "inconsistencies and incoherencies in the texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*" as evidence for how the texts were composed see Wilson (2000).

[3]   Cf. Lord (1960) 28, Tsagarakis (1979), Janko (1998).

problems of verisimilitude can be viewed "not as problems as long as the nar-
rative audience can believe that there is a plausible reason within the fictional
world." This suggestion that readers are meant sometimes to minimize prob-
lems of consistency and unity in some ways resembles the thesis of Malcolm
Heath, that ancient authors paid little attention to thematic unity, or indeed to
thematic (as opposed to aesthetic) concerns at all.[4] But Scodel also describes
a large number of ways in which an inconsistent detail can be "thematized,"
or "can be made by the poet (or in some cases merely the reader) into some-
thing with important thematic consequences." My study, while aiming to
keep in mind various ways to minimize the impact of inconsistencies, will
often discuss ways in which inconsistencies are "thematized."[5]

The next few paragraphs will dance through some examples of Homeric
inconsistencies and possible responses to them. Homer may, for example,
misdirect the audience to some degree, in order to create tension or uncer-
tainty about how the narrative will proceed, as when Zeus predicts how far
Hector will get before Achilles returns. Such passages have long been seen
by Analysts as signs of multiple authorship, on the false assumption that a
poet must provide accurate and dependable foreshadowing of what comes
later in his work.[6] Alternatively one might see Zeus as deceiving the other
gods – a way of reading discussed in the treatment of Jupiter below in my
chapters on Vergil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Indeed many incon-
sistencies are introduced by speakers other than the narrator. Scenes in which
characters summarize earlier events are often slightly inaccurate, because of
a character's ignorance (e.g. a dead suitor in *Odyssey* 24) or someone's wish
to "spin" a story to emphasize or minimize certain elements (e.g. Odysseus
to Penelope on his travels, and Thetis to Hephaestus on Achilles' troubles).[7]
Ahl and Roisman's study of the *Odyssey* focuses "particularly on instances in
which the narrator or an internal speaker seems to be contradicting something
stated authoritatively as fact elsewhere in the epic;" their "central concern is
with what we would describe as Homeric rhetoric" or the way in which what
speakers say is fitted to their rhetorical needs (1996: ix–x). Not all of their
examples convince, but such explanations are not without ancient precedent.

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[4] Heath (1989), discussed below at n. 35.   [5] Scodel (1999) 15–21.
[6] See esp. Morrison (1992); this issue will be important in my Lucretius chapter. On creating
tension see also Scodel (1998) on an apparent inconsistency concerning the removal of
arms from the hall in *Od*. 16 and 19.
[7] Scodel (1999) 62–3, whose examples I cite.