Inconsistency in Flavian Epic

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Edited by

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In memoriam

Stratis Kyriakidis

1944-2022

CONTENTS

PREFACE

The papers in this volume were originally delivered at the Flavian Epic Network conference on 'Unity and Inconsistency in Flavian Epic' held at Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest) on 4–5 September 2014. As the title might lead one to suspect, this conference was conceived of, in part, in reaction to James O'Hara's 2007 monograph *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*. Some of the conference papers—including those focusing on unity—have appeared elsewhere; updated versions of those investigating phenomena related to inconsistency more specifically have been collected here. Publication of the collection has taken much longer than it should have: the editors of the volume are entirely to blame for that. We extend our apologies both to the individual contributors and to the press; we would also like to express our gratitude for the good-natured forbearance of everyone involved.

This volume owes much to the editors of the 'Pierides' series at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Stratis Kyriakidis, Philip Hardie and Antonis K. Petrides. Their guidance and encouragement proved invaluable as the volume slowly wound its way towards completion. We are also deeply indebted to the anonymous referee for an impressively thoughtful, incisive and detailed evaluation of the initial submission: this was an uncommon act of intellectual generosity that helped to shape both the individual chapters and the collection as a whole. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to Eleni Peraki-Kyriakidou for her rigorous copy editing, which enabled us to set right a wide assortment of errors and—it must be said—resolve more than a few inconsistencies.

The volume was initially commissioned by Philip Hardie and Stratis Kyriakidis, and it was immeasurably sad for all involved that Stratis passed away while the book was still in production. His extended dialogues with the editors have, nonetheless, left their mark on the volume, and on the Introduction in particular. Stratis was a decidedly 'hands-on' series editor who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that each volume of the 'Pierides' series managed to realise its full potential. This remained true even in his final years as he struggled with ill-health. In the hope that it is not too meagre a gesture for so fine a scholar and so gracious a human being, we have dedicated this volume to his memory.

Budapest, March 2023   AF, DK, AZ

ABBREVIATIONS

1. ANCIENT LITERATURE

Abbreviations for Greek and Latin literature follow the conventions of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition, with the following additions:

Lucr.   Lucretius
   DRN   *De Rerum Natura*
Stat.   Statius
   Theb.   *Thebaid*
Val. Fl. Valerius Flaccus
   Arg.   *Argonautica*
Virg.   Virgil
   Aen.   *Aeneid*

2. MODERN REFERENCE WORKS

ILS   *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*
OLD   P.G.W. Glare, ed., Oxford Latin Dictionary
        (Oxford 1968-1982)
TLL   *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*

3. JOURNALS

AC   *Acta Classica*
AJP   *American Journal of Philology*
ANRW   *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römische Welt*
CA   *Classical Antiquity*
CJ   *Classical Journal*
CP   *Classical Philology*
CQ   *Classical Quarterly*
CW   *Classical World*
EFH   *Entretiens de la Fondation Hardt*
G&R   *Greece and Rome*
HSCP   *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*

ICS	*Illinois Classical Studies*
JRS	*Journal of Roman Studies*
MD	*Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*
Mnem.	*Mnemosyne*
TAPA	*Transactions of the American Philological Association*

INTRODUCTION

THEORISING INCONSISTENCY IN FLAVIAN EPIC

ANDREW ZISSOS

> "Consistency isn't really a human trait."
> - *Harold and Maude* (1971; directed by Hal Ashby,
> screenplay Colin Higgins)

If inconsistency, as the eponymous heroine of the black comedy *Harold and Maude* observes at a poignant moment, is the expected condition in human affairs, the question naturally arises as to how scholars should react when complex human discursive enterprises such as Roman epic poems fail to exhibit the un-human quality of consistency.[1] What forms of inconsistency in these epics call for sustained critical attention? The answer ventured by James O'Hara, in his study *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*, is that attention should be focused on those cases in which inconsistency arises not from authorial lapse or biographical hazard,[2] but either from some manner of textual corruption or as a deliberate effect, "exploited for thematic purposes" by the epic poet.[3] The former belongs to the realm of the textual critic, the latter, the focus of O'Hara's monograph, to the realm of the literary critic. Distinguishing between the different categories is, of course, the crux of the matter; but when confronted with inconsistencies, the prescribed response is "to ask whether we can interpret them, and whether

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[1] This Introduction to the volume is a revised version of the keynote address delivered at the *Unity and Inconsistency in Flavian Epic* conference, held in Budapest on September 4-5, 2014. I would like to thank the conference participants for a number of comments that proved helpful in the revision process; additional thanks to my volume co-editors Attila Ferenczi and Dániel Kozák for helpful remarks and suggestions on an initial draft of the full version.

[2] O'Hara [(2007) 5] mentioning as examples untimely death (often cited in the cases of Lucretius, Virgil and Lucan) and banishment (Ovid).

[3] O'Hara (2007) 140. Other answers are of course possible: see, for example, n. 5 below.

they are being used with some skill to make suggestions—whether they
have been 'thematised'."[4]

Among its other virtues, *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*, which appeared
in 2007, is a breathtaking act of intellectual consolidation. It draws together
and offers a culminating validation of a vast array of recent work by various
scholars who had argued that many of the inconsistencies in ancient epic
were there for reasons other than authorial lapse or errant textual
transmission—that they were deliberate effects. This was an important
critical movement: prior to such scholarship there had been a nearly
exclusive analytical resort to mimetic assumptions and notions of 'unity'
that left scant theoretical space for appreciation of the many inconsistent
features and contradictory elements that permeate ancient epic.[5] As O'Hara
himself points out, much of the originality of his monograph lay in
analyzing over a range of epic poems what "a number of scholars have been
noticing in isolation in individual authors, often without mentioning work
being done by anyone else".[6] O'Hara was, in other words, gathering
together and building upon recent scholarship on both Greek and Roman
poetry in probing the possibility of interpreting certain instances of
inconsistency in the epic poems of Catullus, Lucretius, Virgil, Ovid, and
Lucan.[7]

From the point of view of the present volume, the coverage of O'Hara's
monograph prompts an obvious and compelling question: what happens
after Lucan?[8] On subsequent Roman epic O'Hara has nothing to say,
beyond a single sentence referring the reader to an article analyzing

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[4] O'Hara [(2007) 5, citing Scodel (1999) for the concept and term.

[5] It is worth acknowledging here that most Latinists, O'Hara and myself included,
are working within theoretical paradigms that would strike many post-structuralist
literary critics as oversimple and outdated. Deconstructionists, for example, have for
many decades followed the practice of "analyzing texts … in order to reveal their
inconsistencies and inner contradictions, … [to expose] the cover-ups that texts use
to create the semblance of stable meaning": Bertens (2014) 114. Cf. the reference of
O'Hara [(2007) 6] to "modern critics [who] have argued that texts tend to fly apart
despite the presumed desires of their authors for them to hold together."

[6] O'Hara (2007) 1.

[7] One might even extend this further by observing that O'Hara was applying to
ancient epic the kind of analysis that scholars in other fields had applied to other
literary traditions: one thinks of studies like Haber (1994) entitled *Pastoral and the
Poetics of Self-contradiction*, which ranges from Theocritus to Andrew Marvel.

[8] This question was raised by the organisers of the conference from which this
volume arose (see n. 1).

inconsistency in the *Argonautica* of Valerius Flaccus.[9] As this lone reference might suggest, inconsistency in Flavian epic has yet to be the focus of sustained and systematic study. And given that, in accordance with Maude's *dictum*, we can be confident that there is an abundance of inconsistency in Flavian epic, the question naturally arises as to whether the individual works of Valerius Flaccus, Statius and Silius Italicus merit critical attention in this regard, and, if so, how they relate to one another and to their predecessors. Do the Flavian epicists share patterns or modes of inconsistency? Is there anything specifically 'Flavian' about inconsistency in the Flavian epics, and if so, how might one set about accounting for—or historicising—it?[10]

1. Definition and Typology

Inconsistency in Roman Epic was written with the avowed intention of stimulating critical debate—and the present volume is powerful evidence of its success in that regard.[11] As its title is meant to convey, *Inconsistency in Flavian Epic* endeavours to build upon O'Hara's work by extending the study of inconsistency to that body of texts at whose threshold he terminated his monograph. At the same time, the opportunity to revisit some basic methodological issues ought not to be passed over. Most pertinent here is O'Hara's gambit of eschewing both a definition of his basic term and a rigorous typology:[12] such liberties are better suited to a diminutive monograph than a multi-authored volume such as this.

Let us begin, then, with the problem of definition: what is to be understood by 'inconsistency' in the context of Roman epic? The pertinent entry for 'inconsistent' from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* provides a useful point of departure: "lacking harmony between different parts or elements, self-contradictory."[13] It seems clear that this compound definition

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[9] O'Hara [(2007) 132] citing Zissos (1999) which explores, inter alia, how Valerius' allusive modes result in "internal discontinuities arising from the coexistence of distinct and incompatible statements of narrative fact" (p. 300).

[10] These broader concerns are addressed most directly by Ferenczi in the final section of Chapter One in this volume.

[11] O'Hara (2007) 2.

[12] With respect to the latter, O'Hara [(2007) 3] acknowledges the trade-off: "there may be room to criticize my lack of interest in distinguishing these different types of phenomena." His minimalist approach to such conceptual building blocks may also have to do with the modest word limits imposed for the *Roman Literature and its Contexts* series in which the monograph appeared.

[13] *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'inconsistent', 2.

refers to (at least) two distinct qualities: want of harmony and self-contradiction can be overlapping or related features but they are at their core fundamentally different concepts. With respect to the epic poems that are the focus of this volume, we might think of "lacking harmony between different parts or elements" as speaking in the first instance to style and subject matter, while 'self-contradictory' speaks primarily to content. This fundamental dichotomy carries with it important implications, not the least being that the first category has a subjective element inasmuch as ascribing want of harmony—or, to use a more familiar critical language, unity—to a literary work entails an aesthetic judgement over which there can be disagreement, whereas the second category is more 'objective' thanks to the generally self-evident and uncontroversial character of contradiction. As with O'Hara's monograph, the various analyses in this volume range over the two categories, touching on issues from 'generic mixing' (first category) to conflicting statements of narrative fact (second category).

The above dichotomy suggests a useful conceptual distinction around which a typology might be constructed. O'Hara's proceeds in a less formal manner, generating a list of categories from an initial overview of the book's contents. It is not entirely clear how far O'Hara's enumeration extends; on my reading his list of categories includes the following:[14]

    (1) factual inconsistencies;
    (2) inconsistencies of theme;
    (3) inconsistencies of philosophy;
    (4) inconsistencies of political attitudes;
    (5) incompatible mythological variants;
    (6) chronological problems;
    (7) mixing of genres;
    (8) unreliable narrators.

As O'Hara rightly points out, there are significant advantages to be gained by dispensing with rigour in matters of typology. There can, of course, also be costs—including the risk of category mistakes, omissions and diminished conceptual clarity. Based on the experience of various contributors to this volume, myself included, it seems likely that many readers will find O'Hara's ad hoc accumulation of categories difficult to grapple with. That said, the heterogeneous mix of texts under examination

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[14] O'Hara (2007) 3-4; I have omitted "inhabiting his opponents' positions" (p. 4), ascribed to Lucretius, as a sub-category of (3). In the initial (oral) version of Chapter Six, Jean-Michel Hulls listed nine categories of inconsistency enumerated by O'Hara, while indicating that his list was partial.

by O'Hara—including mythological and historical epic, neoteric epyllion, and non-narrative didactic poems on farming and Epicurean philosophy—made methodological vagueness a useful, perhaps even a necessary, expedient. In this respect, the present volume enjoys advantages over its predecessor: not only is it focused on a smaller group of texts, but those texts comprise a much more homogeneous collection. Valerius Flaccus, Statius and Silius Italicus all composed narrative epics—mythological in the first two cases, historical in the last.[15] This greater homogeneity makes it possible to take advantage of concepts and terminology from other disciplines that allow a more structured approach to inconsistency in the Flavian epics.

2. Inconsistencies of Content: The 'Continuity Error'

In any narrative, *continuity* speaks to consistency in the status and characteristics of characters, events, objects, and places encountered by the reader over the span of that narrative. A *continuity error* is any violation of that consistency, a breakdown in the expected operation of the fictional universe constellated by the narrative. The term arose in the first instance from film theory, though its use has subsequently been extended to other narrative forms—and is here being extended to ancient epic. Unlike the motley assortment of texts analyzed by O'Hara, the Flavian epics are all narrative forms that can be said to construct a fictional universe or 'storyworld' which is expected to operate consistently and according to established principles (the majority of which work according to real-world analogy).[16]

Adopting the notion of continuity offers a number of advantages, not the least being that it fosters alignment with other academic fields, thereby making available helpful *comparanda* against which inconsistency in ancient epic can be assessed. It also 'tidies up' and clarifies one subset of O'Hara's ad hoc typology. So, for example, positing separate categories for factual and chronological irregularities becomes unnecessary: both are continuity errors, both are instances of a storyworld failing to function

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[15] The distinction between historical epic and mythological epic is not germane to this kind of analysis: as with the *Argonautica* and *Thebaid*, the narrative of the *Punica* constructs a storyworld that either operates consistently or inconsistently at any given point. For a discussion of Silius' relationship to historiography, see Gibson (2010).

[16] The chief deviation from strict real-world analogy is of course the supernatural element—in particular divine machinery, which, as it happens is deployed in all extant Flavian epic, whether mythological or historical.

'properly'. A further benefit is that the adopted schema accommodates categories that were not enumerated in *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*. Thus, in addition to chronological problems, O'Hara's sixth category, inconsistencies in the working of physical space, a supplementary category that Dániel Kozák appends to O'Hara's list (Chapter Seven in this volume), simply amount to one more form of continuity error, one more manifestation of storyworld malfunction accommodated within this overarching category. It is also significant that, in the context of narrative forms, the 'continuity error' corresponds broadly to the second, more 'objective' category of inconsistency relating to content in the dictionary definition cited earlier, while excluding the first 'subjective' category relating to style and subject matter: in other words, continuity errors amount to 'self-contradictory' elements.

It should be acknowledged that, although they lacked the term, ancient literary critics were aware of and adept at identifying continuity errors, particularly in the much-scrutinised Homeric epics, as an important subset within the broad category of 'Homeric Problems'.[17] A notorious example involves the minor character Pylaemenes, leader of the Paphlagonians, in the *Iliad*. In Book 5, Menelaus kills Pylaemenes in battle (*Il.* 5.576-579); yet Pylaemenes appears later in the narrative, when he witnesses and mourns the death of his son (13.643-659). There is in the second passage an obvious failure to maintain the most important and irreversible characteristic of Pylaemenes: namely that he is no longer alive. As chiding ancient commentators eagerly pointed out, when composing the later passage 'Homer' evidently overlooked the earlier one.[18] It was presumably this kind of inadvertent continuity error that prompted Horace to declare *indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus* ("I become annoyed whenever great Homer nods", *Ars* 359).[19]

Continuity errors, as modern film criticism—to say nothing of ancient literary criticism, discussed by O'Hara in the first chapter of his monograph—recognised long ago, can be strategic choices as well as inadvertent effects: modern cinema abounds in instances of 'deliberate continuity errors'.[20] In film these are often deployed for comic effect; but other effects are possible, such as a mirthless 'baring of the device' employed as part of a metanarrative discourse. 'Deliberate' is, of course, a

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[17] Discussed more fully by Attila Ferenczi, Chapter One in this volume.

[18] Kirk (1990) 117 on *Il.* 5.576-589.

[19] The verb *indignor* ("I become annoyed") speaks to the irritation that a continuity error often provokes by shattering the 'suspension of disbelief' by which a satisfying narrative has drawn the reader into the storyworld.

[20] '*Wikipedia* s.v. 'Continuity' accessed June 1, 2021.

fraught term, as belonging to a language of intentionality that has long been out of favour with many literary critics—though it appears to have caused less consternation among their cinematic counterparts. If the intentionality debate can be put to the side for now,[21] then by a terminological transposition it can be said that a good deal of what O'Hara examined in his monograph, which does not hesitate to speak of "deliberate inconsistencies,"[22] and many of the phenomena examined by contributors to this volume amount to 'deliberate continuity errors'.

Sometimes, then, continuity errors have a premeditated purpose, are part of a broader artistic strategy. In many such cases they are 'thematized' in a direct and obvious way, often pressed into the service of something akin to a 'poetics of self-contradiction'—of which Lucan is arguably the supreme Roman epic exponent.[23] In other cases, though, the effect is of a different order: continuity errors arise from interference patterns arising across the various referential levels of the epic in question (on which more below). For now, suffice it to note that in both scenarios we can speak of 'deliberate continuity errors'; in this volume they are a primary focus of Chapters One (Ferenczi), Two (Buckley), and Three (Lovatt), and feature as well in the argumentation of Chapters Six (Hulls) and Seven (Kozák).

3. Inconsistencies of Style and Subject Matter

As already observed, inconsistencies of the second type generally do not qualify as continuity errors, and do not impinge upon the operation of the storyworld as such. There is a 'subjective' aspect to them inasmuch as in nearly all cases they depend upon prescriptive notions or aesthetic judgments relating to stylistic features of the literary work or the subject matter it treats and how these impinge on its 'unity'.

As a case in point, let us turn to what I take to be O'Hara's seventh category, the 'mixing of genres'.[24] This is a slightly misleading term

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[21] This is not meant to undercut either the importance or the complexity of the critical debate, as brought out, for example, in the second chapter of Hinds (1998) and the subsequent review by Miller (1999). Thoughtful remarks on intentionality are offered by Helen Lovatt, Chapter Three, section 5 in this volume.

[22] O'Hara (2007) 13, 36, 54, etc.

[23] Cf. Caterine [(2014) 13] arguing, by way of response to O'Hara's diachronic picture, that the crucial watershed in epic inconsistency comes not with the Augustan epicists, as O'Hara suggests, but with Lucan, who "elevates a minor feature of his predecessors into a poetic principle."

[24] Although O'Hara flags 'mixing of genres' in his initial typology and discusses numerous examples, he occasionally becomes somewhat evasive when it comes to

inasmuch as, formally speaking, ancient epics never ceased being 'epic' (for example, by momentarily abandoning their hexametric form of composition). We are not, in other words, speaking of genuinely composite generic forms (such as Petronius' prosimetron *Satyrica*), but merely deviations from expected norms with respect to subject matter or style that draw their inspiration from non-epic genres. In many such cases, it might be useful to speak of (generally fleeting) shifts in 'generic register.' The fundamental question then becomes: under what conditions does a shift in generic register amount to an inconsistency?

The critical stratagem resorted to here depends on what might be termed 'generic prescription': a definition of what epic 'should be'—for example, what kind of narrative material it should restrict itself to—is supplied, and significant deviations from the normative pattern are branded 'inconsistent'.[25] In recent scholarship this approach has generally made appeal to ancient authority: epic was conventionally associated with, to cite Virgil paraphrasing Callimachus (*Aet.* fr 1 Pfeiffer), lengthy narratives on the deeds of *reges et proelia* ("kings and battles", Virg. *Ecl.* 6.3).[26] The reality, of course, was probably never that simple, and it certainly wasn't by the early Roman imperial period. Moreover, by staking so much on absolute standards, this approach risks failing to recognise the evolution of genres over time. No literary genre is a static entity; though depending on a set of recognizable conventions, it is a dynamic and ever evolving literary form. Each epic poem that achieves a measure of renown updates and transforms the genre by the very fact of its coming into existence. Once they have become 'codified', forms of generic eclecticism that once seemed radical would be perceived as belonging to the expressive options conventionally available to the epic poet rather than inconsistencies as such. Whence the increasing irrelevance, with the passage of time, of narrow generic prescriptions such as *reges et proelia*, which, already schematic in their own day, would surely have lost even more prescriptive potency following the appearance of

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identifying particular cases as instances of inconsistency, and occasionally explicitly disavows any such identification: see, for example, O'Hara (2007) 119-121.

[25] Key studies, upon which many such critical ventures build, are Hinds (1998) and (2000).

[26] There was evidently no shortage of such prescriptions for epic: cf. Hor. *Ars* 73 *res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella*, ("the deeds of kings and commanders and wretched wars") and Stat. *Silv.* 5.3.10 *magnanimum ... facta ... regum*, "the deeds of stout-hearted kings"). The Virgilian collocation *arma virumque* (*Aen.* 1.1) was also used prescriptively in subsequent Roman literature: see, for example, n. 28, below.

generically 'omnivorous' works such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[27] A post-Ovidian epic poet could certainly appeal to generic prescriptions such as *reges et proelia*, as a kind of programmatic 'straw man'.[28] But the extent to which 'transgressions' of such putative norms would register as inconsistent is open to question.

The fundamental issue might be posed as follows: once patterns of generic hybridity are introduced into a given tradition, do subsequent instances continue to register with the implied or actual reader as 'inconsistent'? It seems more likely that there would be a 'waning of the effect' as the initial subversion of generic convention itself becomes codified and conventional. To put it in cinematic terms, after watching *Billy the Kid versus Dracula*, and registering a sense of 'inconsistency' in the blending of the western and horror film genres, would a movie-goer experience the same when viewing *Jesse James Meets Frankenstein's Daughter*?[29]

Literary genres constellate readerly expectations within the context of specific traditions. As Jean-Michel Hulls points out in Chapter Six, epic poetry had always made a practice of assimilating content appropriate to other genres and redeploying it within its own narrative domain.[30] The gradual expansion of normative subject matter in ancient epic would tend to vitiate the power of simple generic prescriptions to generate a perception or sense of inconsistency in its readers. Certainly, by the Flavian period epic habitually embraced panegyric, tragic and elegiac themes, and was an accepted vehicle for exploring and expressing ideas culled from, inter alia, science, philosophy, history, and ethnography.

In the context of the present volume, we might ask to what extent, in the wake of Apollonius Rhodius' generically ambivalent *Argonautica*, and

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[27] In his fifth chapter, O'Hara well surveys (drawing upon important earlier studies such as Farrell 1992) the issue of generic multiplicity in the *Metamorphoses*, in reference to figures such as Polyphemus and Medea.

[28] For 'essential epic', see Hinds (2000); see also Feeney [(1991) 324] on Valerius' deployment of the collocation of *arma* and *virum*, and Jessica Blum-Sorensen, Chapter Four in this volume. In Chapter Six of this volume Jean-Michel Hulls explores similar issues for Statius' *Thebaid*, suggesting that the initial programmatic declaration of theme *fraternas acies* (*Theb*. 1.1) establishes an "essentialised view of epic poetry as masculine and martial" (p. 124) that the subsequent narrative subverts.

[29] These two pioneering blends of the western and horror film genres were released in 1966 and initially played as a double feature.

[30] Of at least peripheral interest here is Hutchinson's notion of a hexametric 'super-genre,' and his discussion of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in particular [Hutchinson (2013) 22-24].

Ovid's presentation of a 'bigeneric' Medea in the *Metamorphoses*,[31] the
hybridity of Valerius Flaccus' epic still stands out as a manifestation of
'inconsistency'. Jessica Blum-Sorensen explores this question for Valerius'
Argonautica in Chapter Four; again, the point is that there is a subjective
element here: in such cases, as Blum-Sorensen observes, "inconsistency is
in the eye of the beholder".

4. Excluded Categories

Not everything that is apparently inconsistent should be counted as such in
a rigorously constructed typology. A case in point is what I take to be
O'Hara's eighth category of inconsistency: unreliable internal narrators.[32]
While an undeniably rich and fascinating literary device, this generally does
not fall within the remit of inconsistency per se, and it certainly needs to be
excluded from the remit of the continuity error.

O'Hara devotes a great deal of space to embedded narratives. In his rich
and detailed analysis of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the pertinent section
culminates with the declaration "[s]uch is the potential for narrative
inconsistencies to create a portrait of an unreliable narrator."[33] But care must
be taken here: an embedded narrative is not constrained by the same
standards of 'truthfulness' or continuity within the storyworld as events
reported on the primary diegetic level.[34] There is an obvious reason for this:
a particular character may be poorly informed, confused or may simply
choose to dissemble: such cases hardly amount to 'inconsistency' in any
meaningful sense. Here we are back to Maude's dictum: a storyworld in
which all humans (and anthropomorphic deities) behaved and discoursed
according to absolute standards of truthfulness, objectivity and transparency
would be decidedly odd. An unreliable internal narrator might be
designated, with colloquial specificity, 'a dishonest character', 'a forgetful
character', or 'a confused character'. Human nature being what it is, there
is nothing inconsistent about populating a narrative universe with such
figures.[35] Again, conceptual clarification can be sought from film studies.

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[31] See O'Hara (2007) 117-118.

[32] As with generic mixing, O'Hara at various points discusses unreliable internal
narrators, though without always asserting that such phenomena amount to
inconsistency per se, and sometimes explicitly stating that it is not.

[33] O'Hara (2007) 117.

[34] As Lash [(2019) 28] puts it more abstractly, "when we encounter a narrative within
another narrative, we are dealing … with an ontological hierarchy."

[35] O'Hara [(2007) 5] demonstrates that he is aware of the issue, observing that "[a]
text may be inconsistent … because a character is lying, or speaking deceptively for

Rather than speaking of inconsistency it might be more helpful to call to mind the '*Rashomon* effect', a term derived from the eponymous film, directed by Akira Kurosawa, in which a series of characters narrate the same event in wildly discrepant terms.[36]

In other words, apparent narrative inconsistencies that are reducible to the erroneous perception or manipulative intent of characters within the storyworld are not inconsistent in any meaningful sense. The same principle should probably be applied to the manipulation of prophetic utterances, a category that O'Hara devotes a great deal of space to. To the extent that those controlling the content of a prophetic utterance—whether mortal, divine, or a combination of the two—manipulate it without violating the proper operation of the storyworld, this does not involve inconsistency as defined above.

5. Inconsistency and Referential Level

An investigation of the nature and function of inconsistency in ancient epic would do well to pay close attention to the question of referential level. Any narrative epic operates on multiple levels of referentiality, of which it will be expedient here to identify three: the *diegetic* (encompassing the storyworld described by the epic narrative and the events that unfold within it); the *creatorial* or metapoetic (the implied or stated activity of the poet in creating his epic, sometimes referred to as the 'composition myth'); and the *external* or extrafictional (references to and engagement with the contemporary 'real world' in which the epic was composed, recited and read).[37] In all ancient epic the last two categories register far more intermittently than the first, but they nonetheless possess a measure of autonomy and even, in some cases, a distinctive ideological or rhetorical agenda.

Inconsistencies of content, or continuity errors, generally arise from two passages that contradict one another on the diegetic level. It is sometimes the case, however, that one of the two passages in question possesses a different or additional level of referentiality, either creatorial or external, whose rhetorical requirements impinge on the diegetic level, causing some

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rhetorical purposes. This solution … 'saves' the consistency of the world being presented by the text."

[36] For the '*Rashomon* effect', see conveniently Davis, Anderson and Walls (2016).

[37] The typology and following discussion draw inspiration from Lash (2019) 37-38, which itself harks back to the foundational work of Souriau (1951).

manner of 'narrative rift' or inconsistency.[38] In such instances, it is the requirements of the subsidiary referential level as a more-or-less autonomous discourse that generate the inconsistency.[39]

In order to clarify the dynamics at play here, it will be helpful to consider a pair of examples of how a text's different referential levels may become entangled with one another in ways that produce inconsistency. For entanglement of the creatorial with the diegetic level, the relatively well-documented case of Valerius' *Argonautica* will be briefly touched on; for the entanglement of the external and the diegetic level, the case of Silius' *Punica* will be examined in slightly more detail.[40]

5a. Diegetic and Creational Levels

Over time, ancient epic developed a more robust and systematic creational or metapoetic level of reference, moving away from traditional patterns of generic decorum and self-effacing craftsmanship that looked back to Homeric epic. Based on the limited evidence, it would appear that Ovid and Lucan were key figures in this development, at least as far as Roman epic is concerned: the difference between the *Metamorphoses* and *Bellum Civile* on the one hand and Virgil's *Aeneid* on the other is striking.[41] The transformation of Latin epic into a more self-conscious, more insistently auto-reflexive form by their two immediate predecessors was a crucial inheritance for the Flavian epicists, and Valerius Flaccus in particular.

The deep-rooted metaliterary preoccupations of the Flavian *Argonautica* have received a good deal of critical scrutiny in recent decades.[42] The critical reappraisal of Valerius' epic over this period rests in no small part on scholarship that has reclassified inconsistencies that had once been assumed to be accidental as deliberate and coherent—or, to use O'Hara's language, interpretable—gestures operating on the creatorial level of reference. A particular focus has been on how Valerius draws attention to

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[38] 'Narrative rift' from Zissos (1999). It is worth noting that such hybrid passages are distinct from explicit declarations such as invocations of the Muse. In Chapter Three, section 5 in this volume Helen Lovatt explores some of these possibilities using related critical concepts.

[39] This is often what is at play when O'Hara's speaks of inconsistencies "exploited for thematic purposes" [O'Hara (2007) 140].

[40] I have permitted myself this dilation on the *Punica* as it is under-represented in the chapters of this volume.

[41] Ovid: Gildenhard and Zissos (2000); Lucan: Masters (1992).

[42] See in particular Feeney (1991) 313-337; Malamud and McGuire (1993); Zissos (1999).

his mediating role as a selector of variants within the tradition.[43] In many instances this effect is achieved by making reference to mythological variants that the poet has chosen *not* to follow, thereby signalling a program of options.[44] In its more extreme manifestations, whereby a rival narrative variant is incorporated into the narrative in a marginal manner, this device causes the creational level to become entangled with its diegetic counterpart, resulting in irresolvable inconsistencies in narrative logic. So, for example, as Emma Buckley demonstrates in Chapter Two, the anticipation of the slaying of the Boreads at 4.524-525, implies that they will be "paying the price in the Flavian epic for what they did in a different poem entirely."[45] The signalling of unchosen variants is not in itself a novelty; it is a practice that can be traced through Virgil back to Homeric epic.[46] What makes Valerius' approach unusual is the extent to which he allows the assertion of mutually contradictory variants to affect the narrative fabric of his epic: the reader is repeatedly confronted with continuity errors arising from the coexistence of incompatible statements of narrative fact.[47] The 'meaning' of the text thus resides, in part, in the thematisation of the act of fictionalising, which often seems to take priority over straightforward narrative diegesis.

5b. Diegetic and External Levels

The early imperial period was the age of the senator poet, and few figures better illustrate that dual career path than Silius Italicus. As the fates of Ovid and Lucan under the Julio-Claudians had demonstrated, the

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[43] What follows is a *précis* of the argument of Zissos (1999), which analyses the following passages. listed in order of discussion: 8.64-66 and 98-99; 1.22-23 and 71-73; 1.218-20 and 3.545-51; 7.573-575; 3.699-702 with Ap. Rhod. 1.331-343; 1.43-50 and 5.224-225; 8.37-40 with Ap. Rhod. 3.617-623.

[44] 'Negative allusion' is the expression coined in Zissos (1999); it is worth recalling that the registering of incompatible mythological variants is O'Hara's fifth category of inconsistency, as enumerated above.

[45] Buckley, Chapter Two, section 2 in this volume.

[46] See Zissos [(1999) 300 n. 43] citing Slatkin (1991) for Homeric epic and Horsfall (1991) for Virgil.

[47] The other two Flavian epicists generate similar effects, but perhaps to a lesser degree than Valerius (see below, section 6). In Chapter Six of this volume, Jean-Michel Hulls discusses the elaboration of elements of a 'composition myth' (without explicitly using the term) in Statius' *Thebaid* and writes of the incorporation of 'incompatible mythological variants' (one of O'Hara's categories). The latter practice is also touched on as one possible interpretation of an inconsistency in Silius' *Punica* by Dániel Kozák in Chapter Seven.

consequences for prominent Roman authors of offending the *princeps* could be severe; cautious writers took measures to steer clear of imperial wrath, even at the cost of an inconsistent text. This dynamic is well illustrated in Silius' *Punica*, an epic in which two mutually contradictory discourses on Roman history collide, the first arising from the poet's diegetic treatment of his theme, the second from the demands of the sometimes perilous political climate in which he operated.

As has long been recognised, Silius conceived of his *Punica* as the belated middle term of a trilogy of Roman epics that took Vergil's *Aeneid* as its initial and Lucan's *Bellum Civile* as its concluding element.[48] Like Lucan, Silius exalts the defunct Roman Republic as a political ideal; whence the deep sense of nostalgia that pervades the *Punica*. One of the poem's most resonant insights is that, as Denis Feeney puts it, "Rome's victory over Carthage held the seeds of contemporary decline."[49] This pessimistic view of Roman history originated with moralising historians such as Sallust, who had famously identified the fall of Carthage, which left Rome with no serious rival to its geopolitical hegemony, as the pivotal event.[50]

In accordance with the Sallustian conception of history that it embraces and promulgates, the *Punica* is replete with anticipations of Roman decline.[51] At the close of the tenth book, immediately following his account of Rome's crushing defeat by Hannibal at Cannae, Silius affirms in a powerfully paradoxical formulation that this was Rome's greatest hour—and the beginning of her inexorable decline. After describing Roman resilience in the wake of one of history's most cataclysmic defeats, the poet addresses Carthage wistfully in what is surely the poem's most memorable apostrophe:[52]

> *haec tum Roma fuit: post te cui vertere mores*
> *si stabat fatis, potius, Carthago, maneres.*
> (Sil. 10.657-658)

> "This was Rome at that time; if it was ordained by fate that our [national] character should change after your fall, it would have been better, Carthage, if you had remained." [53]

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[48] See conveniently Tipping [(2007) 225] with further references.
[49] Feeney (1996) 4107.
[50] Sall. *Hist*. 1.12; *Cat*. 10.1-2.
[51] On the theme of decline more generally, see conveniently Harrison (2005).
[52] Similarly 3.588-590; 9.346-347, 351-353 (two more effective apostrophes); cf. 14.684-8.
[53] The text of the *Punica* is cited from Delz (1987); translations are from Augoustakis and Bernstein (2021), with some modifications.

The forceful assertion of this historical trajectory would seem to oblige a skeptical perspective on Silius' own day, but that is not consistently the case. Earlier in the poem, Silius extols the Flavian dynasty at great length (3.594-629), with particularly extravagant praise of Domitian.[54] This panegyric, part of a prophetic disquisition put in the mouth of Jupiter himself, presents the Flavian Age as a culmination of Roman history, the very apogee of Roman greatness:[55]

> exin se Curibus virtus caelestis ad astra
> efferet, et sacris augebit nomen Iulis
> bellatrix gens bacifero nutrita Sabino.
> <div align="right">(Sil. 3.594-596)</div>

> "After that, heavenly virtue will raise itself to the stars from the town of Cures: a warlike race, born and bred in olive-bearing Sabine land, will exalt the sacred Julians' name."

This utterance is impossible to square with the poem's more Sallustian pronouncements on Roman decline. Such a fundamental inconsistency is best understood as arising from the exigencies of the extrafictional contemporary world in the form of more-or-less obligatory sections of imperial panegyric.[56] As a result, the diegetic and external levels, which are mutually implicated in an historical epic such as the *Punica*, assert historical teleologies that are fundamentally at odds.[57] We might say that Silius is

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[54] A similar, if briefer, treatment at 11.122-126.

[55] It is noteworthy that this passage exalts not just the Flavians, but also the preceding Julio-Claudian dynasty (3.595). Silius' subtle assertion of continuity with the Flavians' Julio-Claudian predecessors (*sacris augebit nomen Iulis*, 595) makes of the entire Imperial Age a culminating phase of greatness in Roman history. This amounts, then, to a twofold counterthrust to the theme of historical decline.

[56] This is a relatively new element of Roman epic composition that has a concomitant development in the emergence of imperial panegyric as a discrete literary genre in the first century CE (as well as index of the ever-widening gulf that was opening up between the emperor and the senatorial class).

[57] The same tension, of course exists in Lucan's proemic praise of Nero (Luc. 1.33-66), over which much ink has been spilled. Unlike Silius, though, Lucan addresses and to a degree mitigates the contradictory effect by addressing it directly (1.33-44), thereby transmuting (in the eyes of many critics) the contradiction into irony. In her essay on Statius' *Thebaid*, Chapter Five in this volume, Ruth Parkes explores a related but different phenomenon, whereby the proemic anticipation of Domitian's achievement of astral immortality is subtly undermined by the conspicuous failure of a variety of the poem's protagonists to achieve the same. On this reading, a

caught between a primary aristocratic ideology of the past and a secondary rhetoric of the coercive imperial present.[58]

Did the historical figure T. Catius Asconius Silius Italicus genuinely believe his own exaltation of the contemporary Flavian Age? The available biographical evidence makes that unlikely.[59] A high-ranking Roman senator, Silius managed, over the course of a long and flourishing political career, safely to navigate a dizzying array of violent regime changes and their attendant perils. He was one of Nero's final pair of consuls, still in office when that emperor committed suicide in 68 CE.[60] In the turmoil that followed, the so-called Year of Four Emperors, Silius became a close friend and supporter of the short-lived emperor Vitellius—a potentially disastrous case of backing the wrong political horse.[61] Despite his close associations with both Nero and Vitellius, Silius continued to prosper in the Flavian period: he was a provincial governor under Vespasian,[62] and father of a consul under Domitian. There is clearly a strong case to be made that Silius survived the turbulent times in which he lived by being politically inconsistent; small wonder that his nuanced and sophisticated epic manifests the same quality.[63]

6. The Chapters

The individual chapters of this volume include seven analyses concentrating on an individual poem and one broader study of all three Flavian epicists. With respect to the former, there is a noticeable asymmetry in the distribution

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discrepancy across levels of reference—extratextual and diegetic—is an effect engineered by the poet to impart a subtle political message.

[58] In terms of O'Hara's typology enumerated above, this might be classified as belonging to the fourth category (inconsistency of political attitudes).

[59] We are relatively well informed about Silius' political career. There is assorted evidence, the most important of which is literary. This includes passages from the works of Martial, Pliny the Younger, and Tacitus, all contemporaries or near contemporaries of Silius.

[60] Nero's last consul: Plin. *Ep.* 3.7.9-10. Earlier in the same letter, Pliny reports that Silius' reputation suffered from his role as informer under the same emperor (3.7.2).

[61] Tac. *Hist.* 3.65 reports that Silius even participated, as a witness on the Vitellian side, in the negotiations between the warring factions. In Pliny's summation, Silius served Vitellius *sapienter et comiter* ("wisely and amicably", *Ep.* 3.7.3).

[62] As proconsul of Asia in 77-78; according to Pliny (*Ep.* 3.7.3), he performed his duties in an exemplary manner.

[63] The assertion of mutually exclusive political views will rise to the level of continuity error when the views are expressed as statements of fact and framed as historical teleologies, as we find in the *Punica*.

of coverage: four chapters focus on Valerius *Argonautica*, two on Statius' *Thebaid*, and only one on Silius' *Punica*. How might this uneven distribution, and the domination of Valerius in particular, be accounted for? The most obvious explanation is that inconsistency is a more prominent feature of Valerius' epic, that it is somehow, as Emma Buckley nicely puts it in Chapter Two, "hard-wired" into the poem in a manner different from the *Thebaid* or the *Punica*. The comparative study of Antonio Río Torrres-Murciano, Chapter Eight in this volume, would seem to lend support to this thesis inasmuch as it demonstrates a lesser inclination on the parts of Statius and Silius to grapple directly with the same inherited Homeric/Virgilian incongruity than Valerius. It may also be the case that the peculiar history of modern scholarship on the *Argonautica* has played a role.[64] The influential interwar study of Friedrich Mehmel, which dismissed Valerius' epic as an incoherent composition marked by rampant internal contradictions, largely set the critical agenda through to the present day, as many subsequent scholars have striven to confirm or refute his judgment.[65] The 1990s were an important decade for the refutation side, with three publications in particular rehabilitating Valerius' epic by focusing on its metaliterary preoccupations, thereby preparing the ground for the kinds of rich and nuanced studies of the Flavian *Argonautica* found in this volume.[66] There simply has been no comparable scholarly trajectory for either Statius or Silius Italicus: the chapters on the *Thebaid* and *Punica* thus tend to have a somewhat more exploratory or foundational character than do their four Valerian counterparts.

In Chapter One, 'Foreknowledge and Deviation in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*', Attila Ferenczi offers the first of the four essays focusing specifically on the Flavian *Argonautica*. His paper offers an in-depth analysis of an apparent continuity error arising over discrepant indications of Jason's knowledge of the death of his father Aeson (*Arg.* 2.1-3, 3.301-303). After examining this inconsistency on its own terms, Ferenczi provides an analysis of the intertextual context, examining correspondences with Virgil's discrepant indications of Aeneas' awareness of the death of Dido in the *Aeneid*. He then offers some thoughts on the potential

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[64] A more detailed overview of modern scholarship is provided by Emma Buckley, Chapter Two, section 1 in this volume.

[65] Mehmel (1934), identifying 'Sinnlosigkeit' (senselessness), as the chief characteristic of the poem. In this volume both Attila Ferenczi (Chapter One) and Emma Buckley (Chapter Two) take Mehmel as a critical point of departure.

[66] Feeney [(1991) 313-337] brilliantly explores Valerius' play with generic prescription; Malamud and McGuire (1993) and Zissos (1999) tackle a number of continuity errors, as discussed in the previous section.

implications for Valerius' characterisation of Jason. Finally, Ferenczi expounds on the suggestive parallelism between the confusion surrounding Aeson's death in the early books and the baffling circumstances in the poem's second half of Aeetes' brother Perses, who, like Jason, voices frustration at the inadequacy of divine communication via oracles.

In Chapter Two, 'Phineus and the *Ira Deorum:* Inconsistency and Interpretation in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica'*, Emma Buckley provides an analysis of Valerius' Phineus episode (*Arg.* 4.423-636) that pulls back from the metaliterary concerns of many recent studies of inconsistency in the Flavian *Argonautica* in order to come to grips with direct thematic implications. By way of situating her analysis, Buckley opens with a polemical *tour-de-force* that brings out the pervasively dissonant character of Valerius' epic and then offers a helpful overview of the modern critical response to that dissonance. She then turns her attention to the liberation of Phineus and other 'civilising' episodes in Book 4 that have given rise to optimistic readings of the poem in recent decades. Buckley shows that a number of inconsistencies, particularly as found in the speech of Typhoeus at 4.519-526 and in the often evasive and obscure language of Phineus himself, serve to undermine any such uplifting interpretation of this part of Valerius' epic. The essay concludes by extrapolating from Phineus' utterances to the much-discussed authorising prophecy of Jupiter at 1.531-560 and the theodicy it appears to underwrite.

In Chapter Three, 'Unity and Power: Valerius Flaccus, Apollonius Rhodius and the Election of Jason', Helen Lovatt provides an in-depth examination of a much-discussed inconsistency in Valerius' *Argonautica*, which arises at a tense moment in Book 3 when Telamon mentions an earlier election process by which Jason was made leader by his fellow Argonauts (3.699-702). This episode is found in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (1.317-362), but is absent from Valerius' earlier narrative and is not easily squared with it. Lovatt shows that this notorious 'continuity error' can be—and has been—interpreted in various ways that touch on the 'creatorial' level of reference. Ultimately, though, her purpose is to move beyond metapoetics to investigate the political ramifications of this inconsistency. For Lovatt, inconsistency and related phenomena can have political implications—and this is all the more likely to be the case when they touch on questions of heroic leadership. She concludes by problematising straightforwardly 'optimistic' reading strategies that see the *Argonautica* as validating Flavian rule: "Valerius leaves us at sea in a shifting flood of words, memories and ideas."

In Chapter Four, 'Juno *Audax:* Rethinking Genre in the *Argonautica'*, Jessica Blum-Sorensen examines the ongoing tension in Valerius' epic