"One must not ask questions such as these": ancient and modern scholars on inconsistencies, from Aristotle to Versnel

Jonge, C.C. de; Beerden, K.; Naerebout, F.

2

"One Must Not Ask Questions Such as These"

Ancient and Modern Scholars on Inconsistencies, from Aristotle to Versnel

Casper C. de Jonge

> Uitgerekend onze charmante God had mij als patiënt in een gek-
> kenhuis gebracht op de avond van 26 februari 1966 in Leiden en als
> het nu Poseidon, Prometheus en de Schikgodinnen waren geweest
> die me dat hadden geleverd, had ik er vrede mee gehad.
>
> It was precisely our charming God who had brought me to the mad-
> house on the evening of 26 February 1966 in Leiden and if it had
> been Poseidon, Prometheus and the Moirai who had done this to
> me, it would have been acceptable to me.
>
> <small>BIESHEUVEL 2018, 253</small>

∵

1 Introduction

The second chapter of *Coping with the Gods* raises an important ques-
tion, which is formulated in the title: "The Gods: Divine Justice or Divine
Arbitrariness?"[1] In this chapter Versnel convincingly shows that many ancient

---

1 Versnel 2011a, 151–237. It is a great honour for me to contribute a paper to a volume on
the impact and importance of Henk Versnel's work. I happen to belong to the lucky gen-
eration of Leiden students who were born just in time to be taught by Versnel in the last
few years before his retirement. His lectures on Greek mythology, which I attended in
the late 1990s, were the most learned, the most inspiring, and the most entertaining that
were on offer at Leiden. In 2001 I became a PhD student at Leiden University, with my
own office and a computer with access to the printer of the Classics Department. Versnel
knew where to find me. I was delighted that he frequently visited me, and perhaps slightly
less delighted that he would as frequently ask me to print yet another version of his mon-
umental book, which at that stage consisted of more than the 593 pages of the final ver-
sion. As a reward for printing his chapters, Versnel gave me a most precious gift of ξενία:
I was allowed to save the Word Documents of his book on my computer, so that I could
read and reread it whenever I wished. Which I did, over and over again; this inspired

Greek texts do not answer this question with a clear choice in favour of either one of the alternatives mentioned. On the contrary: events that happen in the life of a human being can be explained as resulting from *both* divine justice *and* divine arbitrariness; and contradictory explanations often stand peacefully next to each other within one single text.

Henk Versnel and I have often discussed this problem. When I teach a course on Herodotus or archaic Greek poetry at the Leiden Classics Department of Leiden University, I usually invite Henk Versnel to deliver a guest lecture, so that new generations of students can not only profit from his great knowledge, but also enjoy his inspiring and entertaining teaching methods. Versnel's guest lectures always had the same topic: 'divine justice or divine arbitrariness – contradictions in archaic thought.' As a result I have had many opportunities to listen to Versnel's analysis of the contradictory statements in archaic literature. He objects to clever, modern attempts to explain away the inconsistencies; instead he proposes that we adopt a tolerant attitude towards contradictions in ancient Greek literature. The guest lectures would usually be followed by a lunch allowing us to further discuss inconsistencies in Homer, Herodotus, Solon and Theognis. As part of the table talk, I once asserted that some ancient literary critics were just as tolerant of the coexistence of contradictory truths as Henk Versnel. This chapter will present the argument supporting that claim.

I will argue that Versnel indeed had ancient predecessors – ancient scholars who, like him, believed that contradictions in archaic literature should not be explained away by clever strategies of interpretation or over-interpretation; and ancient scholars who thought that such contradictions were in fact characteristic of archaic literature. It should not come as a surprise that such predecessors can only be found among the most learned men of the ancient world: the ancient Versnels were called Aristotle and Aristarchus. To be sure, I am not going to argue that Aristotle (fourth century BC) and Aristarchus (third century BC) taught exactly the same theory that Versnel presented in AD 2011. What I will argue is that these ancient scholars were (for a variety of reasons) tolerant of contradictions in archaic Greek literature, and the Homeric epics in particular; and that these scholars thus represent what one could call a 'proto-Versnellian' approach towards literature, which is very different from the "typically modern drive towards transparency and explicitness", very different indeed from the "desire to bring to light a coherence that Homer left implicit and opaque."[2]

2   Versnel 2011a, 167 on Dodds 1951, 6–7: see below, n. 3.

2   Versnel on the Coexistence of Contradictory Truths

Let me briefly summarize the argument Versnel presents in the second chapter of *Coping with the Gods*. He demonstrates that archaic Greek literature explains divine interventions in the lives of human beings on the one hand as a form of divine justice (man is punished for wrong deeds, and rewarded for proper behaviour) and on the other as a form of divine arbitrariness (the gods fix everything randomly, 'according to their will'). These two contrasting options can 'peacefully' coexist in the writings of one author, even within a single text. The three main examples discussed by Versnel are taken from Homer, Herodotus and Solon. In *Iliad* 19, Agamemnon famously blames Zeus *and* Moira *and* Erinys for his own bad behaviour towards Achilles, before adding that "God accomplishes everything."[3] Herodotus explains the downfall of the Lydian king Croesus by a stunning variety of options, all mentioned in book 1 of the *Histories*: universal principles, the arbitrary intervention of god or the gods, the envy of the gods, *and* human faults.[4] In his *Hymn to the Muses* (fr. 13 West) Solon first emphasizes the universal importance of δίκη – Zeus punishes human beings for their hybris – but then he just as eloquently complains about the arbitrariness of fate – there is nothing on which we can actually rely.[5]

   How do we deal with this "persistent and pervasive lack of consistency in expressions concerning divine causation"?[6] Versnel shows how most modern scholars are inclined to 'save the author' and to 'solve' the problems they find in archaic (and classical) literature:[7] when confronted with a contradiction in archaic literature, modern scholars usually keep interpreting, re-interpreting and over-interpreting until they have (they think) discovered and revealed the 'real meaning', i.e. the consistency and coherence that *underlies* the superficial

---

3   Versnel 2011a, 163–179. In Homer, *Iliad* 19.86–96 Agamemnon refers to 'Zeus and Moira and Erinys' as being responsible for his unfortunate behaviour towards Achilles. Dodds 1951, 6–7 interprets these words by constructing a hypotactic relationship between the three agents, which supposedly underlies the paratactic relationship presented by Agamemnon. In Dodds' interpretation Zeus is the mythological agent, Erinys is the personal agent "who ensures the fulfilment of a *moira*." The explanation which Biesheuvel 2018, 253 adduces for his own madness (God rather than 'Poseidon, Prometheus *and* the Moirai') echoes Agamemnon's juxtaposition of "Zeus *and* Moira *and* Erinys."

4   Versnel 2011a, 179–190 on Herodotus, *Histories* 1.32–34 and 1.86–91.

5   Versnel 2011a, 201–212 on Solon fr. 13 West. Noussia 2010, 133 points out that the *Hymn to the Muses* consists of two parts: lines 1–32, "in which justice dominates and appears to govern human affairs" and lines 33–70, "where the outcomes of human action seem to be depicted as being largely determined by the unpredictable (and even capricious) power of fortune (μοῖρα)."

6   Versnel 2011a, 162.

7   See the section 'Saving the Author' in Versnel 2011a, 190–201.

chaos: once interpreted by these clever commentators, Homer suddenly appears to be as logical and coherent as they are:

> As soon as feelings of uneasiness concerning the consistency in a textual unit emerge, modern readers have a range of hermeneutic strategies at their disposal to allay their misgivings and satisfy their craving for coherence.[8]

Which 'strategies' do scholars employ in order to explain away the contradictions in ancient literature? Three of these strategies should be singled out here, to which I refer as '*paraleipsis*', 'perspective', and 'textual criticism.' I will start from Versnel's observations on modern scholars of Greek religion, but we will later see that all of these strategies were also employed in ancient scholarship.

First, scholars may claim that apparent inconsistencies in archaic poetry are the result of *paraleipsis* (παράλειψις):[9] the author is intentionally silent, and invites the reader to reconstruct the connections that the text itself leaves implicit. This is one of the strategies adopted in the scholarship on Agamemnon's words in *Iliad* 19.86–96, mentioned above: E.R. Dodds assigns different roles to Zeus (mythological agent), Moira ('portion' or 'lot') and Erinys (the immediate agent) and thereby reconstructs a 'hypotactic relationship' which Homer himself left implicit. Thus, Homer is 'saved' by *paraleipsis*.[10]

Second, scholars argue that apparent inconsistencies in archaic literature are in fact not *real* inconsistencies, because the contradictory views are expressed by different characters with different perspectives (and perhaps for different audiences at different occasions). Narratologists have adopted this strategy in order to explain the contradictory statements in Herodotus' Croesus *logos*:[11] Croesus himself, Solon, Apollo, and the narrator all have their own

---

8   Versnel 2011a, 188.
9   The term 'paralipsis' is used by Versnel 2011a, 192.
10   Dodds 1951, 6–7; see Versnel 2011a, 167.
11   De Jong 1999 deals with narratological aspects of Herodotus' *Histories*; De Jong 2013 is an abridged and updated version of the same article. On Herodotus' Croesus narrative, see Shapiro 1996 and Pelling 2006 with further bibliography. Shapiro 1996 argues that Herodotus agrees with the views expressed by Solon in his speech to Croesus (*Histories* 1.29–33): in her interpretation there is little room for inconsistencies. Pelling 2006 focuses on the elusiveness of wisdom which the Croesus narrative demonstrates and draws attention to the proverbial character of Solon's speech: this analysis thus in various ways anticipates the argument in Versnel 2011a. See especially Pelling 2006, 152: "If this is right, all three strands are in the air, universal mutability, divine envy, and the prospective of tyrannically transgressive, self-destructive behaviour."

perspectives, which account for their different statements.[12] Versnel rightly acknowledges that this strategy is important and valuable, but he also points out that it cannot explain everything: as he argues, the contradictory truths are even juxtaposed within the statements formulated by one single character.[13]

Finally, scholars have always attempted to solve their problems of interpretation by creatively changing the ancient texts or by deleting difficult passages. This method can be illustrated by the case of Solon's *Hymn to the Muses*: one of the numerous 'solutions' scholars have proposed in order to account for the contradiction between the two parts of the poem (one emphasizing divine justice, the other one arbitrariness) is to assume that the two parts simply belong to different poems.[14] Similar arguments have been advanced for the corpus of Theognis which Versnel also includes in his argument.[15]

Versnel proposes a radically different approach towards the contradictions we find in archaic literature. He argues that we should not impose our own logical rules on the texts of Homer, Herodotus and Solon; that the coexistence of contradictory 'truths' is in fact characteristic of archaic literature; and that the contradictory statements concerning divine causation represent 'gnomologisches Wissen': they are to be understood as proverbs, maxims, or gnomic expressions, which are paratactically organized within the narrative:

> The result is not necessarily 'unity *in* diversity' – which of course may occur, but is easily misappropriated as a soothing expression serving to reconfiscate their experiments for our paradigm – but unity *as* diversity. In other words I am suggesting that the syntactically peaceful contiguity of semantically inconsonant explanations should not necessarily be censured as chaos – non-sense, hence to be adjusted in order to save the author – but may be appreciated as another type of order, that is *their* type of sense.[16]

---

12   In his interpretation of *Histories* 1.34.1 (after Solon's departure a νέμεσις came from God and struck Croesus) Pelling 2006, 150 draws a distinction between the perspectives of Solon on the one hand and the narrator on the other: "Herodotus marks this as his own conjecture (ὡς εἰκάσαι), and it goes some way beyond anything directly suggested by Solon's words."

13   Versnel 2011a, 189–190: "[I]n both the Polykrates *logos* and the Croesus episodes it may be one single character, including the god Apollo, that lists a variety of sometimes divergent explanatory devices."

14   Noussia 2010, 133–134 mentions various scholars (including Perrotta, Puccioni and Colesanti) who have argued that the text of fr. 13 West consists of two or even three separate elegies.

15   Versnel 2011a, 154–160.

16   Versnel 2011a, 212–213.

3   Ancient Philosophers and Scholars on Contradiction

How do ancient scholars deal with contradictions? Let us start from a few observations on the notion of 'contradiction' in ancient thought more generally.[17] The Greeks use the term ἀντίφασις for a 'contradiction' proper, and they have the term διαφωνία for cases of 'discord', 'disagreement', and 'inconsistency.' Not surprisingly, self-contradiction was looked upon with suspicion, especially in the circles of rhetoricians and philosophers. Rhetoricians naturally warn their students not to juxtapose contradictory statements, because self-contradictory discourse will significantly weaken the persuasiveness of a speech or narrative.[18] Aristotle devotes much attention to contradictory propositions in several of his philosophical works and draws a clear conclusion (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 6. 1011b13–15):[19]

> ὅτι μὲν οὖν βεβαιοτάτη δόξα πασῶν τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἀληθεῖς ἅμα τὰς ἀντικειμένας φάσεις, καὶ τί συμβαίνει τοῖς οὕτω λέγουσι, καὶ διὰ τί οὕτω λέγουσι, τοσαῦτα εἰρήσθω.

> The fact that the most secure belief of all is that opposite affirmations are not true at the same time, what the consequences are for those who say that they are, and why it is that they say this, may now be regarded as adequately discussed.[20]

---

17   Rieger 2012 offers a helpful discussion of the notion of 'contradiction' ('Widerspruch') in ancient rhetoric. For the principle of non-contradiction in ancient Greek philosophy, see Thom 1999 and Hudry 2013 with further bibliography.

18   See e.g. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 4.2.88–94 on false narrative, especially 4.2.90: curandum praecipue, quod fingentibus frequenter excidit, ne qua inter se pugnent; quaedam enim partibus blandiuntur, sed in summam non consentiunt: praeterea ne iis quae vera esse constabit adversa sint: in schola etiam ne color extra themata quaeratur. "The most important precautions however (often forgotten by those who make things up) are (1) to avoid self-contradiction (for some stories are attractive in parts, but do not make a consistent whole); (2) to avoid any inconsistency with what is acknowledged to be true; (3) also, in school exercises, not to look for a 'colour' outside the terms of the theme." Translation Russell 2001.

19   This is Aristotle's summary of what he has argued in Γ3 1005b8-Γ6 1011b12. See also *Metaphysics* I4 1055b.

20   Translation Reeve 2016.

There were of course exceptions to the rule. Much of Aristotle's thought about contradiction is directed against the followers of Protagoras.[21] Protagoras is especially known for claiming that "man is the measure of all things" (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος) and for stating that "on each matter there are two arguments opposed to each other" (δύο λόγους εἶναι περὶ παντὸς πράγματος ἀντικειμένους ἀλλήλοις).[22] But even if we assume that Protagoras' relativism implied that in his view opposite truths could co-exist, this would still not make him a proto-Versnel. For it seems that in the case of Protagoras, the contrast between two opposite statements would be explicit and articulated (μέν / δέ). We, however, are looking for a paratactic combination of two contrary statements that leaves the relationship between the two *implicit*, as with Solon's statements on divine justice and arbitrariness in the *Hymn to the Muses* or with Croesus' explanations for his downfall in Herodotus' book 1.

Aristotle's belief that "it is impossible for anyone to take the same thing to be and not to be" was extremely influential and became one of the fundamental truths of western philosophy.[23] Around the year AD 1000 Avicenna, also known as Ibn Sina, aggressively threatened students who would not accept the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction. A person who denies this law "must be subjected to the conflagration of fire, since 'fire' and 'not fire' are one. Pain must be inflicted on him through beating, since 'pain' and 'no pain' are one. And he must be denied food and drink, since eating and drinking and the abstention from both are one [and the same]."[24]

In contexts of logic, dialectic and rhetoric such a gentle warning is quite understandable. But matters might be slightly different in literary contexts. In fact, even Aristotle himself (as we will see below) seems to have acknowledged as much. Let us therefore turn from philosophy to philology: one context where contradictions have always been found problematic is that of poetry. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the discipline of classical philology was in

---

21 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ5-Γ6 (1009a6–1011b22) offers an extensive refutation of Protagoras' argument (DK 80B1) that "Man is the measure of all things, of those that are that they are and of those that are not that they are not" (πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μέν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν). See Keeling 2013 on Aristotle, Protagoras and contradiction.

22 DK 80B6 (= Diogenes Laertius 9.51).

23 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ 3. 1005b23–25: ἀδύνατον γὰρ ὁντινοῦν ταὐτὸν ὑπολαμβάνειν εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι … (Translation Reeve 2016). Aristotle adds "… as some people think Heraclitus says" (… καθάπερ τινὲς οἴονται λέγειν Ἡράκλειτον). For Heraclitus' fragments that could be connected with Aristotle's statement, see Reeve 2016, 344.

24 Avicenna, *Metaphysics* 1.8, 53.13–15, commenting on Aristotle, *Topics* 1.11.105a4–5. Translation Marmura 2004.

fact born from the need to 'solve' all kinds of 'problems' in poetic texts: such problems could include unrealistic scenes, improprieties of gods and characters, linguistic difficulties, but also inconsistencies. Many of such problems were identified in the Homeric epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which continued to be analysed, interpreted and debated throughout antiquity.

Within the long ancient debate on Homeric problems we might roughly distinguish between two parties. On the one hand, there were those intellectuals who, for different reasons and from different angles, fiercely attacked Homer for being (grammatically, ethically or aesthetically) incorrect, inappropriate or inconsistent. This group included sophists and philosophers, like Protagoras, Xenophanes, Plato and Zoilus, nicknamed 'Scourge of Homer' (Ὁμηρόμαστιξ), and moralistic teachers, whose views can be deduced for example from Plutarch's *How to Read Poetry*.[25] On the other hand, there were those scholars who tried to 'save' Homer (to use Versnel's terminology) and who therefore refuted the arguments against Homer, thus solving the 'problems' that the first group of scholars had posed. The second group included, again, philosophers, such as Aristotle and Porphyry, literary critics, such as Longinus (the author of *On the Sublime*), poets, such as Horace, and the scholars who worked in the Library of Alexandria.[26]

---

25   Protagoras objected to Homer's use of the imperative ἄειδε ('sing') and the feminine substantive μῆνις ('wrath') in *Iliad* 1.1: see DK 80A27–29 with Fehling 1965. For Xenophanes' criticism of Homer's portrayal of the gods, see DK 21B11. On Zoilus of Amphipolis (fourth century BC), see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Isaeus* 20 (DK 85A13) and Longinus, *On the Sublime* 9.14 (criticism of *Odyssey* 10.237). On Plato's complex relationship with Homer in various dialogues, see the essays in Destrée 2011 with further bibliography. On Plutarch's *How to Read Poetry* and ancient criticism of Homer, see Hunter and Russell 2011, 9–11.

26   On Aristotle's discussion of Homeric Problems in *Poetics* 25, see below (section 5.3). For Porphyry's *Homeric Questions* (ed. Schrader 1880), see Schlunck 1993 and MacPhail 2010 (and cf. below). Longinus, *On the Sublime* 9.7–8 echoes Xenophanes' criticism of Homer's portrayal of the gods: "Homer has done his best to make the men in the *Iliad* gods and the gods men" (ἀνθρώπους ... θεοὺς πεποιηκέναι, τοὺς θεοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώπους). But this critic saves Homer by proposing allegorical interpretation: "Terrible as these passages are, they are utterly irreligious and breach the canons of propriety unless one takes them allegorically" (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα φοβερὰ μέν, πλὴν ἄλλως, εἰ μὴ κατ᾽ ἀλληγορίαν λαμβάνοιτο, παντάπασιν ἄθεα καὶ οὐ σῴζοντα τὸ πρέπον). Translation Fyfe / Russell in Halliwell et al. 1995. There are similar attempts to 'save' Homer in Plutarch's *How to Read Poetry* (see above, n. 25). Horace (*Ars Poetica* 359–360) is aggrieved whenever "good Homer nods" (bonus dormitat Homerus), but acknowledges that "when a work is long, a drowsy mood may well creep over it" (verum operi longo fas est obrepere somnum). Translation Fairclough 1978. Brink 1971, 368 points out that Horace defends Homer by alleging "a reason for Homeric faults [...]: the size of his task." Longinus, *On the Sublime* 33.4 makes a very similar point: "I have myself cited a good many faults (ἁμαρτήματα) in Homer and the other greatest authors,

The ancient debate on Homer's alleged mistakes has of course left numerous traces in a great variety of ancient works, from Plato to Plutarch and from Horace to Longinus. The remaining part of this paper will focus on two ancient authors who were arguably most influential in classical scholarship. The first author is Aristarchus, whose interpretations of Homer partly survive in the massive body of scholia on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The second author will be Aristotle: in the 25th chapter of his *Poetics* he has kindly included a summary of his *Homeric Problems* (a treatise that is now lost), which introduces several strategies by which one can solve the problems detected in Homeric poetry.

4 The Homeric Scholia: Ancient Strategies to Resolve Contradictions

It is perhaps not surprising that the ancient strategies to 'solve' problems in Homer are quite similar to the strategies of modern scholarship. Versnel observes that modern scholars attempt to resolve the inconsistencies in Homer, Herodotus and Solon by having recourse to the strategies of *paraleipsis*, perspective and textual criticism.[27] Parallels for these three strategies can easily be found in the ancient scholarship on Homer. Apart from these three methods, ancient critics of course also employed other strategies, including etymology and allegorical interpretation.[28] I will, however, focus on *paraleipsis*, perspective and textual criticism, because these allow us to recognize the strong connections between the ancient and the modern debate on inconsistencies in Greek literature.

The technical term *paraleipsis* (employed by Versnel himself in the discussion of his opponents) is of course derived from ancient scholarship. In rhetorical theory, it refers to a *praeteritio*, that is, an *explicit* omission, for instance 'I will pass over the fact that....' In the Homeric scholia, however, *paraleipsis* refers to an *implicit* gap: the poet leaves something out, so that the reader must reconstruct the events or the connection between the events which the narrative leaves implicit. Ancient critics actually distinguish between σιωπώμενον and παράλειψις. The former refers to an element that is "entirely left implicit"; the latter refers to "an event that is first passed over in silence but

and though these slips certainly offend my taste, yet I prefer to call them not wilful mistakes (ἁμαρτήματα) but careless oversights (παροράματα), let in casually almost and at random by the heedlessness of genius." Translation Fyfe / Russell in Halliwell et al. 1995. For Aristarchus and other Alexandrian scholars as defenders of Homer, see below.

27 Versnel 2011a, 190–201. See above.

28 On ancient allegorical interpretation, see above n. 26 on Longinus, *On the Sublime* 9.7–8 and Whitmarsh in this volume.

later explicitly added by the narrator."[29] Ancient scholars argued that such omissions and gaps were characteristic of Homeric poetry. When they found out that one passage of the *Iliad* did not square with another passage in the same poem, one possible solution was to say that the first passage contained an omission (σιωπώμενον or παράλειψις).

An example is offered by a scholion on *Iliad* 16.432.[30] When Sarpedon is about to die by the hand of Patroclus, Zeus feels pity for his son. He addresses his wife Hera and asks her whether he should rescue Sarpedon or let him be vanquished. But how could Zeus address Hera, if she had left him a moment ago, when she travelled from mount Ida to the Olympus in *Iliad* 15.79? While Patroclus and Sarpedon are fighting, as far as we know, Zeus is still on Mount Ida, but Hera is on Mount Olympus. So their conversation about the fate of Sarpedon is impossible. The scholion on this passage mentions two possible solutions to the problem. One concerns textual criticism, the other one *paraleipsis* (Schol. A Il. 16.432a Ariston.):

> ὅτι Ζηνόδοτος καθόλου περιγράφει τὴν ὁμιλίαν τοῦ Διὸς καὶ τῆς Ἥρας (sc. Π 432–58), οὐκ αἰσθόμενος ὅτι πολλὰ κατὰ συμπέρασμα λέγει ὁ ποιητὴς σιωπωμένως γεγονότα, καὶ οὐ δέον ἐπιζητεῖν πῶς ἡ μικρὸν ἔμπροσθεν (sc. Ο 79, cf.149) ἐπὶ τὸν Ὄλυμπον παρακεχωρηκυῖα νῦν ἐπὶ τῆς Ἴδης ἐστίν.

> <The diple periestigmene,> because Zenodotus brackets [here = deletes] the conversation between Zeus and Hera in its entirety [sc. 16.432–58], not understanding that the poet mentions summarily [i.e. by indicating the result only] many events which happened tacitly, and that one must not investigate why she, who shortly before [sc. 15.79] had retired to Mt Olympus, is now on Mt Ida.[31]

The scholion presents two solutions for the apparent contradiction (or disagreement) between *Iliad* 15.79 (Hera goes to Mount Olympus) and *Iliad* 16.432 (Hera is at Mount Ida). Zenodotus adopts the most radical solution: he deletes the 27 lines describing the dialogue between Zeus and Hera, which can in his interpretation never have taken place. But Aristarchus, to whom we can assign the argument presented by the scholion, adopts a different solution: in his interpretation, Homer has 'silently' (σιωπωμένως) passed over the fact that one god travelled from one location to the other: Hera has come back from Mount

---

29   Nünlist 2009, 161; I cite Nünlist's formulations here.

30   The scholia on the *Iliad* are cited according to the edition by Erbse 1969–1988.

31   Translation Nünlist 2009, 158. The 'diple periestigmene' is a dotted right-pointing angle, a scholarly sign which marked where Aristarchus did not agree with Zenodotus' changes.

Olympus to Mount Ida, but it is the reader who must draw this conclusion for himself. The scholion thus offers two out of the three strategies that we have distinguished in modern scholarship on contradictions, textual criticism on the one hand, and *paraleipsis* on the other.

It is remarkable that in this scholion Aristarchus states that "one must not investigate" (οὐ δέον ἐπιζητεῖν) how it happens that Hera is at one moment on Mount Olympus and at the next moment on Mount Ida. This formulation ('one must not investigate' or 'one must not ask') seems characteristic of Aristarchus' general tolerance of the (logical) imperfections of Homeric poetry. I will return to this point below.

In our survey of modern scholarship on alleged contradictions in Greek literature we have encountered a third strategy: scholars explain contradictory statements in a narrative as resulting from the different 'perspectives' of different characters. This strategy is also frequently employed in ancient criticism. In fact, the λύσις ἐκ τοῦ προσώπου ('solution from the character') is a major 'interpretative principle' in the scholia, as Nünlist has observed: "[i]ts point is that if one takes into account in each case who the speaker is, contradictions in a text can often be proven to be apparent only because the speakers are not identical."[32] This is exactly the strategy modern narratologists have used to explain the contradictory statements in Herodotus' Croesus *logos*; in the words of Versnel: "Who says what to whom in which context, for what reason, with what intention and with what effects?"[33] The Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry (third century AD), author of a treatise on *Homeric Problems*, formulates the principle as follows (Porphyry on Il. 6.265, I 100.4–9 Schrader):

> οὐδὲν δὲ θαυμαστὸν εἰ παρὰ τῷ ποιητῇ ἐναντία λέγεται ὑπὸ διαφόρων φωνῶν. ὅσα μὲν γὰρ ἔφη αὐτὸς ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ ἐξ ἰδίου προσώπου, ταῦτα δεῖ ἀκόλουθα εἶναι καὶ μὴ ἐναντία ἀλλήλοις· ὅσα δὲ προσώποις περιτίθησιν, οὐκ αὐτοῦ εἰσιν ἀλλὰ τῶν λεγόντων νοεῖται, ὅθεν καὶ ἐπιδέχεται πολλάκις διαφωνίαν, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν τούτοις.

> No wonder when in Homer different things are said by different voices. Whatever is said by the poet in propria persona should be consistent and not contradictory. All the words/ideas he attributes to the characters are not his, but are understood as being said by the speakers. This often leads to an (apparent) contradiction, as in the present case.[34]

---

32   Nünlist 2009, 116.
33   Versnel 2011, 189.
34   Translation Nünlist 2009, 116.

Sometimes two statements within one poem seem to contradict each other, but if one statement is by the narrator and the other one by a character (or if the two views are presented by two different characters), there is no problem. The statements of one character must be "consistent and not contradictory" (ἀκόλουθα … καὶ μὴ ἐναντία ἀλλήλοις), but otherwise the inconsistency (διαφωνία) is only apparent and not real. Porphyry here almost sounds like the modern voices that interpret the contradictory statements about divine justice and arbitrariness in Herodotus' Croesus *logos*.[35] In the passage under discussion, Porphyry does not comment on inconsistencies in stories about divine interventions, but rather on contradictory statements about the effects of wine as formulated in *Iliad* 6: Hecuba offers Hector to bring him some honey-sweet wine, for, as she points out, "when a man is weary with toil, wine greatly increases his force."[36] Hector, however, refuses: "Bring me no honey-hearted wine, queenly mother, lest you cripple me, and I be forgetful of my force and my valor."[37] The two characters thus express quite different opinions about the influence of wine, but Porphyry tells us not to worry too much about their contradictory statements, which can be explained "from their character" (Porphyry on Il. 6.265, I 100.9–13 Schrader):

> ἡ μὲν γὰρ Ἑκάβη οὐκ εἰδυῖα τὸν κάματον τῶν ἀνδρῶν ταύτης ἐστὶ τῆς γνώμης, ὁ δὲ Ἕκτωρ μάλιστα ἐπιστάμενος ἀντιλέγει. ἔπειτα καὶ ἡ μὲν πρεσβῦτις ἦν, χαίρει δὲ τῷ οἴνῳ ἡ ἡλικία αὕτη – ἐπωφελὴς γὰρ ταύτῃ ἐστὶν ὁ οἶνος θερμὸς ὢν καὶ ὑγρὸς ψυχρᾷ οὔσῃ καὶ ξηρᾷ καὶ ἀναρρώννυσιν αὐτήν – , ὁ δὲ Ἕκτωρ νέος ἦν καὶ ἀκμαῖος.

> For Hecuba, who does not know the weariness of men, is of that opinion; but Hector who knows it very well contradicts her. Furthermore, she was an old lady, and people of that age take pleasure in wine – to her the wine, being warm and fluid, is useful, as she herself is cold and dry: it strengthens her – but Hector was young and vigorous.

We might not agree with the Neoplatonist philosopher when he states that the appreciation of wine depends on age and gender, but what matters here is that

---

35   E.g. Pelling 2006, 150 on the different perspectives of Solon and the narrator in Herodotus' Croesus narrative (see above).

36   Homer, *Iliad* 6.261: ἀνδρὶ δὲ κεκμηῶτι μένος μέγα οἶνος ἀέξει. Translation Murray / Wyatt 1999.

37   Homer, *Iliad* 6.264–265: μή μοι οἶνον ἄειρε μελίφρονα, πότνια μῆτερ, | μή μ᾽ ἀπογυιώσῃς, μένεος δ᾽ ἀλκῆς τε λάθωμαι. Translation Murray / Wyatt 1999.

Porphyry's careful distinction of characters, with their different perspectives, eloquently anticipates the modern narratological approach to contradictions in ancient Greek narrative.

5   Tolerance vis-à-vis Contradictions: Versnel, Aristarchus, Aristotle

So far, we have identified parallels between ancient critics and modern scholars who develop strategies in order to 'save' the ancient author and to explain away apparent contradictions in his narrative. Apart from perspective, *paraleipsis* and textual criticism, various other strategies are of course applied in modern scholarship, which likewise have their antecedents in ancient literary criticism. The remaining part of this paper, however, will focus on the approach to contradictions advanced by Henk Versnel himself. Can we also identify ancient scholars and critics who anticipate Versnel in adopting a tolerant attitude towards the contradictions in archaic literature?

Versnel's approach to inconsistencies in Homer, Herodotus and Solon, which I have summarized above, has three distinct characteristics. Firstly, Versnel emphasizes that *our* concerns and questions are not necessarily the questions of the ancient authors and their audience: we should therefore stop imposing our own rules of logic upon the ancient texts (section 5.1). Secondly, he advocates a tolerant attitude towards incoherencies and contradictions: we should stop inventing and applying clever 'strategies' which aim to 'save' the author (section 5.2). Thirdly, Versnel interprets the peaceful juxtaposition of contradictory statements in archaic literature as expressions of γνῶμαι, maxims and sayings – as 'ways of speaking' (section 5.3). Let us examine the occurrence of these three points in ancient scholarship, one by one.

5.1   *Our Questions Are Not Their Questions*

In his book *Unity in Greek Poetics* Malcolm Heath has demonstrated that ancient conceptions of 'unity' are very different from modern ones.[38] Versnel rightly mentions this important study in *Coping with the Gods*; in the present context it deserves some further attention.[39] Heath argues that whereas modern readers tend to look for one central 'meaning' in a poem, a dialogue or a tragedy, ancient theorists are very tolerant of what he calls 'centrifugal' techniques of composition. Ancient critics praise literary works for their variety (ποικιλία)

---

38   Heath 1989.
39   See Versnel 2005, 175 n. 57.

and for their treatment of many different themes: "The characteristic tendency of ancient criticism was to seek coherence in thematic plurality ordered primarily at a formal level."[40] Thus, Homer is admired for being φιλοποίκιλος and πολύμορφος (versatile, multiform).[41] Dionysius of Halicarnassus praises Herodotus for "having chosen many subjects which are in no way alike" (πολλὰς καὶ οὐδὲν ἐοικυίας ὑποθέσεις) and making them into one "harmonious body" (σύμφωνον ἓν σῶμα).[42] Ancient literary criticism thus supports the idea that poems (such as Homer's *Iliad*, or Solon's *Hymn to the Muses*) should not be reduced to one single theme: such poems, as ancient scholars knew, can treat a variety of themes in peaceful juxtaposition. This ancient position can be said to anticipate Versnel's concept of 'unity in diversity', perhaps even his notion of 'unity *as* diversity.'[43] Diversity (ποικιλία) is of course not the same thing as ambiguity (ἀμφιβολία), inconsistency (διαφωνία) or contradiction (ἀντίφασις). What matters here is that modern views of poetic 'unity' are different from ancient views: our problems, in other words, are not *their* problems.

That we should not bother archaic authors with modern questions is a notion we have already encountered in our discussion of the Alexandrian scholar Aristarchus of Samothrace. As we have seen, Aristarchus claims that "one must not investigate" (οὐ δέον ἐπιζητεῖν) how it is possible that Hera is one moment on Mount Olympus and the next moment on Mount Ida.[44] This kind of formulations ("one should not ask such questions") appears to be characteristic of Aristarchus' method. He frequently points out that one should not raise the questions asked by his colleagues – Aristophanes, Zenodotus and other clever ancient scholars who might remind us of the 'modern voices' cited by Versnel.

In his important book *The Ancient Critic at Work*, René Nünlist summarizes the tolerant attitude towards (perceived) imperfections in archaic poetry as follows: "The notion that poets enjoy particular liberties is very common in antiquity. Consequently, readers are repeatedly advised not to scrutinise a poetic text with microscopic precision (or even pedantry)."[45] Compare Versnel's urgent exhortation, to "stop hassling the author by confronting him with questions which, not being a philosopher nor a literary critic, he simply had no inclination to contemplate at that special moment and in that context."[46]

---

40   Heath 1989, 150.
41   See Heath 1989, 110.
42   Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Letter to Pompeius* 3.14.
43   Versnel 2011a, 212–213 (cited above).
44   Schol. A Il. 16.432a Ariston. (cited above).
45   Nünlist 2009, 183.
46   Versnel 2011a, 173.

The dangers of anachronistic interpretation concern all sorts of problems in Homer, including cases of (apparent) contradictions and incoherence. Concerning such cases of inconsistency in Homer, Versnel asks the following question: "Why do we stubbornly persist in interrogating Homer on questions of semantic coherence?"[47] This more or less echoes the concerns of the Homeric scholar Aristarchus, as summarized by Nünlist: "Aristarchus repeatedly argues that one must not scrutinise poets like Homer too rigorously. Many of the alleged inconsistencies are only apparent, because they are due to poetic licence."[48]

Aristarchus and Versnel clearly agree that one should not bother Homer with questions that were not *his* questions, and that one should not expect Homer to be 'consistent' in the logical terms of a scholar living in later times. Aristarchus and Versnel offer similar reasons for their tolerance. A key idea in Versnel's discussion is that inconsistencies can be tolerated because they reflect 'gnomologisches Wissen', to which I will return below.[49] More generally, however, Versnel seems to agree with Aristarchus that Homer's alleged inconsistencies can sometimes be tolerated because of 'poetic license' (ποιητικὴ ἄδεια or ἐξουσία).[50] In the statement cited above, Versnel urges us not to bother the author "with questions which, *not being a philosopher nor a literary critic*, he simply had no inclination to contemplate."[51] This formulation implies that the rules of poetry are different from the rules of philosophy and literary criticism: in other words, Homer enjoys a certain 'liberty' (license) that is not allowed to a philosopher or a critic. Aristarchus would wholeheartedly agree.[52]

5.2   *Tolerance towards Incoherencies and Contradictions in Homer*

What kind of 'inconsistencies' in Homer does Aristarchus tolerate? The passages he discusses are mostly different from the ones Versnel examines in *Coping with the Gods*. Aristarchus is less concerned with theological issues.[53]

---

47   Versnel 2011a, 171.

48   Nünlist 2009, 176.

49   Versnel 2011a, 218–225.

50   On the notion of poetic licence in ancient literary criticism, see Nünlist 2009, 174–184.

51   Versnel 2005, 173, my italics.

52   In the context of Greek strategies to cope with the divinity of the ruler through "willing suspension of disbelief", Versnel 2011a, 478 explicitly acknowledges that there are many ways in which possible inconsistencies can be explained: "Many are the strategies, launched by both author and audience, in order *not* to notice implausibilities, intrinsic contradictions and mere impossibilities." Versnel *inter alia* embraces the theory of 'Homeric rule of inattention' suggested by Scodel 1999, 16–18.

53   Note, however, that there is an illuminating scholion (Sch. Il. 19.86–7 bT) on Agamemnon's blaming of Zeus, Moira and Erinys, which is cited by Versnel 2011a, 171.

He is interested in all sorts of contradictions and inconsistencies that occur within the Homeric text. One example concerns the sword of Agamemnon. In *Iliad* 2.45, the nails of Agamemnon's sword are 'silver' (ξίφος ἀργυρόηλον, 'silver-studded sword'); in *Iliad* 11.29–30, they are suddenly 'golden' (ἧλοι χρύσειοι, 'studs of gold'). A scholion tells the reader that the inconsistency is not important (Schol. A Il. 2 .45a Ariston.):

> ὅτι τὸ Ἀγαμέμνονος ξίφος νῦν μὲν ἀργυρόηλον, ἐν ἄλλοις δὲ (Λ 29) χρυσόηλον. καὶ Εὐριπίδης σφυρῶν (cod. -ον) σιδηρᾶ κέντρα εἰπών, ἐν ἄλλοις φησὶ χρυσοδέτοις περόναις (*Phoen.* 26–812). τὰ τοιαῦτα δὲ κυρίως οὐ λέγεται, ἀλλὰ κατ' ἐπιφορὰν ἐστι ποιητικῆς ἀρεσκείας.

> < The diple,> because in the present passage Agamemnon's sword is 'studded with silver nails', whereas elsewhere it is studded with golden nails. Euripides too says 'iron spikes through the ankles' [sc. of Oedipus] and 'gold-bound pins' in another passage. Such things are not to be taken literally, but are indicative of poetic licence on impulse.[54]

The inconsistencies in Homer, like those in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, should not worry the reader, because they are a case of poetic licence. The formulation 'on impulse' (κατ' ἐπιφοράν) can be interpreted as 'for no particular reason.'[55] There are many other examples in the scholia, where Aristarchus argues that inconsistencies must be tolerated. Thus, Homer calls both Cassandra (*Il.* 13.365) and Laodice (*Il.* 3.124; 6.252) "the most beautiful daughter of Priam" (Πριάμοιο θυγατρῶν εἶδος ἀρίστην) and clever critics might object that only one daughter could be 'the most beautiful.' They could propose various solutions to 'save the author', but according to Aristarchus, the two passages are not really contradictory (οὐ μάχεται), or, in other words, such minor contradictions can be tolerated.[56]

Let us finally consider one example which concerns an inconsistency between *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In the *Iliad* (23.229–230), Homer states that the winds live in Thrace. In the *Odyssey* (10.19–22), the winds are located on the island of Aeolus. However, Aristarchus tells us not to worry about it too much (Schol. T Od. 10 .20 ed. Dindorf):

---

54   Translation Nünlist 2009, 175. The term 'diple' refers to a simple angle, a scholarly sign that draws attention to something noteworthy in a Homeric line.

55   Meijering 1987, 66.

56   Schol. A Il. 13.365a Ariston. See Nünlist 2009, 176 with n. 10.

εἴληπται μὲν τὸ πλάσμα πρὸς τὸν καιρόν, διὸ οὐ δεῖ ζητεῖν τὰ τοιαῦτα· ἀνεύθυνα τὰ τῶν μύθων.

He [sc. Homer] has made use of an ad-hoc fiction; therefore one must not ask questions such as these. The domain of fiction is not open to investigation.[57]

The nature of this inconsistency between *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is slightly different from the contradictions Versnel discusses in *Coping with the Gods*. But what matters here is the basic agreement between Aristarchus and Versnel in their approach to such problems in archaic poetry, and in the ways they talk about them. We could compare Aristarchus' words, just cited, with the following statement by Versnel:

So I would suggest we take a pause in feeding red herrings to Homer, and stop hassling the author by confronting him with questions which, not being a philosopher nor a literary critic, he simply had no inclination to contemplate at that special moment and in that context.[58]

Aristarchus said: "one must not ask questions such as these", for Homer has used a story that fits "the moment" (τὸν καιρόν). Versnel states: the poet was not contemplating *our* questions "at that special *moment*." When he compares these two statements, Henk Versnel, who has often emphasized that he is *not* a classicist, but a historian and an anthropologist, may start to feel a little uncomfortable, as he is finding himself in the good company of old Aristarchus, the champion and prototype of all classicists and philologists.[59] The concluding section of this chapter will make things even worse, as I will be suggesting that Versnel's position has been anticipated, even before Aristarchus, neither by a historian, nor by a classical scholar, but by the greatest *philosopher* of the western world.

5.3   *Contradictory Statements as 'Ways of Speaking'*

So far we have been able to trace two elements of Versnel's approach back to ancient scholarship. In his discussion of Homeric poetry, Aristarchus repeatedly claims that "our questions are not their questions"; in addition, he advocates a certain "tolerance towards inconsistencies in Homer." One element

---

57   Translation Nünlist 2009, 181.
58   Versnel 2011a, 173.
59   Cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica* 450.

remains to be discussed: Versnel interprets the co-existence of contradictory statements in Homer, Herodotus and Solon as an expression of maxims and sayings: they represent 'gnomologisches Wissen.'[60] We have observed that Aristarchus is as tolerant of contradictions as Versnel, but the Alexandrian scholar explains these contradictions as resulting from poetic licence, not as expressing maxims or sayings. So what about contradictions as resulting from γνῶμαι?

In *Coping with the Gods*, Versnel refers to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which contains a fundamental survey of γνωμολογεῖν (to speak in maxims).[61] I here wish to draw attention to a different text by the same author. Aristotle was extremely interested in the contradictions, inconsistencies and other 'problems' identified in Homeric poetry. He wrote a treatise in six books, which he called *Homeric Problems*.[62] Aristotle's *Homeric Problems* may have been a response to the *Homeric Questions* published by Zoilus of Amphipolis (fourth century BC). The 'Scourge of Homer' (Ὁμηρομάστιξ, see above) seems to have compiled a long list of inconsistencies, contradictions and other problems which he identified in the plots of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The topic has never failed to attract the interest of scholars: a recent title in the same genre is John Wilson's *Sense and Nonsense in Homer. A Consideration of the Inconsistencies and Incoherencies in the Texts of the Iliad and the Odyssey*.[63] Wilson is a modern Zoilus.

Whereas Zoilus asked 'questions' about the numerous inconsistencies in Homer, Aristotle provided various strategies by which one could answer these questions. Unfortunately, the *Homeric Problems* are lost, but Aristotle has helpfully summarized his treatise on Homer in the 25th chapter of the first book of his *Poetics*. There, Aristotle deals with a number of criticisms of Homer which scholars (such as Zoilus) had put forward; and he proposes several ways to answer such objections. Although the chapter is nowadays not the most popular part of the *Poetics*, Stephen Halliwell has pointed out that it contains "some of Aristotle's most important ideas on poetry."[64] Halliwell rightly describes Aristotle's approach to Homeric poetry in this chapter as "flexible", "liberal" and "accommodating."[65] Aristotle here presents himself as remarkably *tolerant*

---

60   Versnel 2011a, 218–225.

61   Versnel 2011a, 221 on Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.21, 1394a–1395b.

62   For Aristotle's *Homeric Problems*, see fragments 142–179 in Rose 1886; cf. Halliwell 1998, 327–328. *Homeric Problems* is also the title of Porphyry's treatise (see above) and of Heraclitus' treatise discussed by Tim Whitmarsh in this volume.

63   Wilson 2000.

64   Halliwell 1987, 177. See also Ford 2015, who regards chapter 25 as the key to the understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

65   Halliwell 1987, 180.

of Homeric inconsistencies which other ancient scholars found problematic. His basic principle here is that the rules of poetry are different from those of other disciplines (Aristotle, *Poetics* 25, 1460b13–14):

> οὐχ ἡ αὐτὴ ὀρθότης ἐστὶν τῆς πολιτικῆς καὶ τῆς ποιητικῆς οὐδὲ ἄλλης τέχνης καὶ ποιητικῆς.

> Poetry does not have the same standard of correctness as politics, or as any other art.[66]

The importance of this statement cannot be overrated. For it means that what is correct in politics (or in logic, rhetoric, or scholarship) is not necessarily correct in poetry, and *vice versa*. This implies that one should not impose external rules of logic upon Homeric poetry. In other words, one should not bother Homer with questions that are external to his art. Halliwell's formulation is revealing: in his interpretation, *Poetics* chapter 25 is

> Ar[istotle]'s response to all those Greek critics of poetry who assumed a fixed and unquestionable standard of accuracy or truth by which works could be tested and, perhaps, found wanting. The argument purports to show that it is a basic critical prerequisite to consider the aim of a work of art, and to judge it by criteria which at least to some extent the work itself (or its genre, as Ar. would say) determines, *rather than imposing an inflexible and wholly independent set of norms*.[67]

Homer's truth, we might say, need not be the truth of his readers and interpreters. Halliwell's words, "not *imposing* an inflexible and wholly independent set of norms" (my italics) bring to mind a statement from Versnel's *Coping with the Gods*: "They [scholars] must be continuously aware that it may be our drive towards coherence that we are *imposing* on the text, a drive which the archaic author … may not have dreamt of in his philosophy."[68]

    How, then, does Aristotle deal with 'problems' in the Homeric text? In his typical, systematic way, he first reminds us that poetry is a form of μίμησις (imitation or representation), and that, therefore, in any passage of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* Homer must be doing one of three things (Aristotle, *Poetics* 25 1460b7–11):

---

66   Translation Halliwell in Halliwell et al. 1995.
67   Halliwell 1987, 178, my italics.
68   Versnel 2005, 195, my italics.

ἐπεὶ γάρ ἐστι μιμητὴς ὁ ποιητὴς ὡσπερανεὶ ζωγράφος ἤ τις ἄλλος εἰκονοποιός, ἀνάγκη μιμεῖσθαι τριῶν ὄντων τὸν ἀριθμὸν ἕν τι ἀεί, ἢ γὰρ οἷα ἦν ἢ ἔστιν, ἢ οἷά φασιν καὶ δοκεῖ, ἢ οἷα εἶναι δεῖ.

Since the poet, like a painter or any other image-maker, is a mimetic art-ist, he must represent, in any instance, one of three objects: the kind of things which were or are the case; *the kind of things that people say and think* (οἷά φασιν καὶ δοκεῖ); the kind of things that ought to be the case.[69]

Aristotle's approach is therefore that if someone thinks they have found a mis-take in a particular passage of a Homeric poem, they can solve the problem in one of three ways: what the poet says can be 'justified as true', because (1) he says things 'as they are', or (2) he says things 'as they are said to be' or (3) he says things 'as they ought to be' (i.e. he is representing them as more beautiful than they actually are). I will here focus on the second option: those problems in Homer which one can solve by pointing out that what the poet says might seem wrong in the first instance, but in fact represents "the kind of things that people say and think" (οἷά φασιν καὶ δοκεῖ). This is Aristotle's explanation of the principle (*Poetics* 25, 1460b35–1461a1):

εἰ δὲ μηδετέρως, ὅτι οὕτω φασίν, οἷον τὰ περὶ θεῶν· ἴσως γὰρ οὔτε βέλτιον οὕτω λέγειν οὔτ' ἀληθῆ, ἀλλ' εἰ ἔτυχεν ὥσπερ Ξενοφάνει· ἀλλ' οὖν φασι.

If neither solution fits [i.e. the representation is neither 'as it is' nor 'as it ought to be'], there remains the principle that people say such things (ὅτι οὕτω φάσιν), for example in religion (τὰ περὶ θεῶν): perhaps it is neither ideal nor true to say such things, but maybe it is as Xenophanes thought; no matter, people, say them (ἀλλ' οὖν φασι).[70]

In a later passage from the same chapter, Aristotle summarizes his point in a concise formulation (*Poetics* 25, 1461b14): "Refer irrationalities to what people say" (πρὸς ἅ φασιν τἄλογα). So, if the reader thinks that the Homeric text con-tains a mistake, one possible answer is to say that Homer in the passage under discussion represented not his own views, but "what people say", "the kind of things that people say." The reader may be inclined to object to the passage, but Homer has merely stated "the kind of things that people (usually) say." Let us now compare Versnel's explanation of contradictory truths in archaic literature:

---

69   Translation Halliwell in Halliwell et al. 1995, my italics.
70   Translation Halliwell in Halliwell et al. 1995.

Ἔτσι το λέμμε·"this is the way we say it." That is *façon de dire*, 'our way of speaking', speaking in maxim or proverb, in ancient Greek *gnome*. … Indeed archaic diction concerning fate and the gods is to a very large extent gnomic.[71]

Aristotle's reference to Homer's representation of "things concerning gods" (τὰ περὶ θεῶν) might for a moment make us believe that the ancient philosopher is talking about exactly the same kind of Homeric problems that Versnel addresses in *Coping with the Gods*, that is, about contradictory statements on divine interventions. To be fair, however, Aristotle is probably thinking of inappropriate representations of the gods in Homer, as his reference to Xenophanes seems to indicate.[72] So in this particular passage he is not primarily concerned with contradictions (although he does treat those elsewhere), but rather with religious improprieties – for these too belong to the set of 'Homeric problems' in ancient criticism. Readers of Homer might object to his depiction of anthropomorphic gods, or to the shameless behaviour of Ares and Aphrodite in the *Odyssey*, but – Aristotle will answer – Homer is just representing "such things as people say", so we should not blame the poet.

There are obvious connections between the approaches that Aristotle and Versnel adopt towards problematic passages in Greek literature. Versnel proposes to understand contradictory statements on divine interventions not as the personal beliefs of the author (Homer, Herodotus, or Solon), but as representing gnomic wisdom: "the total supply of folk wisdom as stored in the treasure-house of maxims and proverbs."[73] I suppose that Versnel would not object if we would reformulate his interpretation in Aristotelian terms: when Solon first states that human beings are ruled by divine justice, and then – in the same poem – complains about the arbitrariness of fate, he is neither representing "the kind of things which were or are the case", nor "the kind of things that ought to be the case": but he is representing "the kind of things that people say and think" (οἷά φασιν καὶ δοκεῖ).

The expression φασιν ('they say', 3rd person plural of φημί) is used with the meaning 'they say', 'it is said' and, 'since what one says commonly expresses a belief or opinion', 'they think, deem, suppose.'[74] The terminology therefore suggests that Aristotle is indeed thinking of common beliefs, popular wisdom ("what people believe"), like 'folk wisdom', which could be expressed in maxims

---

71   Versnel 2011a, 220–221.
72   Aristotle is perhaps thinking of Xenophanes' objections to Homer's portrayal of the gods: see DK 21B11.
73   Versnel 2011a, 221.
74   See LSJ s.v. φημί.

and proverbs. Indeed, to strengthen my case, I could point out that the word φασιν is in Greek literature also used as an introduction to a proverb or saying: φασιν ('people say') can in some contexts mean 'so runs the proverb.'[75] So although Aristotle's point is slightly different (as he is *here* focusing on incorrectness rather than contradiction), his *approach* to the problem and his discourse may indeed remind us of Versnel's interpretation of contradiction – or rather the other way around: Versnel's interpretation reminds us of Aristotle.

It would of course be too good to be true if Aristotle had made exactly the same point as Versnel. Besides, I would certainly not like to disappoint Henk Versnel by telling him that everything that he has so carefully thought out and so elegantly written down in the twenty-first century has actually already been published by a clever guy who taught in the fourth century BC in Athens. So the good news is that we can feel relieved, as my exploration of ancient literary criticism has not detracted from the originality of *Coping with the Gods*. What we have seen, however, is (1) that some ancient scholars of Homeric poetry – like Versnel – thought that "our questions are not *his* questions"; (2) that some ancient scholars – like Versnel – were tolerant of inconsistencies in archaic poetry; and (3) that one famous ancient scholar – like Versnel – explained alleged problems in Homeric poetry as 'ways of speaking.' If I have to some extent been successful in demonstrating that Versnel's *approach* to archaic literature has its precedents in ancient scholarship, that conclusion will only strengthen the authority of his book, which, standing in the honourable tradition of Aristotle and Aristarchus, is a monumental contribution to classical philology.[76]

---

75   E.g. Aristotle, *Poetics* 7. 1451a9: ὥσπερ ποτὲ καὶ ἄλλοτέ φασιν, "as they say now and then", "as we usually say", "as the saying goes", rendered in Arabic as "as is our custom to say at some time and when": cf. Tarán and Gutas 2012, 254; Janko 1987, 90 ad loc. Cf. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* 1208b9.

76   I wish to thank René Nünlist and Henk Versnel for their useful comments on an earlier version of this article.