

The Meaning of βλαβερόν in the *Poetics*

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ARISTOTLE'S CLASSIFICATION in *Poetics* 25 of the various objections raised against poetry and of the arguments that can answer them has been a notorious puzzle for generations of scholars. In the face of such an overwhelming history of unsuccessful attempts to clarify the chapter's internal consistency,¹ one must venture to propose new solutions only hesitantly. In fact this paper seeks solely to address a single detail among the chapter's numerous intricacies. The case in question is that of τὸ βλαβερόν, numbered third, of a total of five, in the final enumeration of the technical objections (ἐπιτιμήματα) with which Aristotle laconically concludes his review of poetic "problems and solutions" (1461b22–24):

The charges brought against poets fall under five headings: impossibilities (ἀδύνατα), irrationalities (ἄλογα), [morally] harmful elements (βλαβερά), contradictions (ὑπεναντία), and offences

¹ The main difficulty of this chapter lies in the alleged number of solutions (twelve) that Aristotle states to have proposed for the five objections listed at the end of the chapter (1461b22–25). There have been several attempts to identify these twelve solutions among the sixteen possibilities found in the chapter, and to establish their respective relations to the objections. See inter alia G. Hermann, *Aristotelis de arte poetica liber* (Leipzig 1802) 189; T. Twining, *Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry*² (London 1812) 418; J. Vahlen, *Beiträge zu Aristoteles Poetik* (Vienna 1867) 390–391; M. Carroll, *Aristotle's Poetics, c. xxv in the Light of the Homeric Scholia* (Baltimore 1895). The various results of his predecessors are tabulated by D. de Montmollin, *La Poétique d'Aristote, texte primitif et additions ultérieures* (Neuchâtel 1951) 306–322, who is followed by D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Oxford 1968), in the conclusion that "something is wrong with the tradition" (251).

against the true standards of the art (*παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην*).²

It is my contention that the meaning of *βλαβερόν* in this passage has been repeatedly misunderstood by commentators and translators, partly because of their failure to recognize in this term a specific kind of artistic shortcoming which Aristotle, as well as the other literary critics of his time, were much more prone than us to detect.

Although the correspondences to be established between the five types of *ἐπιτίμματα* and Aristotle's preceding remarks as to how to answer the objections remain highly problematic, the nature of the particular censures indicated in this list of *ἐπιτιμήματα* is comparatively easy to identify—that is, if we except the case of *βλαβερά*. *τὰ ἀδύνατα* and *τὰ ἄλογα* are closely related categories and point to the impossible/irrational narrative elements of a story. *τὰ ὑπεναντία* obviously refers to the inconsistent factual details that happen to coexist within a poet's work and that result from his occasional slips or lapses of attention. And *τὰ παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην* must have one of two possible meanings: either Aristotle is thinking of accidental poetic misrepresentations by reference to some technical or scientific standard, such as the example given in this same chapter (1460b19) of a zoologically inaccurate portrayal of a horse throwing forward both its right legs at a time (in which case *κατὰ τέχνην* = *κατὰ τινὰ τέχνην*); or he means to isolate a particular set of artistic errors that are directly related to the poet's expertise (in which case *κατὰ τέχνην* = *κατὰ τὴν τέχνην*, viz. *τὴν ποιητικὴν τέχνην*).³ In any case, even though

² Transl. Halliwell, brackets mine. Unless otherwise specified, citations of the *Poetics* will be from S. Halliwell's translation *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill 1986). The word *βλαβερά* is rendered simply with "harmful" in Halliwell's more recent Loeb translation (1995), but his reference to Plato in the footnote ad loc. shows that he still gives a moral meaning to the word. See below.

³ Examples of scholars opting for the first possibility are: Twining, *Aristotle's Treatise* 414; I. Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (Oxford 1909) 350;

none of them receives an explicit definition, Aristotle at least provides examples for each of these four ἐπιτιμήματα, either in this same chapter or elsewhere in the *Poetics*.⁴ Only the ἐπιτιμήματα ὡς βλαβερά remain without any literary illustration. The word βλαβερόν itself does not occur elsewhere in the treatise and its meaning in the immediate context is anything but evident.

Most commentators on the *Poetics*, when acknowledging the difficulty, hazard some kind of connection between βλαβερόν and Aristotle's brief reference, a few lines before (1461b19–21), to the infamous attitude of Menelaus in Euripides' *Orestes* (previously alluded to at 1454a27). Accordingly, they propose to render βλαβερόν with “morally harmful,”⁵ a periphrastic expression combining the regular meaning of the word (“harmful”) with the alleged ethical content of the ἐπιτίμημα. In most cases though, this interpretation is either simply not argued or expressly given as a *pis aller*.⁶

T. Rosenmeyer, “Design and Execution in Aristotle, *Poetics* ch. XXV,” *CSCA* 6 (1973) 231–252, at 252; R. Janko, *Aristotle, Poetics I, with the Tractatus Coislinianus, Reconstruction of Poetics II, and the Fragments of the On Poets* (Indianapolis 1987) 153. For the second possibility: Carroll, *Aristotle's Poetics* 24; Halliwell, *The Poetics* 63. Given the apparent irrelevance to Aristotle of inaccuracies of a non-poetic character, I am for my part inclined to join the second group.

⁴ See 333–335 below.

⁵ This translation, or an equivalent, is adopted by Twining, *Aristotle's Treatise* 202 (“of immoral tendency”); S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London 1911 [1895]) 107; Carroll, *Aristotle's Poetics* 21; Bywater, *Aristotle* 89 (“corrupting”); J. Hardy, *Aristote Poétique* (Paris 1961) 73 (“(in-)utilement méchant”); Rosenmeyer, *CSCA* 6 (1974) 252 (“vicious”); Halliwell, *The Poetics* 63; Janko, *Aristotle* 152 (translating with “harmful” but identifying it with “wickedness” in his commentary); A. Schmitt, *Aristoteles Poetik* (Berlin 2008) 40 (“absichtlich Böses”). De Montmollin's “blâmables” (*La Poétique* 100) fails to indicate what is particularly blamable about τὸ βλαβερόν, since the notion of “blame” is already expressed in the word ἐπιτιμήματα.

⁶ Some hesitancy is expressed by Janko, *Aristotle* 153; Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* 250; R. Dupont-Roc and J. Lallot, *Aristote, La Poétique* (Paris 1980) 402.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that Aristotle uses the word *βλαβερόν* in this passage as a compact formula denoting a special type of narrative implausibility that relies on character motivation. More precisely, *βλαβερόν* should here be understood as a “character-focalized”⁷ judgment of a reader whose expectations about the aims pursued by a character are at odds with a narrated action (or speech) that is consequently criticized as “harmful.” Before I present my arguments in favor of this interpretation—an interpretation which, on reflection, consists in no more than giving the word its standard meaning, that of “harmful”—I shall first explain why the traditional moralistic interpretation of *βλαβερόν* is improbable.

Moral criticism and the Poetics

As pointed out above, the moralistic interpretation is usually adopted without argumentation. I can see only two reasons for this interpretation: (1) the nearby reference to Menelaus induces interpreters to think of flaws of character as a potential motive for objection; (2) it is generally expected that Aristotle’s list of frequent objections to poetry should include the moralistic criticisms that are known to have been formulated by Plato (and by other earlier detractors of Homer).

The relevance of Menelaus’ “wickedness” to our problem does not bear a close examination. Here is the relevant passage from the *Poetics* (1461b19–21):

But it is correct to find fault with both illogicality (*ἄλογία*) and moral baseness (*μοχθηρία*), if there is no necessity for them (*μὴ ἀνάγκης οὕσης*) and if the poet makes no use of the illogicality

⁷ If it be allowed to make a catachrestic use of this oft-misrepresented narratological concept of “focalization” (cf. R. Nünlist, “Some Clarifying Remarks on ‘Focalization’,” in F. Montanari and P. Ascheri [eds.], *Omero tremila anni dopo* [Rome 2002] 445–453). I hereby voluntarily extend its application, usually confined to the internal world of the narrative, to the *external* position of the critical reader. This extension relies on the assumption that a reader who sufficiently internalizes the point of view of a fictional character can sometimes express a judgment based on this point of view rather than on his own aesthetic one.

(as with Euripides and the case of Aegeus) or the baseness (as with Menelaus's in *Orestes*).

This passage implies that in cases of both “illogicality” and “baseness,” the issue is really the necessary vs. unnecessary character of the particular narrative element. It is precisely his focus on this universal criterion of necessity that explains how Aristotle can speak in such a compact form of such different matters as the “illogicality” and the “moral baseness” in poetic compositions: wickedness of character, *in the same way* as irrationality, is not condemnable in itself, but only insofar as it is not motivated by the story. And in fact this holds true for just about any feature of the poem, since necessity acts as the all-pervading principle of a cohesive narrative. There is thus no reason to believe that Aristotle made wickedness, or more generally moral features, the object of a specific kind of offense against poetic necessity. The unnecessary wickedness of Menelaus is merely an example of narrative gratuitousness in general—an example that was readily available since Aristotle had already used it in his discussion of characters in ch. 15. “Illogicality” (ἄλογία), on the other hand, represents a self-standing ἐπιτίμημα that deserves a place in the final five-item list, because the presence of an ἄλογον in a poem almost always gives the impression of a rupture in the causal chain, and is thus much more often open to the kind of criticism that is based on μὴ ἀνάγκης οὔσης.

Moreover, when Aristotle first mentions Euripides' Menelaus in ch. 15 (1454a27), it is to illustrate the violation of the first of a total of four requirements relative to character: goodness (χρηστόν), appropriateness (ἁρμόττοντα), likeness (ὅμοιον), and evenness (ὁμαλόν). Three of these requirements are provided with an example of their violation: there is no illustration of what it would mean for any given character to lack “likeness.”⁸

⁸ G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge 1957) 468–469, explains this peculiarity with the “rules of consistency—generic, specific, and particular” that apply in the cases of goodness, appropriateness, and evenness, whereas likeness has to be tested by observing life itself.

But more importantly, the passage does not argue for any prioritization of goodness over the three other requirements, although goodness is mentioned first by Aristotle. Consequently, this text can hardly be cited as evidence to support the view that Aristotle believed wickedness of character to form *particularly* serious grounds for criticism addressed to poetry.

As regards the second reason I see behind the traditional understanding of *βλαβερόν*, I should like first to recall that Aristotle's general attitude towards the moral status of poetry is far less clear-cut than that of other philosophers, most notably Plato's. The sole aspects of Aristotle's poetic theory where there is room for suspecting some kind of ethical standpoint are: the famous *ἁμαρτία* problem, to which no one yet has provided a definitive solution;⁹ the function of poetic justice in Aristotle's hierarchy of dramas according to their denouement;¹⁰ and the quality of the tragic character, whom he vaguely defines as "good" as opposed to his "mediocre" comic counterpart. Whatever the precise interpretation given to these various notions, their presence in Aristotle's account could merely reflect the simple fact that a play—or any other mimetic composition, for that matter—must feature characters that are in-

⁹ This hotly debated question revolves around the precise meaning of the word *ἁμαρτία* in *Poetics* 1453a10. Is Aristotle thinking of a character flaw or simply of a plain factual "mistake"? For various views between these two possibilities, see (inter alia) R. D. Dawe, "Some Reflections on Ate and Hamartia," *HSCP* 72 (1968) 89–123; Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* 299–307; J. Bremer, *Hamartia. Tragic Error in the Poetics of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy* (Amsterdam 1969); T. C. W. Stinton, "Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy," *CQ* 25 (1975) 221–254.

¹⁰ The debatable issues in this regard are the exact import of the words *μιαρόν* and *φιλόανθρωπον* at 1452b34–1453a3 as well as Aristotle's general preference for either "happy" or "unhappy" endings. See D. de Montmollin, "Le sens du terme *φιλόανθρωπον* dans la *Poétique* d'Aristote," *Phoenix* 19 (1965) 15–23; R. Lamberton, "Philanthropia and the Evolution of Dramatic Taste," *Phoenix* 37 (1983) 95–103; J. Moles, "Philanthropia in the Poetics," *Phoenix* 38 (1984) 325–335; S. A. White, "Aristotle's Favorite Tragedies," in A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton 1992) 221–240.

evitably endowed with ethical attributes and that realize certain actions which are either “good” (that is, noble or successful) or “bad” (that is, dishonorable or unsuccessful). But nowhere in the *Poetics* is there any suggestion that poetry has the power of “morally harming” its public,¹¹ as indeed is the case in Plato, whose conception of poetry as a morally degrading agent within the polis is dependent on a very personal and distinctive understanding of political reality.¹² This single fact seriously undermines the case for such an interpretation of *βλαβερόν* in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Even granted that moral flaws affecting characters were indeed, in his opinion, a strong motive for criticism—on account perhaps of the standards of loftiness that the epic and tragic genres ought to aspire to—the word *βλαβερόν* would still be a very peculiar way of phrasing this criticism.

Naturally, it could be argued that Aristotle, in the context of *Poetics* ch. 25, is content with providing solutions to typical objections raised against poetry that do not need to be valid in his own eyes. Leaving a space for criticism based on the “morally harmful” would then appear as a concession to previous critics holding different views about the purpose of poetry, and Aristotle would employ the word *βλαβερά* as some kind of reference to Plato’s use of it at *Resp.* 391E: “For, as we were saying, such utterances [those of the poets about the gods] are both impious and false ... And they are furthermore harmful (*βλαβερά*) to those that hear them” (transl. Shorey). But if that is the case, one can legitimately wonder why Aristotle does not provide any means to answer objections of this nature. Indeed, *βλαβερόν* with such a meaning as “morally harmful” would be

¹¹ At *Pol.* 1336b20–35 Aristotle does advise against allowing youngsters to attend comedies on account of the obscene language that such performances feature. But this stricture is far from a censure of the poets themselves, especially those that are representatives of the “serious” genres, such as epic and tragedy.

¹² On this topic see J. Lear, “Inside and Outside the *Republic*,” *Phronesis* 37 (1992) 184–215, who offers a limpid analysis of the psyche/polis interaction in the *Republic*.

the only one of the five basic *ἐπιτιμήματα* to be left without any potential solution,¹³ although this sort of objection should certainly call for a serious defense. Considering that morality is incommensurable with technical skill, it would be useless to contest the argument *μὴ ἀνάγκης οὔσης* by pointing out the poetic necessity of any given immoral element in a poem, since the objectionable content would be no less “harmful” to the morals if it were poetically “necessary.” (By contrast, charges of *ἄλογία*, being directly concerned with poetic technique, are adequately answered by arguments that rely on this same technique, such as the “necessity” argument.)

Besides, *Poetics* ch. 25 has rightly been understood as a condensed account of Aristotle’s own standards of criticism,¹⁴ as evinced especially in the fundamental distinction between the correctness (*ὀρθότης*) of poetry and that of other crafts (cf. 1460b13–15). Rather than a mechanical method of answering

¹³ Solutions for *ἄλογα* and *ἄδύνατα*, which are similar notions (see 330 below), often consist in showing the poetic advantage of introducing striking or marvelous ingredients in the poem (cf. 1460b23–26); a particular solution for “contradictions” is to “consider how many meanings are possible in the linguistic context” (1461a32); and objections regarding mimetic consistency, which I presume is the meaning of *ἐπιτιμήματα ὡς παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην* (see 333 below), could be linked with the kind of solution that is hinted at in the following passage: “For even where an inconsistent person is portrayed, and such a character is presupposed, there should still be consistency in the inconsistency” (1454a25–27; cf. Arist. fr.391 Gigon).

¹⁴ See Halliwell, *The Poetics* 177. Strangely enough, Halliwell claims a few pages later that in fact this chapter “offers a defensive strategy against hostile critics of poetry, while the work as a whole contends for what Ar. sees as the finest standards inherent in the genres which he examines” (180). Halliwell’s view on the relation of ch. 25 to the rest of the treatise is far from clear: although he believes that the *Poetics* as a whole generally exhibits a “more prescriptive approach” compared with “the ‘liberal’ and accommodating quality of ch. 25,” he simultaneously asserts that “the treatise certainly eschews the more naive kinds of moralism or technical criticism which are rebutted in this chapter” (180). The simplest way to avoid such a contradictory conclusion is to admit that the chapter does not adopt a significantly different standpoint from what precedes and what follows it.

previous attacks, however relevant they may be, the chapter seeks to identify what are *genuine* grounds for criticism and to provide, wherever possible, equally genuine solutions to them. Aristotle's preoccupation with the legitimacy or the unfairness of his contemporaries' censures is indeed perceptible at various points throughout the *Poetics*.¹⁵ It is thus unlikely that this chapter should make use of poetic criteria that have no direct antecedents in the extensive prescriptions of the previous chapters. The denunciation in ch. 25 of "morally harmful" elements in poetry would constitute a late encounter indeed for the reader, since Aristotle shows a persistent disinterest in this matter in the *Poetics*.

"Harmful" actions in ancient literary criticism

Given the uniqueness of *Poetics* ch. 25 as a systematic account of the ancient debates over "the problems and solutions" related to a critical study of the Homeric epic, it may be rewarding to turn to another set of texts that provide useful illustrations of what these debates looked like. The texts in question are the numerous literary ζητήματα transmitted (mostly) in the ancient scholia to Homer, in particular those that have demonstrably been given attention by Aristotle.¹⁶

There are thirty-nine Aristotelian fragments listed under the heading Ἀπορήματα Ὀμηρικά in Gigon's edition (thirty-eight in Rose's). Although one could wish for more, these are sufficient to give a reasonable estimate of Aristotle's involvement in the literary debates of his time. Moreover, the various problems addressed by Aristotle can usually be adequately sub-

¹⁵ See e.g. 1458b5–7 on the "undeserved censure" of poetical diction (οὐκ ὀρθῶς ψέγουσιν οἱ ἐπιτιμῶντες τῷ τοιούτῳ τρόπῳ τῆς διαλέκτου), and 1453a24, where Euripides' detractors are said to "err" (ἀμαρτάνουσιν) when they reproach him for his unhappy endings.

¹⁶ The comparison between *Poetics* ch. 25 and the pieces of Porphyry's *Homeric Questions* found in the scholia has been duly exploited by Carroll, *Aristotle's Poetics*, who fails however to provide a satisfactory meaning for βλαβερόν.

sumed under the five types of *ἐπιτίμημα* listed at the end of *Poetics* ch. 25,¹⁷ on condition that the ticklish term *βλαβερόν* be interpreted plainly as “harmful,” i.e. “contrary to one’s advantage,” and that this harmfulness be understood as affecting a character within the narrative, instead of the audience.

It seems to be a peculiar feature of ancient literary criticism, including Aristotle’s, to credit the epic heroes with a strong sense of self-interest and a proportionate amount of instrumental intelligence to satisfy it. This feature accounts for the frequency with which Greek critics express a somewhat naive perplexity before a scene showing a character who acts in an obviously stupid, dangerous, or simply inexpedient manner. I say “naive” because this reaction seems to result from a somewhat “day-to-day” perspective that the critic typically applies to the poetic world.¹⁸ This perspective is particularly visible in his tendency, when judging a character’s decisions and actions, to compare them with what he, or any other sensible man,¹⁹ would do in the same situation. Considering the heroic and divine status of the epic’s protagonists, the expectations concerning the cleverness of their doings are all the more inflexible. This is true at least in the case of Greek characters, whose superiority over the barbarians is another assumption shared by ancient readers.²⁰ For example Heraclitus, the first century A.D. author of *Homeric Problems*, gives the following argument to support his view that the narration of the *Iliad* takes place in summer:

And why should all those who had come as allies have been so careless of danger (*ῥυφokinδυνος*) as to settle down to besiege the

¹⁷ See 332 below.

¹⁸ Cf. R. Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic at Work: Terms and Concepts of Literary Criticism in Greek Scholia* (Cambridge 2009) 14, 252–253.

¹⁹ Cf. *Poet.* 1461b16–19: the poet’s potential self-contradictions must be judged not only on the basis of his own literal statements but also by comparison with “something which can be sensibly assumed” (*ὁ ἂν φρόνιμος ὑποθῇται*).

²⁰ Cf. Plut. *Quomodo adul.* 29D–E; Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic* 13.

enemy in a bad season? ... But suppose the barbarians, in their stupidity, did choose to do something contrary to their interests (*τῶν ἀσυνφόρων*²¹ ... *τι*)? Why then do the Greeks, who are superior in intelligence in every way, pick their best men to send out on reconnaissance at night—with what conceivable possible success compared with the loss (*βλάβη*) consequent on their failure? A snow shower or a winter rainstorm might easily have drowned them both. (9.7–10; transl. Russell and Konstan)

Such a pragmatic premise happens to be at the heart of a surprisingly large number of Homeric *zetemata*, whose significance is not obvious to a modern eye that does not spontaneously accept the premise. No fewer than ten of the surviving fragments from Aristotle's *Homeric Problems*²² raise questions that are apparently prompted by the critic's disappointment at a character's incompetent or unintelligent handling of a particular situation. The ten problems are the following:

Why did Agamemnon test the Achaeans in such a way as to nearly cause a situation opposite to what he intended? (fr.366 Gigon,²³ on the *Διάπειρα* episode in the *Iliad*)

Why did Athena not choose one of the Trojans in order to violate the oaths, but rather chose one of the allies, although one of his own would have been more agreeable to Alexander [and thus even readier to satisfy Athena's will]? (375, on Athena's choice of Pandarus at *Il.* 4.88)

Why did Ajax reveal Achilles' wrath? That was in no way necessary, and a sensible man (*φρονίμου ἀνδρός*) does not make his weaknesses known to his enemies (381, on *Il.* 7.229)

²¹ On the proximity of *ἀσύνφορον* with *βλαβερόν* see 321 below.

²² Hintenlang's list of fragments dealing with the "expediency" (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) of some actions is very incomplete: H. Hintenlang, *Untersuchungen zu den Homer-Aporien des Aristoteles* (diss. Heidelberg 1961) 141.

²³ References to Aristotelian fragments are based on the numeration of Gigon's collection (1987), although Rose (1886) was generally more cautious in attributing the content of the relevant scholia to Aristotle. Rose's editorial choices have been preferred to a large extent by B. Breitenberger in her recent translation of the fragments in H. Flashar et al. (eds.), *Aristoteles Fragmente zu Philosophie, Rhetorik, Poetik, Dichtung* (Berlin 2006).

Why did Homer make the commanders deliberate outside the walls for their nocturnal council, when it was possible for them to do it safely (*ἐν ἀσφαλεῖ*) within the walls? (384 on *Il.* 10.194)

The position of the spears planted on their point seems ill chosen (*φαύλη*); indeed it is a well-known fact that a single fallen spear suffices to cause general confusion at night (383, on *Il.* 10.153)

Why does Calchas give an interpretation of only that part of the omen where the birds are devoured by the snake, and say nothing about the snake's ensuing lithification, although this was a real marvel that called for explanation? And if the lithification was a symbol of the Greeks' return by sea after the war, it would be ridiculous (*γελοῖος*) of Calchas not to warn them that, according to the signs, they would never come back. (369, on *Il.* 2.305–329)²⁴

Why did Odysseus tell the Phaeacians that he had mutilated the Cyclops, when we think that the Phaeacians are descendants of Poseidon, just like the Cyclops? (396, on *Od.* 9.345)

Why did Odysseus act with such foolish (*ἀνοήτως*) contempt toward Poseidon when taunting the Cyclops about his wound being incurable, even by his father Poseidon? (397, on *Od.* 9.525)

Why did Odysseus refuse Calypso's offer of making him immortal? (401, on *Od.* 23.337)

Why did Odysseus not reveal in the first place his identity to Penelope as he had done with his son and his servants, even though she was an adult and she loved him [and could thus have provided him additional help]? (399, on *Od.* 16.188)

To these ten problems we could possibly add fr.376 (schol. B *Il.* 4.297) on the disposition of Nestor's army,²⁵ and 402 (Strab. 13.1.36) where Strabo reports Aristotle's view about the wall built by the Achaeans in *Iliad* 7 (whose future destruction is announced at the beginning of the twelfth book): "According to

²⁴ I give here a shortened account of the content of this long and intricate *zetema*. On the psychological nature of this *zetema*, whose focus is on Calchas' behavior rather than on the fantastic character of the omen, cf. R. Lambert and J. J. Keaney, *Homer's Ancient Readers: the Hermeneutics of Greek Epic's Earliest Exegetes* (Princeton 1992) xiv: "Aristotle, as often, seems [in fr.369] to have been concerned to pry into the motives and the latent dynamics of the interaction of the characters."

²⁵ On this fragment see n.55 below.

Aristotle, the poet, having invented it, destroyed it” (ὁ δὲ πλάσας ποιητῆς ἠφάνισεν, ὡς Ἀριστοτέλης φησίν). Although its precise meaning is debatable, this last remark was presumably made in the context of an ancient discussion concerning the various peculiarities of this wall in the narrative, and in particular the odd fact that the Greeks only thought of building such a protection in the last year of the war.²⁶ The inconceivability of the Greeks’ foolishness (ἀπόνοια) on this matter, along with that of the Trojans’ cowardice (since they did not dare to attack the Greek vessels although they were vulnerable all that time), is in fact what worries Strabo in this passage. Aristotle’s remark, by stressing the fictional nature of the wall, could be understood as a way of allaying criticism against the inexpedient behavior of both Greeks and Trojans during the period preceding the building of the wall. But the interpretation of this meagre fragment must remain hypothetical.²⁷

As regards the ten *zelemata* listed above, they all bluntly consist in pointing out the apparently harmful—or at the very least useless—nature of a character’s specific action with regard to his own interest or that of his near and dear. Although it is not actually used in these passages, I believe that the word *βλαβερόν* could adequately render this notion of “counterproductiveness.” Indeed, not only does this term occur only once in the *Poetics*, but it is not found as a source of objection in the scholia either.²⁸ A close equivalent, however, the word *ἀσύμφορον*, is used in at least one scholium addressing the same sort of problem as those listed above: at schol. A *Il.* 24.130, Aristonicus reports that Thetis’ words enjoining her son to stop grieving and predicting his imminent death (24.130–132) were athetized, partially on account of being “the least useful of all

²⁶ Notably, Thucydides (1.11.1) speaks of this wall as if it had been erected upon the Greeks’ arrival at Troy.

²⁷ See T. W. Boyd, “A Poet on the Achaean Wall,” *Oral Tradition* 10 (1995) 181–206, at 187, for a different interpretation of fr.402.

²⁸ Cf. Carroll, *Aristotle’s Poetics* 21.

(ἀπάντων ἀσυμφορώτατον), especially for those who are going to battle, since they rather need grit and spirit.”²⁹

On the assumption that Aristotle’s phrase ἐπιτιμήματα ὡς βλαβερά is meant to designate the critical objections that gave rise to this kind of *zetema*, these objections would then be the expression of the ancient readers’ puzzlement when they encounter what appears to them as an incomprehensible course of action within their accepted paradigm of “pragmatic” psychology. The frequency of *zetemata* showing this sort of preoccupation makes it plausible that Aristotle would have included them in the final list of *Poetics* ch. 25. Moreover, the relatively high number of *zetemata* concerning actions whose author is the character Odysseus in this list (four out of ten) can also easily be explained with what I have termed the “pragmatic” premise of ancient criticism: Odysseus is a paradigmatic figure of intelligence and prudence, and so all the more expected to behave sensibly.³⁰

²⁹ Another reason for the athetesis of these verses is of course the well-known prudishness of Alexandrian mores, who objected to the inappropriate (ἀπρεπές) character of Thetis’ comment on the enjoyment of sex, but the scholium clearly distinguishes between the different motives for the athetesis: ἀθετοῦνται στίχοι τρεῖς, ὅτι ἀπρεπές μητέρα υἱῷ λέγειν “ἀγαθὸν ἐστὶ γυναικὶ μίσεσθαι.” ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἀπάντων ἀσυμφορώτατόν ἐστι καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς εἰς πόλεμον ἐξιούσι· χρεία γὰρ εὐτονίας καὶ πνεύματος. καὶ τὸ λέγειν ὅτι ὁ θάνατός σου ἐγγύς ἐστίν, ἄκαιρον.

³⁰ It is likely, though unprovable, that Odysseus had been the subject of numerous *zetematic* discussions among early Homeric scholars. This is partly hinted at by the fact that Euripides’ satyr play *Cyclops* ostensibly modifies a number of details from the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey*, notably omitting some of Odysseus’ most conspicuous bad decisions (such as his choice to wait for the Cyclops inside the cave, or his foolish hope to be offered presents of hospitality from its inhabitant). Considering that fifth-century tragedians, Euripides in particular, were well aware of the existence of scrupulous readers hunting for *zetemata* (cf. R. Scodel, *Credible Impossibilities: Conventions and Strategies of Verisimilitude in Homer and Greek Tragedy* [Stuttgart 1999] ch. 7), the Euripidean version of Odysseus’ encounter with the Cyclops is conceivably a conscious attempt to provide the corrections necessary to avoid some notorious Homeric problems.

By contrast, only three Aristotelian passages can safely be considered as referring to objections denouncing the morality of a particular action or character: fr.374 (on Paris being “miserable,” ἄθλιος, and “in an irrecoverable disposition,” ἀσώτως διακεῖσθαι), 389 (on Achilles’ dragging of Hector’s corpse “against the established laws”), and 403 (on Agamemnon’s alleged corruptibility in accepting a mare as compensation for a subject’s exemption from war service). It is also possible that Aristotle’s citation (*Poet.* 1461a21; cf. *Soph.El.* 166b) of a grammatical *lysis* provided by a certain Hippias of Thasos, who suggested to change δίδομεν to διδόμεν at *Il.* 2.15, makes reference to a problem of a moral nature: the paroxytone form, an Aeolic imperatival infinitive, avoids making Zeus utter in the first person the deceitful words granting a false victory to Agamemnon.³¹

In addition to frs.374, 389, and 403, H. Hintenlang³² admits 397, 379, and 368 into his list of Aristotelian problems that deal with the “morality” (*Sittlichkeit*) of some actions; but this classification reflects inattention to the details of the relevant problems. In 397 Aristotle is clearly concerned with the *riskiness* of Odysseus’ insulting Poseidon (considering the god’s future persecution of the hero), and not particularly with the latent impiety of his words. In 379, on the exchange of weapons between Glaucus and Diomedes, he points out the *inconsistency* of the judgment expressed by the narrator on Glaucus with the latter’s noble disinterest. And in 368 he merely refutes the ap-

³¹ Interestingly enough, the problematic words δίδομεν δέ οἱ εὖχος ἀρέσθαι are not found in our versions of the Homeric line, where we find instead Τρώεσσι δὲ κήδε’ ἐφήπται (“far more anodyne,” A. C. Cassio, “Early Editions of the Greek Epics and Homeric Textual Criticism in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BC,” in F. Montanari and P. Ascheri [eds.], *Omero tremila anni dopo* [Rome 2002] 105–136, at 120). According to Cassio, the shift was made on moral grounds, and “must be later than Aristotle but earlier than the Alexandrian scholars, who knew nothing of—or decided to ignore—the earlier version.”

³² Hintenlang, *Untersuchungen* 95–105.

parent *inappropriateness* (*ἀπρεπές*) of a personage such as king Odysseus running across the camp without his overcoat;³³ there is no doubt that this instance of *ἀπρεπές* is to be interpreted with its specifically technical meaning “incompatible with the character or the situation,”³⁴ and not in a moralistic fashion.

As regards the few cases that I have just singled out as true “moral” problems (374, 389, 403, along with *Poet.* 1461a21), although they reveal the presence of certain critical presuppositions concerning the noble status of epic characters, they can hardly qualify as instances of anything that could be called *βλαβερόν*—at least not in any straightforward way. Indeed, the exponents of the traditional understanding of *βλαβερόν* do not even cite any of these fragments in support of their view.

βλαβερόν in the Poetics

It was urged above that a moral use of *βλαβερόν* in the *Poetics* is unlikely given that no defense against charges for poetic immorality is provided by Aristotle. Some commentators³⁵ adduce the following passage as offering precisely such a defense (1461a4–9):

When asking whether someone has spoken or acted in a good or bad manner (*καλῶς ἢ μὴ καλῶς*), one should look to see not just if the deed or utterance is worthy or worthless (*σπουδαῖον ἢ φαῦλον*), but also to the identity of the agent or the speaker (*εἰς τὸν πράττοντα ἢ λέγοντα*), to the person with whom he deals (*πρὸς ὅν*), and to the occasion (*ὅτε*), means (*ὅτω*), and purpose (*οὐ ἕνεκεν*) of what is done (e.g. whether the aim is to effect a greater good, or prevent a greater evil). (Halliwell, modified)

³³ Cf. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* 158, who points out that *πρέπον* and *ἀρμότων* are synonyms, along with *Rh.* 1363a28 for a partial definition of *τὰ ἀρμόττοντα* as *τά τε προσήκοντα κατὰ γένος καὶ δύναμιν*.

³⁴ On which see M. Pohlenz, “*Τὸ πρέπον*. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des griechischen Geistes,” in *Kleine Schriften I* (Hildesheim 1965) 100–139.

³⁵ See Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* 250; Dupont-Roc and Lallot, *Aristote* 402–403; Janko, *Aristotle* 148 and 152; Halliwell, *The Poetics* 135; Breitenberger, *Aristoteles Fragmente* 374; Schmitt, *Aristoteles Poetik* 707.

The beginning of Halliwell's original translation reads: "When asking whether someone has spoken or acted morally or otherwise, one should look to see not just if the deed or utterance is good or evil..." But this translation begs the question with regard to the moral connotation that can be perceived in Aristotle's evaluation of the characters' actions.³⁶ The words actually used in this passage are quite noncommittal,³⁷ and I see no reason why, for example, we should not interpret this particular instance of *φᾶδλον* with the same meaning that it obviously has in fr.383 (cf. 320 above), where it describes the "inexpedient/harmful" position of the soldiers' spears in the ground.³⁸ The same can be said of the expression *καλῶς ἢ μὴ καλῶς*: according to Lucas—who still believes that the subject of this passage is "the ethical standards employed"—"*καλῶς* in itself would be equally applicable in criticisms of aesthetic or moral quality."³⁹ It happens that *καλός* and its cognates are regularly employed to express the ancient critics' general approval, whether it is prompted by the poem's realistic, artistic, or moral features. Almost any aspect of a character's action could thus be designated by the expression *καλῶς ἢ μὴ καλῶς*,

³⁶ Janko (*Aristotle* 148) compares this passage to *Eth.Nic.* 1111a3 where Aristotle recommends taking account of similar circumstances in the context of judging an action. But, contrary to what Janko believes, this is not to be done as a means of "mitigating harsh moral judgments," but rather to determine whether the action was intentional or unintentional: if the agent was ignorant of any one of these circumstances when doing his deed, then he cannot be said to have done it willfully. In the passage of the *Poetics* that concerns us, the ignorance of the circumstances surrounding an action is that of a careless reader, and not that of the (fictional) agent.

³⁷ Notably, Halliwell's 1995 Loeb translation is much more neutral: "When the question is whether or not someone has spoken or acted well, one should examine not only whether the actual deed or utterance is good or bad..."

³⁸ Cf. *Eth.Nic.* 1154b4–5, according to which bodily pleasure is a "bad" thing (*φᾶδλον*) when it is harmful, but an unobjectionable one if it is inoffensive (*ὅταν μὲν οὖν ἀβλαβείς, ἀνεπιτίμητον, ὅταν δὲ βλαβεράς, φᾶδλον*).

³⁹ Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* 240; cf. de Montmollin, *La Poétique* 323 n.201.

including the level of success that this action is likely to produce.⁴⁰ For example, the notions of “beautiful” (*καλόν*) and “fruitful” (*συμφέρον*) are closely coupled in the following comment on the rhetorical quality of Hector’s speech against Polydamas, after the latter has advised the Trojans to retreat inside the city walls:

Hector’s speech contains utility along with beauty; that is to say, even what he says about the riches—that they were spent entirely on a long-lasting war—contributes to its utility, because the harm done to the besieged is greater than that which is done to those who give impetus to the engagement.⁴¹

In his speech Hector mentions how much wealth Troy has lost since the beginning of the war; since his speech meets with the Trojans’ acclamations (10.310), the point of the scholiast’s comment is precisely to explain the successful effect of his words.

Moreover, to link *βλαβερόν* with wickedness would be inconsistent with *Poet.* 1461a4–9, because this passage makes no reference whatever to “character” but rather focuses on the value of particular actions accomplished by dramatic characters. And although it is true that actions can also reveal moral character (cf. *Poet.* 1450a21), that is clearly not what Aristotle has in mind here. What is at stake is whether an action turns

⁴⁰ Technically, Aristotle does at one point make a distinction between the “beautiful” (*καλόν*) and the “useful” (*συμφέρον*), which along with the “pleasurable” (*ἡδύ*) are regarded as the three motives at the basis of an agent’s decisions (*Eth.Nic.* 1104b31). But as regards individuals who happen to be *καλοὶ καγαθοί*, the useful in fact coincides with the beautiful (cf. *Eth. Eud.* 1249a10); and at *Eth.Nic.* 1140a26 he says that it is characteristic of a “sensible” man to be able to deliberate “beautifully” on what is good and useful to him (*δοκεῖ δὲ φρονίμου εἶναι τὸ δύνασθαι καλῶς βουλευσασθαι περὶ τὰ αὐτῷ ἀγαθὰ καὶ συμφέροντα*). Generally speaking, the words *καλόν* and *συμφέρον* make a recurring pair in the Aristotelian corpus.

⁴¹ Schol. bT *Il.* 10.290: ὁ τοῦ Ἑκτορος λόγος μετὰ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ τὸ *συμφέρον* ἔχει, τουτέστι *συμφέροντος μέρος* ἐστὶ καὶ τὰ περὶ τῶν *χρημάτων*, ἅπερ πολυχρονίῳ πολέμῳ ἐξαναλώσθαι λέγει, ὅτι μείζων ἢ βλάβη *πολιορκουμένων* ἢ τῇ *συμβολῇ* κρίσιν διδόντων.

out to be “well” (καλῶς) done, and not what sort of character did it.

Consequently, it is indeed plausible that *Poet.* 1461a4–9 furnishes potential answers to the ἐπιτιμήματα ὡς βλαβερά, by means of a reference to various circumstances (the characters concerned, their specific aims, etc.) within the narrative framework of the poem; I shall term this “the contextual argument.” But this does not in itself allow us to decide on the meaning of βλαβερόν, since an accusation ὡς βλαβερόν could be refuted by such an argument regardless of whether βλαβερόν means “morally harmful” or “inexpedient.” The fact that Aristotle here gives no example to illustrate the importance of these various circumstances does not help to settle the uncertainty.

However, if we examine the actual application of this type of *lysis* in the Homeric *zetemata*, we shall find that it is especially suited to the alleged cases of inexpediency. The following are indisputable occasions where Aristotle’s solutions make use of the contextual argument:

- fr.375: Athena does not make a Trojan responsible for the breaking of the oaths because all the Trojans hated Paris, and among the allies she chose Pandarus because of his greediness and because he is a perjurer (solution based on πρὸς ὅν)
- fr.381: Ajax mentions Achilles’ wrath to Hector in order to prevent the latter from thinking that Achilles has retreated out of fear and because he wants him to be aware of the presence of other powerful soldiers (solution based on οὐ ἔνεκεν)
- fr.384: The Achaean commanders made their council outside the walls because it was unlikely that the Trojans would make a desperate nightly assault, since they were in a good situation at the time. Moreover, going a little ahead of the camp was only normal since they were about to send spies to the Trojans (solution based on ὅτε)
- fr.369: Perhaps Calchas failed to say anything about the meaning of the snake’s lithification because it was a symbol of slowness—something that already belonged to the past and that was no longer fearsome for the Greeks (solution based on ὅτε)
- fr.396: Odysseus does nothing foolish in telling the Phaeacians about the blinding of Polyphemus, since they were also enemies of the Cyclopes, who had once attacked them and deprived them of their

- land (solution based on *πρὸς ὄν*)
- fr.397: Nor is he taking any risks with Poseidon when insulting the Cyclops, since he merely means to say that Poseidon shall never *wish* to heal him (solution based on *οὐ ἔνεκεν*). Accordingly, Poseidon's anger over Odysseus' blinding of Polyphemus is prompted by the fact that a mortal (like Odysseus) is not entitled to take justice into his own hands when gods, or their kin, are involved (solution based on *εἰς τὸν πράττοντα ἢ λέγοντα* and *πρὸς ὄν*)
- fr.401: Odysseus refuses Calypso's offer because he does not trust her (solution based on *πρὸς ὄν*), and he tells the Phaeacians about his refusal because he thinks it an expedient way (*συνέφερε*) to gain their sympathy and their help for his homeward journey (solution based on *οὐ ἔνεκεν*)
- fr.399: Odysseus did not reveal his identity to Penelope in order to avoid that her overwhelming joy would raise suspicions about his presence in the palace, since she was used to continuous crying (solution based on *οὐ ἔνεκεν* and *πρὸς ὄν*)
- fr.379 (on *Il.* 6.234): The poet blames Glaucus for having traded with Diomedes his superior weaponry not on account of its greater value but on account of the war that was going on, and of the use Glaucus was to make of the weaponry (solution based on *ὅτε*)
- fr.403 (on *Il.* 23.297–299): Agamemnon did well to bring a valuable mare along with him in his campaign, rather than the worthless man who owned it (solution based on *πρὸς ὄν*)

In all these cases, except in the last two,⁴² solutions based on the contextual argument (that is to say, on the identity of the agent/speaker and of the other characters, on the precise goal the agent has in mind, or on various other circumstances) are

⁴² See 323 above for details on the respective problems corresponding to these solutions. The case of the exchange of weapons between Glaucus and Diomedes is particularly interesting: the *zetema* does not consist, as one could naturally think, in denouncing the foolishness of Glaucus' trading of gold for bronze (in which case the *zetema* would be based on the notion of *βλαβερόν* as I understand it), but rather the inconsistent harshness of the narrator, who precisely calls Glaucus "foolish" although his gesture was prompted by *φιλοτιμία* and friendship. Cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1358b38–1359a5 where it is stated that authors of epideictic speeches often praise their subject for prioritizing a noble action over one's personal interest.

provided to solve problems that I singled out earlier as derived from the pragmatic perspective of “harmful” actions. These solutions consist in showing the particular appropriateness or expediency of a given action, when such an action displays a *prima facie* detrimental character. Of course, it is still possible to solve these problems by resorting to arguments of an entirely different nature, such as those that focus on the poet’s special aims: Agamemnon’s risky trial of his army, for example, is externally justified by the poetic benefit of introducing dangerous (and thus exciting) episodes (fr.366). Similarly, the awkward position of the spears finds some external justification in what Aristotle contends to be ancient practice (383). It is in fact the case that almost any type of *lysis* can be used to stand up to any type of *zetema*.⁴³ But showing the rationale behind an apparently harmful action is obviously a particularly adequate defense against *ἐπιτιμήματα ὡς βλαβερά*, as I propose to understand them.

It remains to be shown that *βλαβερόν* thus understood comes in as a consistent and natural complement of the four other types of *ἐπιτίμημα* in Aristotle’s list. Especially necessary is a clarification of the distinction between *ἀδύνατα*, *ἄλογα*, and *βλαβερά*, since all three categories seem to involve an implausibility of some sort. *ἀδύνατα* and *ἄλογα* are in fact the hardest to tell apart, because “impossibilities” can naturally overlap with “irrationalities” and vice versa.⁴⁴ Examples given by

⁴³ This principle has been a fruitful guide to the analysis of Carroll (*Aristotle’s Poetics*) as is pointed out by Rosenmeyer, *CSCA* 6 (1974) 232 n.5. I am not suggesting that the contextual argument is used *only* to solve cases of in-expediency. In addition to frs.379 and 403 cited above, the *zetemata* treated in 380 and 373 are also answered with this argument, although they do not consist in charges of *βλαβερόν* (see below for a list of the Aristotelian fragments related to the various types of objection).

⁴⁴ Cf. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* 230: “it would seem natural that an *ἄλογον* in the structure would give rise to individual incidents which were *ἀδύνατα*.” It looks though as if the category of *ἄλογα* is more extensive than that of *ἀδύνατα*, since some “irrationalities” are not necessarily “impossibilities.”

Aristotle,⁴⁵ supplemented with a study of the usage found in the scholia, suggest that the word *ἀδύνατα* might refer to those scenes in a poem that give a somewhat fantastic impression, whereas *ἄλογα* would be more generally the cases where a sudden occurrence, or else some particular detail, violently—and unbelievably—deceives the reader's natural expectations. At all events, the *alogia* that is denounced in these examples has certainly nothing to do with the sort of "irrationality" that can manifest itself in the behavior of an individual: the *ἄλογον* in Oedipus' ignorance of the circumstances of Laius' death is by no means the result of his *own* irrationality, but rather that of the narrative. But *βλαβερά*, in keeping with what has been said above, would be precisely those actions that are "irrational" on account of being both voluntary and contrary to a rational agent's expected behavior, and thus correspond to a particular kind of psychological implausibility—one especially offensive to the ancient critics' sensibilities, as we have seen.

βλαβερά appear to be extreme instances of what could be called, in modern terminology, a lack of "actorial motivation,"⁴⁶ with the essential difference that an action is here denounced as *conflicting* with the actorial-motivational context, instead of being merely poorly motivated. The ancient critics' severity towards this lack is partially excusable considering that, according to I. J. F. de Jong, actorial motivation is usually explicit. The implicitness of the motives underlying an action can thus be considered narrative "gaps" that need to be filled in. Regarding fr.399 (on Odysseus' choice not to identify himself to his wife), R. Scodel believes that Aristotle's interest was

⁴⁵ See 333–335 below listing the examples. *ἄλογον* and its cognates are much more often used than *ἀδύνατον*: there is only one occurrence of the latter in the *Poetics* ("Hector's pursuit" at 1460b26); but in fr.390 Aristotle deals with the *ἀδύνατον* of the wounds healing on Hector's corpse. The scholia also sometimes use *ἀδύνατον* to describe supernatural occurrences (e.g. schol. B *Il.* 3.397 and 5.7).

⁴⁶ See the definition of this narratological concept in I. J. F. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge 2001) xi.

justified because Odysseus' behavior "requires naturalization, and ancient criticism treats all gaps as problematic."⁴⁷ Similarly, Calchas' failure to explain the snake's lithification (369), according to R. Lamberton and J. J. Keaney, qualifies as a "glaring omission."⁴⁸

By contrast with ἀδύνατα and ἄλογα, which seem to reflect the sort of judgment that a critic might pass on a painted scene as well as on a narrated scene, to qualify some element as βλαβερόν demands that the critic adopt an internal standpoint in the narrative and evaluate the action with regard to what he believes to be the characters' desires and aspirations. Such an assessment calls for a major involvement in the composition's inner psychological workings, which is more easily conceivable in the case of a literary work than of any other form of art. Indeed, one could argue that "inexpediency" is even too specific a criterion: why is it that in the list of objections the sole item with a psychological tenor should be centered on precisely such a notion?

That is perhaps explainable by the nature of fiction itself, whose potential of interest relies heavily on the introduction of actions capable of provoking excitement and other strongly emotional responses. Such actions can hardly be undertaken by characters with a fully rational and predictable conduct, so the epic poet will do well to allow even his "superior" characters a touch of piquant fallibility. Indeed, such elements as Odysseus' choice of a mortal life, or his provocative words to the Cyclops, have an inescapable appeal for the audience—the first as an expression of the sublimity of human condition, the second as a satisfying experience of cathartic vengeance. But on the prosaic level of "expediency" these can indeed be questionable courses of action, and a meticulous critic endowed with a rational conception of human behavior might easily be tempted to underline this tactical incredibility rather than the poetic qualities

⁴⁷ *Credible Impossibilities* 21.

⁴⁸ *Homer's Ancient Readers* xiv.

associated with it. Or this critic could even go so far as to expose the artificiality of the motives underlying a specific occurrence in the narrative⁴⁹ by pointing out the psychological implausibility of ascribing it to a character. That is precisely what Scodel envisions concerning the unbelievably foolish behavior of Odysseus during the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey*.⁵⁰

Homer faces the danger that Odysseus' decision to remain in the cave will seem to be Homer's, understandable on the aesthetic level (since otherwise there is no story), and so perhaps forgivable by the audience, but without sense mimetically, as part of the represented world, and so a flaw ... when Odysseus points to his own folly in the cave, he transfers the mistake from the (primary) narrator to the character.

As a final argument, I must point out that the critical objections corresponding to the numerous *zetemata* presented above (319–320) can find a place in the *epitimemata* list of *Poetics* 25 only under the heading of *βλαβερά*, which is the only item left after all the other *zetemata* found in the remains of Aristotle's *Homeric Problems* have been distributed and labelled as instances of *ἄλογα*, *ἀδύνατα*, *ὑπεναντία*, and *παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην*. I have just now presented my understanding of the meaning of the first two, and argued that this meaning is significantly different from the objections listed on pp.319–320. The same can be said of *ὑπεναντία*, the least problematic notion of the list, to which we can also assign a good number of Aristotelian fragments.

Examples of objections that concern “technical correctness” are harder to identify, because the vagueness of the formula could well indicate a mixed category. Likely candidates for this group are elements that betray some sort of poetic inconsistency but cannot be qualified as downright factual “contradictions” (*ὑπεναντία*), such as Iphigenia's “unevenness”

⁴⁹ Much like what Aristotle does in fr.366, though without any traces of rebuke (cf. 329 above).

⁵⁰ *Credible Impossibilities* 51.

(*ἀνώμαλον*, 1454a30–33), or that of Menelaus, who happens to act differently in two similar situations separated by a short time interval (fr.380). The one instance of *ἄπρεπές* considered by Aristotle ought also to be included in this class, since it concerns the discrepancy between a character's social status and the behavior that he displays (fr.368, cf. 324 above).⁵¹ In all these cases, the inaccuracy involved is certainly “technical” since it amounts to nothing less than bad imitation.⁵² Again, the formulations used to present these various problems have nothing in common with the objections of pp.319–320, which are thus, by the process of elimination, either left unattached or else assigned to the category of *ἐπιτιμήματα ὡς βλαβερά*—“objections on account of the (implausibly) harmful course of action” taken by any given character in the poem.

For convenience, the following list offers a recapitulation of the distribution of the *zetemata* corresponding to the five categories of *epitimema* of *Poetics* ch. 25 as I propose to understand them, including both the fragments of Aristotle's *Homeric Problems* and the relevant passages of the *Poetics*.⁵³ Since most of the texts do not make a direct use of the crucial terms to express the objections, this distribution is largely the result of deduction; but the passages accompanied by an asterisk are those where the specific objection (as *ἀδύνατον*, *ἄλογον*, etc.) is explicitly stated.

ἀδύνατα frs.390* (wounds healing on Hector's corpse), 395 (how can the Cyclops be born from two non-Cyclops parents?), 398 (Helios' immortal cattle); *Poet.* 1460b26* (the pursuit of Hector, also labelled *ἄλογον* elsewhere; see below)

⁵¹ Although they do not involve the word *ἄπρεπές*, I am tempted to consider as close equivalents to fr.368 the three Aristotelian fragments that hint at a moral rebuke (cf. 323 above), since they can after all be explained in terms of “inappropriateness” (to the generally noble status of epic characters) as well as in terms of “immorality.”

⁵² Cf. Carroll, *Aristotle's Poetics* 24–26.

⁵³ Some fragments are too scanty to be assigned to any category. That is the case with frs.386, 392, and 402.

- ἄλογα* frs.366 (use of the *μηχανή*; cf. *Poet.* 1454b1–2*),⁵⁴ 371* (Helen's ignorance of her brothers' death), 400 (abrupt death of Odysseus' dog); *Poet.* 1460a14–16* (the circumstances of Hector's pursuit), 1460a30* (Oedipus' ignorance of how Laius died), 1460a31* (the report of the Pythian Games in *Electra*), 1460a32* (the silent character's arrival in Mysia in the *Mysians*), 1460a35–36* (the disembarkation in the *Odyssey*), 1461b21* (how Euripides handles "the case of Aegeus"), 1461b4–9 (Telemachus' failure to meet Icarus at Sparta)
- βλαβερά* frs.366 (Agamemnon's trial of the army), 369 (Calchas' silence), 375 (Athena's choice of Pandarus), 376 (the disposition of the army),⁵⁵ 381 (Ajax's mention of Achilles' wrath to the enemy), 383 (the spears' position), 384 (the outdoor nocturnal council), 396 (Odysseus' informing the Phaeacians of the blinding of Polyphemus), 397 (Odysseus' insult to Polyphemus and Poseidon), 399 (Odysseus not making himself recognized by Penelope), 401 (Odysseus refusing immortality).
- ὑπεναντία* frs.370* (number of cities in Crete), 372 (Homer's handling of the perjury of the Trojans), 373 (can Helios "see everything" or not?), 377 (where exactly is Gorgo's head?), 382 (Agamemnon opening his speech as if only the leaders were present), 385 (just what portion of the night is passed?), 388/367 (meaning of *τάλαντον*),⁵⁶ 393 (what do gods drink?); *Poet.* 1461a33–34* (the

⁵⁴ The use of the *μηχανή*, both in tragedy (*Poet.* 1454b1) and in epic (1454b1–2 and fr.366, following the text cited 319 above), should probably be understood as reprehensible in terms of *ἄλογία*, given that Aristotle's mention in the *Poetics* of how *ἄλογον* must be avoided immediately follows his rejection of the poetic *μηχανή* (cf. A. R. Sodano, "Gli *ἄλογα* omerici nell'esegesi di Porfirio. La metodologia filologico-estetica di Aristotele," *AAP* 15 [1965] 205–239, at 205).

⁵⁵ Fr.376, on Nestor's strange (*ἄτοπον*) disposition of the army, could also be assigned to another category (*ἄλογα* or *παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην*), depending on whether the focus is on Nestor's military decision or on the general impression given by the scene. In the transmitted *zetema* it is unclear whether the subject of the sentence "Why did *he* make such a disposition of the troops" (*διὰ τί τὴν τάξιν ταύτην ἐποίησεν*) is Nestor or Homer.

⁵⁶ The content of Rose's fr.164 is split by Gigon into two different fragments (388 and 367), although the passages address the same topic.

meaning of “to be stopped”).⁵⁷
 παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην frs.42 [=144 Rose]⁵⁸ (Menelaus as the only soldier without a concubine), 368 (ἄπρεπές of Odysseus’ behavior), 374 (general mediocrity of Alexander), 378 (incongruous simile), 379 (inconsistent judgment on Glaucus), 380 (Menelaus’ contradictory attitude in the face of a proposed duel), 387 (Zeus swearing instead of simply nodding), 389 (Achilles’ unlawful behavior towards Hector’s corpse), 391 (Achilles’ uneven character), 394 (Homer’s use of some epithets), 403 (Agamemnon’s corruptibility); *Poet.* 1454a27–32 (various shortcomings in character drawing).

Conclusion

The interpretation I propose for βλαβερόν in the final part of *Poetics* ch. 25 has a number of advantages. First, it corresponds to the usual meaning that the word carries in Greek, and in Aristotle in particular, where the vast majority of its instances have the plain meaning “harmful” (with regard to one’s interest) and where it is regularly contrasted with συμφέρον, “useful.”⁵⁹ Second, it avoids the sudden intrusion of moral considerations into a context that otherwise presents a strictly technical discussion. Third, it evens up, so to say, the five-item list, since all the objections can now be understood as pointed towards internal deficiencies that are measured by poetry’s own standards: whereas βλαβερόν, when taken to mean “morally harmful,” ascribes some sort of overreaching quality to poetry, extending its influence beyond the poetic construct to the

⁵⁷ The “contradiction” involved in this elliptic example is that a spear could be said to break through two layers of metal on a shield and be stopped by the gold layer, when the gold is supposed to be the first layer.

⁵⁸ Fr.144 Rose was moved by Gigon to the dialogue *Erotikos*, but he is not followed by Breitenberger, *Aristoteles Fragmente*, who restores its original position among the fragments of the *Homeric Problems*. Indeed the zetematic nature of the passage is obvious.

⁵⁹ E.g. *Rh.* 1358b22, 1396a30; *Eth.Nic.* 1104b2; *Pol.* 1253a15. The noun βλάβη and the verb βλάπτειν also occur regularly in discussions concerning justice, to designate the prejudice suffered by the suing party (e.g. *Rh.* 1373b30).

“real” world, *βλαβερόν* as a description of a character’s self-damaging course of action is a criticism that remains within the boundaries of the mimetic art,⁶⁰ just as is the case with *ἀδύνατα*, *ἄλογα*, *ὑπεναντία*, and also with objections *ὡς παρὰ τὴν ὀρθότητα τὴν κατὰ τέχνην*—at least if one reads this expression as referring to the poetic craft, as indeed I do (cf. above n.3). Finally, it seems to account remarkably well for a large number of Homeric *zetemata* to which Aristotle paid attention and which cannot otherwise find a counterpart in his apparently comprehensive list of objections.⁶¹

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⁶⁰ This conforms with what Halliwell thinks to be the main purport of ch. 25, namely “to offer a series of arguments for a style of criticism which works *with*, rather than from outside, the intrinsic aims and techniques of the individual art or genre” (*The Poetics* 179).

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