

COMPETITION

THE Editors regret that neither the quantity nor the quality of the translations into Latin Elegiacs submitted to them will warrant the award of a prize. In view of continued lack of support for the Competitions they have reluctantly decided to discontinue the series.

CORRESPONDENCE

To the EDITOR of Greece and Rome

Dear Sir,

In the latest issue of *Greece and Rome* (May 1934, p. 174) Mr. Witton lays down the law for Greek that 'in all cases μή with the present imperative means desist'. He is quite right in calling attention to this often neglected meaning of the present imperative. He is wrong, however, in limiting the construction to one use. Theognis abounds in examples of the general prohibition, e.g. in lines 30, 31, 47, 61, 69, &c. Gildersleeve in his *Syntax of Classical Greek*, Part I, p. 164, notes besides 'desist' the meaning 'resist' for the negative present imperative. When at *Iliad* iii. 82 Agamemnon shouts to the Achaeans μή βάλτε, they are only aiming and ready to throw, not actually throwing missiles at Hector. So in the *Prometheus*, l. 685, when Io says μήδέ μ' οἰκτίσας σύνθάλπει μύθοις ψευδέσιν, she does not imply that Prometheus is already comforting her with lies. We know that he has not done so. She is warning him against something that he might be strongly tempted to do and that she earnestly desires him not to do.

The word that most nearly expresses the force of a Greek present imperative, whether positive or negative, is 'insist'. If we except words that have a preference for one tense or that change their meaning with the tense, it is true in general that the present imperative is heavy, i.e. admonitory, threatening, argumentative, authoritative, vituperative even, while the tone of the aorist is one of courtesy, reassurance, conciliation, submission, or supplication. It is used in prayers as a rule. Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon* uses to the king always the conciliatory aorist, while for Cassandra she has only the authoritative present. The chorus, who pity Cassandra, use the reassuring aorist in lines 1054, 1071, 1247. In the *Oedipus Rex* the king before his disaster uses the present in general except when he has a favour to ask of Tiresias (lines 312, 361, 437), or Creon (line 536), or the messenger (line 1037). He uses it also for two mild commands (lines 860, 957). He is already shaken. After his disaster he uses the supplicatory aorist except when admonishing his children (line 1512). It is normal for others to use the aorist to their superior Oedipus; but after line 320 Tiresias uses the rude and threatening present (lines 344, 427, 461). Creon uses the present when he is sententious (line 544) or emphatic (lines 554, 604). When the slave uses the present, his tone is one of urgent warning (line 1165), as is shown by the repeated negative.

Even when a situation implies the meaning 'desist', the present is not necessarily used. Jocasta's μήλιν ἔντραπτις (line 1056) is meant to be reassuring and her μή πρὸς θεῶν ματεύσης is plainly supplicatory, as the appeal to the gods shows. So when Oedipus says μή λείπητε (line 1414), the chorus already fear him, but he is bound to use the aorist because his tone is one of humble supplication.

The distinction between heavy present and light aorist is very neatly illustrated in the same play for the infinitive. When Oedipus threatens Creon (line 623) with death rather than exile he underscores θνήσκειν in contrast to φύγειν. On the other hand when he curses the murderer of Laius, he lightens his tone with an aorist (line 227) only when he offers the light penalty of exile in case of confession. For a use of the heavy imperative in comedy note *Acharnians* 1005-1008, where Dicaearchus, having triumphed, is throwing his weight about with rustic directness.

It is plain that the distinction is often not a formal one and that one who does not have his ear attuned to it will miss many fine shades of expression. It is an excellent field for investigation.

Very sincerely yours,

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