

The Art of Classical Swearing

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There is a nice psychological distinction between oaths and profanity. It has been questioned whether the Greeks and Romans were conscious of the latter, as a vice, something for instance to be avoided in the presence of ladies (who of course never swear). Professor Echols of the University of Alabama is not new to Journal readers.

THE TEMPTATION TO ENTITLE this paper "The FINE Art of Classical Swearing" was almost irresistible; but that title was finally rejected on the ground that swearing, while it is assuredly an art, hardly satisfies a strict definition of fine art, "art which is concerned with the creation of objects of the imagination and taste for their own sake and without relation to the utility of the object produced." (Webster) For even though most swearing does show a high degree of imaginative and artistic inspiration, it has never been considered in the best of taste, and it is generally employed with definite utilitarian intent.

Profanity would seem to be intimately involved in the origin of language itself. Swearing was undoubtedly originated by ancient man to provide an outlet for his anger and frustration—a reasonably acceptable substitute for an obviously impractical action. Man's first formal speech may well have made use of a set of interjectional swear-sounds, probably involving those represented in English by the letters *g*, *h*, *k*, *p*, and *d*, plus the harsh sibilants, since these sounds seem to be favored in all recorded curse-cultures. Meaning in swearing is of secondary importance; when a man is seized with an uncontrollable desire to express emotion, it is important only that his sounds shock, startle, threaten, intimidate, and ultimately carry the day for him. On the question of meaning and understanding in exclamations, Sturtevant writes:¹ "The exclamatory parts of a language, like many animal cries, are characterized by extreme variations in pitch and loudness. This fact, added to the simplic-

ity of the situations that induce them, make them easy to understand. . . . There is abundant experience to show that the expression of emotion by gesture, facial expression and voice, or by any of them alone, is immediately intelligible." In the interjectional curse-inspiring situation, Neanderthal required no mutually-intelligible sound-symbols to express the temper of his tirade; gesture, facial expression and voice would prove entirely satisfactory. An Old-Army mule-skinner would have little difficulty in making himself understood anywhere without an interpreter; he even transcends the man-animal vocal barrier, for his mules understand him completely! *By George!* is really no more effective *per se* than *Bifocal!*; it is only more familiar in the swearing situation. It may be suggested then, in the happy absence of any evidence to the contrary, that another theory for the origin of speech be permanently shelved alongside the oft-belaboured "pooh-pooh," "bow-wow," and "ding-dong" theories—the "damn-damn" theory.

In addition to the interjectional oath, another type of swearing, the asseveration, must have been evolved at an early stage of language development. The asseverative oath is true swearing. As soon as Neanderthal discovered that he could deceive his friends and acquired a reputation for so doing, all of his promises and contracts required the backing of something that could and might, if properly invoked, harm him: an obvious reality—the destructive forces of nature; or a mutually-accepted possibility—the gods. If Sturtevant is correct in his statements:²

"voluntary communication can scarcely have been called upon except to deceive" and "language must have been invented for the purpose of lying," then that necessary concomitant of all doubted statements, the oath asseverative, must have made an early linguistic appearance.

Swearing, the psychologist's "sublimation in fantasia of a practical anti-social impulse," is considered by many authorities a contagious and highly infectious substitute for adequacy of vocabulary, endemic to all cultures, past and present. Ironically, it is most tenacious where it is most taboo. Words held blasphemous have always had the greatest interjectional value; making words too holy for common use automatically makes them swearwords. As Robert Graves observes:³ "The chief strength of the oath in Christian countries, and indeed everywhere, is that it is forbidden by authority." Among the ancients, the Hebrews obviously were accomplished swearers, as witness the Third Commandment. Swearing must early have proved a public nuisance in Crete also, for the Scholiast on Plato's *Apology* records that Rhadamanthus prohibited by law the practice of swearing by the gods, and offered as reasonably acceptable facsimiles, the dog (to which however Socrates once adds, "The god of the Egyptians." [Ed.]), the ram, the goose, the plane tree, or "some other such thing." It should be noted that the initial sounds of the Greek words for the accepted substitutes are among those listed as being universally favored for swearing purposes.

Rhadamanthus' commendable gesture came to nothing. Though Socrates is fond of "By the dog," but a single example (*Wasps*, 83) was noted in Aristophanes. It is curious that the Socrates of the *Clouds* does not make use of this oath; it would seem an obvious and easily exploited identifier.

Aristophanes attests the archaic nature of "By the goose!" (*Birds*, 520-1); since the Lampon mentioned is a soothsayer, his oaths are perhaps justifiably old-fashioned:⁴

And none "By the Gods," but all "By the Birds,"
were accustomed aforetime to swear:
And Lampon will vow "By the Goose" even now,
whenever he's going to cheat you.

Swearing, with the possible exception of the greeting-formula, is the most oral of all linguistic patterns. Seldom transcribed, since they are socially taboo—or were, until recent years—oaths have depended largely, and on the whole successfully, upon oral perpetuation. The difficulties encountered in a purely manuscript study of the art are pointed up by the familiar anecdote concerning Mark Twain's wife. Twain was an acknowledged master of colorful calumny. Determined to shock him out of his swearing habits, Mrs. Twain secretly collected a list of her husband's favorite oaths and one day recited them to him unexpectedly. Twain was startled for the moment, but quickly recovered. "You've got the words, my dear," he laughed, "but you haven't got the tune!"

And so it is with the art of Classical swearing; we have a formidable supply of the words but no more than the faintest academic echo of the tune. The silent manuscript can suggest only a whispering insinuation of the alliterative emphasis, the magnificent stresses, the fearful variations in pitch and volume upon which really effective swearing is so dependent. The oral quality is all-important; for the study of Latin swearing, one wire-recording of what Caesar must have said on that fateful day in Belgium when the hordes of Nervii exploded from the forest would be worth a thousand pages of voiceless text.

It is obvious that the most fruitful source material for the vocabulary of ancient swearing must be the drama, since the legitimate stage, from *Lysistrata* to *Tobacco Road*, seems always to have pre-empted an unusual freedom of speech. Aristophanes and Menander in Greek, Plautus and Terence in Latin, are rich in profane information. The comic vernacular is apparently valid; in Cicero's *De Oratore* (III, XII, 45), Crassus remarks: "Indeed, whenever I hear my mother-in-law, Laelia, speaking, it seems to me that I am hearing Plautus or Naevius." Whether Crassus has reference here to the types or to the frequency of the oaths in his mother-in-law's conversation, the implication seems clear: the old profane vocabulary of Plautus was still current in Roman speech. It is

generally agreed that all of the comedians cited above made use of the contemporary idiom.

There is, of course, a technical distinction between cursing and swearing. Burges Johnson observes:⁵ "Man invented his first curse-words to give form and substance to his malign wishes, and he invented swear-words to back up his vows and establish his veracity." Two additional aspects of profanity, the maledictions and the naughty words, lie outside the scope of this discussion.

THE FIRST TYPE OF OATH, the asseveration, is legitimate swearing, a binding oath given to support an assertion or a promise, as, for example, the oath in the ballad, *Raggle-taggle Gypsy* (Child Ballad 1200):

I swear by the sun and the moon and the stars,
That you never will want for money-O!

Ancient asseverative oaths were often long and ritualistic; such oaths are rare in Greek comedy. In the *Birds* (1608-13) Peisthetaerus ponders the potential benefits for Man under the rule of the Birds:

Now men go skulking underneath the clouds,
And swear false oaths, and call the Gods to witness.
But when you've got the Birds for your allies,
If a man swear by the Raven and by Zeus,
The Raven will come by, and unawares
Fly up, and swoop, and peck the perjurer's eye out.

Two genuine asseverations occur in *Thesmophoriazusae*: "I swear by Ether, Zeus's dwelling place" (272); and "Well, then, I swear by every blessed God" (274). A conventional asseverative oath is preserved in Menander's fragmentary *Girl of the Shorn Hair*: "I swear to you by Zeus the Olympian and by Athena." The conditional asseveration also is found. In the *Frogs*, Dionysius is compelled by circumstances to make use of two within a space of ten lines: "Perdition seize me, if I don't love Xanthias" (579); and:

But if I strip you of these togs again,
Perdition seize myself, my wife, my children,
And most of all, that bleary-eyed Archedemus. (586-8)

Menander's *Girl of the Shorn Hair* supplies an example of this type: "Hang me quick, if I mislead."

Most of the genuine oath-taking in the

Latin comedies involves swearing by the gods collectively, or by an appropriate individual deity, usually Jupiter. The basic pattern shows little variation: *Iuro per Iovem et Mavortem; Per Iovem deosque omnis adiuro; and Per supremi regis regnum et matrem familias Iunonem. Do Iovem testem* represents a second type. The familiar English protestation which begins *Gods know*—is exactly the Latin *di sciunt*—.

In Plautus, the elaborate structure of the solemn oath is occasionally exaggerated with humorous intent, suggesting that even at this early date the reverential force of the asseveration was beginning to weaken. From *Bacchides* (892-5): *Ita me Iuppiter, Iuno, Ceres, Minerva, Latona, Spes, Opis, Virtus, Castor, Polluces, Mars, Mercurius, Hercules, Summanus, Sol, dique omnes ament*, to which the properly awed and admiring reply is "*Ut iurat!*"

IN THE PLAYS, HOWEVER, the asseveration has already degenerated into the oath interjectional, which is, strictly speaking, no oath at all; "interjections are an emotional noise, which edge the deep sea of human conversation."⁶ This evolution from solemn oath to casual ejaculation is the result of a progressive disintegration in which the original meaning and purpose of the oath are forgotten, and the left-overs and spare parts are used for whatever emphasis and emotional catharsis they can provide. The process is clearly illustrated in the casual *So help me!* from the most binding of all modern oaths, the sacred *So help me God!*

Greek and Latin interjectional oaths show the same traditional conservatism and resistance to change to be observed in all curse-cultures. The catholic use of *By Zeus!* in Aristophanes and Menander and of *Per Iovem!* and *Pro Iuppiter* in Plautus and Terence amply attest the potency of the god-king in both cultures as a binding force in early asseverations. This same frequency of occurrence equally attests the casual level to which the godhead seems invariably to tumble. In Aristophanes, "Zeus" interjections outnumber all other deity interjections by a ratio of not less than five to one. Second

in popularity is the oath *By the Gods!* In the *Knights* (235), Paphlagon perhaps gains considerable additional emphasis with his *By the Twelve Gods!*

Of the "Olympic Twelve," Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Hermes, and Aphrodite appear frequently in the oaths; Artemis, Demeter, and Hestia are occasionally invoked, while Athena, Hera, Ares, and Hephaestus are rarely called upon. In general, but by no means invariably, women prefer the feminine deities, Aphrodite, Demeter, Hera, and the Twain, Demeter and Persephone. Other divinities commonly invoked in the casual oath include Dionysus, Hecate, Asclepius, Hercules and Ge.

Infrequently, the attributes of the deity are used, just as today we sometimes use attributes of God without mentioning His name: *Goodness! Gracious! Mercy!* In a series of oaths in *Lysistrata* (439-47), Artemis is invoked by two, and possibly three, of her common epithets. The first example *By Pandrosus!* (439) follows a previous *By Artemis!* (435), and is followed by *By Phosphorus!* and *By Tauropolis!* Pandrosus was one of the sisters of Cecrops, but Rogers notes: "Since throughout this altercation the women invoke Artemis in one or other of her characters, I cannot but believe that in this invocation also the name of Pandrosus, the All-bedewer, is intended to apply to Artemis as identical with Hecate or the moon." Yet it seems to me that Rogers has to some extent possibly missed a point. The position of *By Pandrosus!* is significant; it follows immediately *By Artemis!* It seems possible that Aristophanes has contrived to have the second oath originally conceived by the speaker as a genuine oath by the sister of Cecrops. The two sisters of Cecrops are not unknown in Greek oaths; a woman of the Chorus in *Thesmophoriazusae* (533) swears *By Agraulos!* The coincidental meaning of Pandrosus, the sister, and the "all-bedewing" attribute of Artemis, suggests a deliberate shift from swearing by individual deities to swearing by the various attributes of Artemis; and two more, *By the Light-bringer!* and *By the Bull-hunter!* complete the series.

This same device is employed by Plautus in a series of Greek oaths in the *Captivi* (780-3). Ergasilus, the parasite, swears elegantly in Greek, *By Apollo!* his second oath is *By Cora!* Cora was the name under which Persephone was worshipped in Attica, but it was also the name of a small town in Latium. The coincidental meanings seem to strike Ergasilus' fancy, and he embarks on a geographical swearing tour through Latium, adding four more villages, Praeneste, Signia, Frusino, and Alatrium, turning the Latium names into indifferent Greek. The two techniques are identical; only the development differs slightly. It seems not too bold to suggest that the use of the *double-entendre* in this connection by Plautus is not an entirely independent development.

Occasionally, in the casual oath, an epithet of the god invoked is included along with his name. Zeus is called upon as "Zeus the Saviour," "Zeus the Olympian," "Zeus the Great," and, in Menander, as "Zeus the Greatest." Poseidon is described as the "god of horses," and in *Lysistrata* (403) as the "God of the sea," by the magistrate currently engaged in refitting the fleet. In the *Knights* (294), Hermes is called "Hermes of the Agora" in an oath, from his statue, as patron saint of commerce and tricks, which stood in the Athenian marketplace.

A fair number of somewhat unique oaths are recorded. In the *Clouds* (773), Socrates swears, *By the Three Graces!* The *Clouds* as a whole, from the nature of the subject matter involved, gives rise to a series of distinctive oaths, coined by Aristophanes in burlesque for the occasion. Socrates (627) swears, *By Respiration, By Chaos, By Air!* Strepsiades repeats the "By Air" (667), and adds, *By the Mist!* (814). *By Heaven!* occurs in *Plutus* (403) and *Knights* (705).

Reminiscent of the *Apology* Scholiast's "other such things" is a series of oaths from the *Birds* (194): *By Earth, By Snares, By Bird-nets, By Hunting-nets!* all of which are things foreign or harmful to birds and again are invented for the Hoopoe's use on this occasion. In *Peace* (378) Trygaeus puns on his immediately preceding and parallel oath,

μη̄ πρὸς τῶν θεῶν, "No, By the gods!" with a positive oath, ναὶ πρὸς τῶν κρεῶν, "Yes, By the meat!" the meat which he has sacrificed to Hermes in the past.

One of the most unusual of the oaths occurs in the *Knights* (702): "I'll kill you, by my Pylus-won precedence!" The reference is to the privilege of sitting in a front seat at the theater, an honor frequently awarded for outstanding public service.

The frequent appearance of foreigners in Aristophanes provides some insight into the dialectal oath-habits. The numerous Spartans in *Lysistrata* use several non-Attic oaths. ναὶ τὸ σιῶ is comparatively common; σιῶ is the Attic θεῶ, and refers to the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, as contrasted with θεῶ, Demeter and Persephone. In *Peace* (214), Hermes uses ναὶ τὸ σιῶ, when quoting the Laconians. Both the Spartan herald and the Spartan woman in *Lysistrata* use *By Castor!* as well as the ubiquitous "By Zeus!"

There is a series of Megarian oaths in the *Acharnians* (730 f). These include: *By the God of Friendship!* (Zeus); *By Hermes!* *By Zeus!* *By Diocles!* (a local Megarian hero); and *By Poseidon!*

Boeotian oaths occur in the *Acharnians* (860 f); *By Iolaus!* (a companion of Heracles worshipped especially in Thebes, where the inhabitants commonly swore by his name);⁸ and ναὶ τὸ σιῶ, "By Zethus and Amphion," twin sons of Zeus and Antiope. The variations in deities in the "dual-number" oath among the various dialects are interesting: Demeter and Persephone in Attic, Castor and Pollux in Spartan Doric, and Zethus and Amphion in Boeotian.

In contrast to the great variety of Greek ejaculations, the Romans in general favored three exclamatory oaths: *Heracle*, *ecastor*, and *edepol*, and they occur, in Plautus particularly, with wearisome regularity. Seven of his plays contain forty or more *Heracle*'s. *Rudens*, with fifty-two, is the most profane, while *Amphitryon*, in which women on the whole play a more important part, shows the smallest number. The popularity of *Heracle* suffers in Terence; *Adelphoi* is high with nineteen examples. *Truculentus* is high for

Plautus in the women's oath, *ecastor*; *ecastor* is virtually non-existent in Terence. *Hecyra* contains three examples; no other play contains more than one *ecastor*.

The three basic interjections show a fairly rigid sex-use pattern. According to Gellius (xi, vi), "... Roman women do not swear by Hercules nor the men by Castor. . . . nowhere is it possible to find an instance among good writers, either of a woman saying 'Heracle!', or a man, 'Ecastor!', but *edepoll*, which is an oath by Pollux, is common to both men and women."

This single standard is not borne out by Plautus. Once in *Casina* (983) and once in *Cistellaria* (52), a woman swears with a *hercle*, but it seems only fair to record the over-all total of *hercle*'s in Plautus and Terence: men, 673; women, 2.

The shortened *pol* is the favorite form of *edepol*, the shared oath, among women. No more than four feminine *edepol*'s occur in a single Plautine play, yet in three of the plays, eleven or more *pol*'s are used by women. In every play of Terence, women use *pol* more often than men use the same oath; in *Hecyra*, the ratio is 13 to 1.

This feminine preference for *pol*, rather than *edepol*, itself a shortened form, perhaps for *e deus Pollux*, suggests that *pol* may be what Mencken has aptly termed "deaconic swearing," "bootleg profanity," a suggestive substitution used in the hope that the god invoked may not recognize himself. The modern *Helen!*, *Golly!*, and *Gosh darn!* are typical modern deaconic oaths.

The Romans however had other interjectional oaths. The remains of once potent asseverations may be seen in such oaths as: *Per Iovem!*; *Pro supreme Iuppiter!*; *Per Mercurium!*; *Pro di immortales!*; *Per deos atque homines!*; *O di boni!*; *Deum virtute!*; *Mare, terra, caelum!*; and *O barathrum!*

An occasional Greek oath may usually be discounted as derivative or character-delineating. In *Poenulus* (1270), there is a curious ejaculation: *O Apella, O Zeuxis pictor!* The two men invoked are famous Greek painters; Zeuxis was a contemporary of Socrates; Apelles, of Alexander the Great.

The similarity of the names to Apollo and Zeus suggests that Plautus is punning again, with the *pictor* attached as a conventional epithet, to identify the two men in case anyone missed the point.

Other less common interjectional oaths include those based on *fides*: *Di vostram fidem*; *Per divom fidem*; *Per dium fidium*; *Pro deum atque hominem fidem*. Several verbs serve as interjections: *perii*, *disperii*, *interii*. *Amabo* is a favorite mild interjection, especially among women, and may be the remnant of an old conditional asseveration, *amabo, si* —. *Obsecro* is in this same general category. *Ei, ei mihi, ei misero mihi, crucior*, and *discrucior* are common reflexive interjections. Even an occasional modern-sounding *damnium!* is found. It should be noted that most of these interjections may be used in combination: *perii oppido*; *obsecro hercle*; *me hercle*; *mecastor*; *mi hercle*; *perii miser*; *et al., ad infinitum*.

THE THIRD TYPE OF OATH is the denunciation, the true curse, a harmful wish reinforced by the strongest superstition current: the primitive "May lightning blast you!" and the modern sophisticated "Go to hell!"

The denunciation most favored among the Greeks was *To the crows!*, implying crucifixion, exposure of the corpse without burial, with the resultant eternal wandering on the wrong side of the river Styx. In usage, *To the crows!* closely resembles the modern *Go to hell!* in that it is used with real venom and, on occasion, with something akin to affection; it even serves as a casual exclamation!⁹

In addition to its independent use, *To the crows!* frequently serves as an intensifier for a damning verb: "Won't you off to the crows and destroy yourself?" (*Knights*, 892). In *Peace* (1221), Trygaeus puns on the familiar "Destroy yourself!" oath. He refuses to buy some helmet crests from the crestmaker with these words: *ἀπόφερ' ἀπόφερ' ἐς κόρακας*, "Take them, take them off—to the crows!" *ἀπόφερ'* suggests *ἀπόφθειρ'*, one of the regular damning verbs.

The humorous potentialities of such a phrase as *To the crows!* could hardly have been overlooked by Aristophanes. In the

Wasps (40 f), Sosias and Xanthias are discussing dreams. Sosias says that he dreamed of a certain Theorus, a noted flatterer, a *κόλαξ*, and he was wearing the head of a crow, a *κόραξ*. Sosias fears that this is an ill-omen, to dream of a man turned into a crow. Xanthias reassures him:

Being a man he straight becomes a crow:
Is it not obvious to conjecture that
He's going to leave us, going to the crows?

Again the Loeb translator seems to miss the point; in his explanatory footnote,¹⁰ he states that "to go to the crows" is the same as the modern "to go to the dogs." If the Loeb interpretation is the correct one, it is difficult to account for that passage in the *Frogs* (185 f.) in which Charon calls out destinations for his passengers in the manner of a railroad station announcer. Along with Lethe, Cerberia, and Taenarum, he suggests "To the crows!". Certainly here "To the crows!" is a destination much more to be dreaded than the comparatively mild process of "going to the dogs." An Oriental "Go to the dogs!" would seem a more apt parallel, for the Orientals do not share the Western affection for "man's best friend."

Aristophanes continues to have fun with the oath in *Peace* (1114 f.). Trygaeus's daughter pleads with him as he is about to try an ascent to the heavens on the back of a beetle:

O father, O father, and can it be true
The tale that is come to our ears about you,
That along with the birds you are going to go,
And to leave us alone, and be off to the crow?

In the opening scene of the *Birds*, Euelpides and Pisthetaerus, in their search for Tereus, who has been changed into a hoopoe, have purchased birds which are supposed to guide them to the haunts of Tereus. Then Euelpides observes (27 f.):

Now isn't it a shame that when we are here
Ready and willing as two men can be,
To go to the ravens, we can't find the way?

In addition to *To the crows!*, the Greeks employed a limited number of denunciatory verbs. Compounds of *θλυνμι*, along with *ἀποφθείρω*, are roughly equivalent to the modern slang *Drop dead!*; all imply reflexive

destruction. These verbs are occasionally found with intensifiers suggesting self-destruction in the worst way possible. The denunciatory verb meaning "to rub upon," hence "to destroy," suggests another modern synonym for sudden death. "to rub out." The verb meaning "to cry *οἶμοι*," a common exclamation of pain and anger, also serves as a denunciation, "Go howl!," that is, go somewhere where something will induce howling.

The *Knights* opens with a formal denunciation:

This Paphlagon, with all his wiles . . .
I wish the gods would utterly abolish and destroy. (2-3)

In the *Acharnians* (509-11), Dicaeopolis curses the Lacedaemonians:

And may Poseidon, Lord of Taenarum,
Shake all their houses down around their ears.

Menander makes use of the common Classical denunciatory oaths, occasionally restoring the "go" verb to *Go to the crows!* He also introduces a non-Aristophanic damning verb, "to sweep up, to brush away." The association of crow and curse suggests that the use of this verb may be derived from the unexplained opening line of a traditional wedding song: *κόρε ἐκκόρει κορώνην*, "Boy, drive the crow away!"

Interesting in this connection also is the interjection *κέκραχι*, the imperative form of the verb meaning, in general, "to scream, to screech, to cry." It seems to have referred originally to the croak of the raven and, as an oath, may have derived from the ubiquitous *To the crows!*

Certainly the most frightening of the New Comedy denunciations is *May you not live out your hours!*

The deaconic denunciation also occurs. Just as the modern *Bless the flies!* has a meaning exactly opposite, so the oath in the *Knights* (1151), *Go and be blest!*, is a substitute for *Go and be damned!*

Latin denunciatory oaths are of two types: the *Go to*— and the *Damn you*—. The *Go to*— type involves a pair of destinations: *I in malam crucem* and *I in malam rem*. *Cruciatu*s is occasionally substituted for *crux*. The crucifying adjective, *diirectus*, is used in-

dependently: *Abi hinc diirectum*, and also as an intensifier in the conventional form of the oath: *I diirecte in maxumam crucem*. *Maxumam* is itself a common intensifier: *Abi in malam rem maxumam*.

The favorite Greek oath. *To the crows!* is not found in Plautus or Terence. Horace (*Epistles*, I, XVI, 48) records the expression but not as an oath: "‘*Non pasces in cruce corvos.*’"

No oath occurs either in Greek or Latin which is exactly parallel to the modern "Go to Hell!" Apparently ancient rancour did not venture beyond the grave. Robert Graves suggests a possible reason for the exclusion of this type of oath: "God, though He would not hold him guiltless who took His Name in vain, might forgive an occasional lapse; but the Devil, if ever called in professionally, would not fail to charge heavily for his visit."¹¹

Vae, as in the familiar *vae victis!*, is clearly denunciatory in such oaths as *vae tibi*, *vae tuo capito*, and *vae tuae aetati*; the rare accusative construction, *vae te*, suggests something akin to the modern *damn you!*

The basic damning verb, however, is *perdo*, and the basic damning oath is *di te perdant!* The numerous variations include: *di omnes te perduint*; *di deaeque vos perduint*; *male di omnes perdant*; *Iuppiter te perdat*; *at te Iuppiter dique omnes perdant*; *Diespiter te perduint*; *Hercules dique istam perdant*; and the impressive *ut te quidem di deaeque omnes superi inferi pessimis exemplis perdant!*

The verbs *infelicio*, *malfacio*, *excrucio*, *eradico*, and *interficio* also serve in uninspired execrations; examples include: *di me et te infelicit*; *di te eradicant*; *di deaeque me . . . interficiant*; and *di tibi malfaciant*.

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This survey of Classical swearing has by no means exhausted all of the material available on the subject, but judicious samplings of other authors have indicated that they have nothing to contribute that would alter to any serious degree the findings based on these, the most authoritative, sources. Indeed Classical swearing as a whole has little to add to the sum total of knowledge of uni-

versal swearing. It can only be concluded that swearing among the Greeks and Romans was as common and as casual as it is among most peoples, and that the oaths favored operated within the narrow range of origin and employment dictated by custom and tradition. As sophisticated religious peoples they based the majority of their oaths quite logically on their gods. Classical denunciations, like all denunciations, involved some pain-producing circumstance; there is little to choose among the crows, the cross, and hell! The interjections are a limited number of conventional noises, which subscribe to the fundamental requirement of all effective interjections; the sound must have meaning, the content need not.

Classical swearing also attests the resistance to change to be observed in all curse-cultures; Crassus recognized the oaths of Plautus and Naevius in his mother-in-law's conversation. Further evidence of this slavish perpetuation of the ancient oath is provided by the fair number of oaths with Classical overtones still in use today. *By Jove!* is perhaps the most familiar, but *By Jupiter, Jumping Jupiter*,¹² and even *By Juno* are occasionally heard. *By Jiminy* is a sound Classical oath and is found as *By Gemini* in the early English novel. *Caesar's Ghost!* enjoys considerable popularity, and it has been suggested that *Holy Smoke!* may have originated in the smoke which arose from the sacrificial fires!

There is no doubt that the vocabulary of swearing in present-day America is virtually threadbare, not because modern man is not linguistically ingenious, but largely because the oath-demanding situation always arises suddenly, and the old conventional explosive noises automatically erupt.

I submit that the Latin profane vocabulary, long and colorful and fully time-tested, fulfills all reasonable requirements for a *lingua franca* of swearers. To illustrate its application—it must be an experience common to all language teachers to be asked by the layman to “say something” in their various professed second tongues. The next time that a teacher of Latin is approached by a bore of this type, let him not fumble for

something possibly recognizable, *caveat emptor!* or *pax vobiscum!*; let him rather smoothly combine a heartfelt *di te perdant!* with that magnificent rolling oath from *Menaechmii* (1017): *Agite, abite, fugite hinc in malam crucem!* Then, when the bore interrupts with his inevitable, “Say, wait a minute! Sounds like you’re swearing at me!”, let the curser smile back over his shoulder and say, “What in the world could have given you that idea!” It cannot fail to satisfy!

NOTES

¹ E. H. Sturtevant, *An Introduction to Linguistic Science* (New Haven, 1947) 45.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

³ Robert Graves, *Lars Porsena* (London, 1937) 6.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, quoted translations are from the Loeb texts.

⁵ From *The Lost Art of Profanity*, by Burges Johnson, Copyright 1948, 107. Used by special permission of the Publishers, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷ Loeb Aristophanes, Vol. III, 43, footnote.

⁸ Harper's *Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, Iolaus.

⁹ Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 852.

¹⁰ Loeb, Aristophanes, I, 412-3.

¹¹ Graves, *op. cit.*, 11.

¹² The favorite oath of Paul Douglas, as “Flannagan,” the baseball catcher, in the Twentieth Century-Fox Production, *It Happens Every Spring*.

WANTED

Ecclesiastical Calendar, by Samuel Butcher, Macmillan (1870). Write Mr. Odin Nielsen, Auditor, Bismarck Hotel, Randolph at LaSalle, Chicago.

A Greek verb game. Write Mr. C. A. Peerenboom, Geo. Banta Pub. Co., Menasha, Wis. (who can still quote an Ode of Horace and cares about the content as well as the form of the *Journal*.)

Lilliana Automotaria, audax latro puellaris Arizonae, Authorized tr. ca. 1908, “Automobile Lillian, the Daring Girl-Bandit of Arizona,” Royal Pub. Co. (defunct) of So. Norwalk, Conn., \$.10. Information as to this Americana item to Mr. Chet L. Swital, 415 Beverley Drive, Beverley Hills, Calif.

Notae Tironianae. A *Journal* article on them wanted by an artistic tool designer of Des Moines, Iowa (Dr. Dúard Warren Sexton, 3202 Woodland Ave., Des Moines 12). Let some competent scholar take notice.