

BOOK REVIEW  
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*The Moods of Homeric Greek*. By JO WILLMOTT. Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 264. Cloth, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-521-87988-0.

Latin has a sequence of tenses, Greek has a sequence of moods: so goes the standard line. And Classical Attic is relatively well-behaved in using subjunctives after non-past main verbs, optatives after past-tense ones—with the proviso that an author could always choose in the latter instance to use the “vivid” subjunctive, whatever that is supposed to mean. This distribution, together with the use of main-clause subjunctives in exhortations and prohibitions (over which the speaker has some control) and that of optatives in wishes (over which the speaker has little control), led scholars to posit that the two moods act in parallel, and that they exist, together with the indicative, on an irrealis continuum: with the indicative, the speaker asserts the reality of the event, with the subjunctive that assertion becomes an expression of will, with the optative one of mere wish. There were also morphological grounds for this schema: the subjunctive has primary endings, the optative secondary endings, calling to mind the pairing in English of *will* : *would*, *can* : *could*, and *may* : *might*, in which the past tense of the modal verb is more irrealis than the present.

Nor is this irrealis continuum the only major theoretical categorization of relevance to the Greek moods. Perpendicular to it runs a division of moods and modal verbs into deontic and epistemic modality. As the names suggest, the former covers the use of the moods to indicate obligation, necessity and will (prohibitive and jussive subjunctives, the optative of wish), while the latter encompasses modal uses in which the focus is more on the speaker’s uncertain knowledge of the truth of the statement (potential optatives, and, in Homer, the subjunctive used as a future). Again, objective morpho-syntactic facts seem to corroborate this division: as Chantraine pointed out, deontic modals generally lack the modal particle ἄν / κε and are negated with μή, whereas the epistemic modals have the modal particle and are negated with οὐ. As a whole, the description appears to hold fairly well for Attic. But what about Homeric Greek? The central argument of W.’s book is that it does not. Instead, W. offers a problematized account of the Homeric moods, in which these neat structuralist divisions are called into question and replaced with a more complicated network of usages she sees as ultimately derived from earlier *Ur*-meanings through grammaticalization. (For the uninitiated, grammaticalization is the process whereby words of semantic weight, like English *will*, gradually become bleached of semantic content and, frequently shortened to clitics—*ll*—and affixes, come to serve as markers of grammatical

features like tense or mood.) Because of the tenacity with which W. argues against received opinion, the book will no doubt become essential reading for those interested in the Greek moods. But it should not be taken as the last word on the subject: not all the problems W. sees in the standard view are of equal weight, and, more importantly, as W. would herself agree, this is simply too vast a topic to be given definitive treatment in 200-odd pages.

After two chapters covering the theoretical background in good detail (pp. 1–36), W. begins the body of the work with a chapter on the indicative (pp. 37–52), setting the base-line for the examination of the subjunctive and optative, which are her central focus. W. argues against the position that the indicative is either (a) particularly realis or (b) epistemically neutral, suggesting instead that it signals a “positive epistemic stance.” In contesting position (a), she follows F.R. Palmer’s line that the ability of indicatives to collocate with adverbs like *possibly* shows that they are not realis forms; but neither does she agree with Palmer that they are epistemically neutral, pointing to the incompatibility of the indicative with modifiers like *doubtfully*. In W.’s view, the reformulation of the indicative as a marker of positive epistemic stance also explains the most modally troubling uses of the indicative, in counterfactuals. But difficulties remain. First, it is unclear exactly how “positive epistemic stance” and “realis” differ as descriptions of the indicative. W. has already pointed out (p. 14) that the term realis refers not so much to objective reality as to the speaker’s presentation of the proposition. Clear examples of clauses that would be realis but do not have positive epistemic stance, and *vice versa*, would have been welcome to elucidate the distinction W. is attempting to make. Presumably we are meant to believe that *Tom is possibly singing* would be an indicative that shows positive epistemic stance but not realis modality. But if the presence of *possibly* is enough to prove false the interpretation of the indicative as realis, is it not also enough to refute the positive epistemic stance reading as well? Second, the counterfactuals are still awkward: just as with a description of the indicative as realis, it remains problematic to argue that a counterfactual indicative in an apodosis represents a more positive epistemic stance than does the potential optative of the future less vivid.

Chapter 4, on the subjunctive, is the longest in the book (pp. 53–112) and is divided into three main sections dealing with the chief uses of the mood: the epistemic (Monro’s quasi-future subjunctive), the hortative and the negative directive. In the first, W. examines the difference between the future indicative and subjunctive as markers of future events. There is much overlap between the two, as is only to be expected given the similar situation with future markers in modern languages, e.g. English *will* and *going to*. On the basis of such

pairings as οὐδ' ἔσσεται οὐδὲ γένηται (*Od.* 16.437), W. does not believe that the future signals more certainty about the upcoming event than the subjunctive does. Instead, as the chief difference between the two, she points to the strong preference for the subjunctive over the future in conditional and temporal clauses referring to the future. W. convincingly ascribes this distribution to the fact that the future is a younger marker than the subjunctive. Assuming, as seems safe, that the Indo-European subjunctive was a future marker before the sigmatic futures seen in Greek arose, we can see in the Homeric situation the expected distribution of the older marker in more modal contexts, the younger one restricted (in subordinate clauses) to resumptive conditionals and indirect questions. This pattern has a parallel in Spanish, where the older synthetic future has more modal uses than the younger periphrastic forms. As for W.'s study of the negative directives, her chief point is the refinement of what might be called the Meid–Hoffmann model, which distinguishes between one form (in Greek, the present imperative) as prohibitive—*don't do this thing you're already doing!*—and another (here, the aorist subjunctive) as preventive—*don't start doing this thing you're not doing yet!*<sup>1</sup> To this, W. adds the idea of control: with present-imperative prohibitives, it lies in the power of the addressee to stop the action in question, whereas such action lies outside the addressee's control in the aorist-subjunctive preventives. Readers may not agree with all W.'s examples—the three passages with νεμεσάω on pp. 102–3 suggest, as she apparently admits, that the chief determining factor is temporal—but control remains a useful parameter to keep in mind when examining negative directives.

This is a concept W. returns to in her next chapter, on the optative (pp. 113–52), where she concludes, *inter alia*, that the difference between optatives of wish and imperatives is not that the former are weaker than the latter, but that they lack the element of control on the speaker's part. More problematic is the material in the first half of the chapter, where W., eager to confound the notion that the optative is a less realis version of the subjunctive, suggests that it should instead be portrayed as indicating a negative epistemic stance and thus forms a closer pair with the *indicative*. This position is supported largely by W.'s analysis of conditionals, in which she argues that the optative in protases and apodoses is not always a remote possibility, but rather presents events as unreal. Apart from the fact that it is unclear how this description is to be distinguished from the standard position that the optative is the most irrealis mood (is W. really correct in saying on p. 122 that it is “just coincidental that ‘unreal’

<sup>1</sup> Those interested in the corresponding problems with negative directives in Latin can now turn with profit to Chapter 4 of W.D.C. De Melo, *The Early Latin Verbal System: Archaic Forms in Plautus, Terence, and Beyond* (Oxford, 2007).

events will often be ones with a smaller likelihood of happening than real ones"?), W.'s interpretations of the conditionals are themselves subject to question: she holds that the optative does not in fact occur in particularly remote conditionals, yet in her examples on pp. 116–23, she nearly invariably translates it with the past-tense protasis and *would* apodosis that is, to my mind, precisely how English indicates remote possibility (contrast the present-tense protasis and *will* apodosis of "more vivid" conditionals). True, some of these optative protases may be relatively likely to be fulfilled, but there might be pragmatic reasons for presenting them as only remotely likely.<sup>2</sup>

Generally more satisfactory is Chapter 6, which treats the use of the moods in purpose, iterative temporal and non-specific relative clauses (pp. 153–91). W.'s position that Homeric Greek has not yet reached as rigid a sequence of moods as Classical Attic is a reasonable one, and, considering the numerous exceptions that arise if one pretends that it has, W. must be right to see the choice of the moods as determined through the semantics of the subjunctive and optative independent of their relationship to the main verb. The book concludes with a brief summary (pp. 192–8); a justification of the decision not to treat the modal particle or choice of negative as important (pp. 199–210; some may still want to defend Chantraine's position); a complete list of the lines of Homer that exhibit the constructions she discusses (pp. 211–37); a very full bibliography, especially rich in theoretical linguistic literature; and indices of passages and topics covered. Overall, while readers may disagree with W. on some points, they will no doubt be stimulated into reconsidering exactly what the Homeric moods do: Attic this certainly is not.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the optatives in *Il.* 5.273 that W. says refer to a relatively likely event (p. 119) could be deliberate understatement (*It's likely, but I'll pretend it isn't*), perhaps out of a desire on Diomedes' part not to appear too cocky in going after horses that were descended from those given by Zeus to Tros in exchange for Gany-mede. Even more to the point, the capturing of the horses is itself contingent on—and thus more remote than—the successful killing of Pandarus and Aeneas, an act marked as dependent on the fulfillment of a future more vivid protasis (αἴ κεν ... ὀρέξῃ) in lines 260–1. Here, at least, the Homeric moods follow the Attic playbook.