Lesson 32. Contrary-to-Fact Conditions

The Constant Lover
by Sir John Suckling

Out upon it, I have lov'd
Three whole days together;
And am like to love three more,
If it hold fair weather.

Time shall moult away his wings
Ere he shall discover
In the whole wide world agen
Such a constant lover.

But a pox upon't, no praise
There is due at all to me:
Love with me had made no stay
Had it any been but she.

Had it any been but she
And that very face
There had been at least ere this
A dozen dozen in her place.

We humans like to speculate. We have a way of talking about possibilities that never became realized:

If it were raining
I would be wearing boots. (understood: but it is not)

If you had invited him
he would have come. (understood: but you did not)

This if-then sequence is called a contrary-to-fact or unreal condition.

In an earlier stage of English we could use the past tense in both if and then clauses, as Greek does. (See Suckling's poem above.) Now we use a past tense in the if clause and a would in the then clause.

GREEK CONTRARY-TO-FACT CONDITIONS

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<th>Present:</th>
<th>If clause</th>
<th>(called protasis)</th>
<th>Then clause</th>
<th>(called apodosis)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Past:</td>
<td>εἰ + imperfect</td>
<td></td>
<td>imperfect + ἄν</td>
<td>aorist + ἄν</td>
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Present contrary-to-fact (verbs are imperfect):

εἰ ἰκουεῖς, ἐμάνθανε εἰ. If you were listening (now), you would be learning (now).

Past contrary-to-fact (verbs are aorist):

εἰ ἰκουσαῖς, ἐμαθεῖς ἄν. If you had listened (then), you would have learned (then).