Pick any Wrong Card:

A rhetoric model for circumstances of doom

by David Maisel

An ancient proverb:

"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad."

"Whom the gods would destroy, they first...."

Page 2 searching online for variations that change this proverb's meaning

Page 5 templates for creating new variations

Page 13 a citation of an online provenance of the proverb

The recommended pace for scrolling to each next page of this file: as slowly as you want.

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A Google search phrase for finding variations on the proverb that change its meaning:

"whom the gods (would OR wish-to) destroy they" -make-mad
-make-insane -make-crazy -drive-mad
Here is the previous page's search phrase again:

"whom the gods (would OR wish-to) destroy they" -make-mad
-make-insane -make-crazy -drive-mad

This paragraph doesn't contain any instructions. It only explains how the search phrase works. A hyphen after a space is a minus sign that excludes the next word (or the next phrase if its words are grouped together by a hyphen or by quote marks). By typing the four excluding phrases in the above search phrase, you can eliminate unwanted hits, i.e., the webpages that include the original proverb or include one of three other versions of it that have the same meaning as the original proverb. Those unwanted webpages add up to more than 90% of the hits that Google shows for a search in which you don't exclude those four phrases. So, this excluding lets your eyes find the variations faster. (The reasons for omitting "first" and "make" in the quotemarked expression are that including "first" would eliminate desirable webpages in which a variation of the proverb omitted it and that including "make" there would eliminate desirable webages in which a variation of the proverb replaced "make" with some other verb.)

To save time at Google after reading the first 30 or 40 hits:

After you find, in the listed hits, some variations on the proverb that occur in several hits, you can find other variations faster by doing this: Type (in the above search phrase, somewhere outside of its quote marks) each several-hit variation's completion's rarest word (after typing a space and then a hyphen, i.e., a minus sign) or type a rare combination of consecutive words that its completion contains (after a space and then a minus sign, with a hyphen, i.e., a minus sign, between its words).

The maximum number of words allowed in a Google search phrase is 32. The upper-case "OR" doesn't count as a word.

Another way to save time and bother is to increase the number of hits displayed on each Google page. Ten hits per page is the default. To change the number, click the Preferences link to the right of the search box.

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The following search phrase, which is an alternative to the above one, lets you avoid eliminating some desirable hits that would be eliminated by the above search phrase, i.e., webpages that are desirable because although one (or more than one) of the four excluded phrases ("make mad" and its three synonyms) happens to occur somewhere in the page, it doesn't occur in the proverb's variation.

"whom the gods (would OR wish-to) destroy they" -"whom the gods (would OR wish-to) destroy they (make OR first-make) mad OR insane OR crazy" -"gods (would OR wish-to) destroy they (drive OR first-drive) mad"

Make sure that each of those two minus signs (to the left of the second and third quotemarked expressions) comes after a space.

You can't add any words to this search phrase because it contains Google's maximum: 32 words. You can't override that maximum by clicking the "Search within results" link (which is at the bottom of Google's page of results) and adding words to the new search box that then appears.

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To create new variations that have rhetorical effect, include "make" (as the first word of the filler) in any of its many uses whose meaning isn’t the meaning it has in the original proverb ("cause to become"). To see a list of those, look up "make" in a regular dictionary, in a dictionary of phrasal verbs (online and print editions of which are findable with the search phrase

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allintitle:"phrasal verb dictionary" OR "dictionary of phrasal verbs"
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at Google) or in a dictionary of idioms.

Four examples of that:
"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make VERB [or VERB–PHRASE]."
"Whom the gods would destroy, they make NOUN for."
"Whom the gods would destroy, they make up with."
"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make."
Other fillers (after "they first" or "they") with good rhetoric are VERB plus PREPOSITION and VERB-PHRASE plus PREPOSITION. That verb doesn't need to be "make."

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"Whom the mad would destroy, they first make gods."

(said of Mao Tse Tung by Bernard Levin in 1967)
"Whom the gods would make mad, they first make angry."
"Whom the gods would make mad, they first make read x."
"Whom the gods would make mad, they first make read this."

For "whom the gods would make mad they first destroy" Google has no hits.

For "whom the gods would make mad they first" Google has 3 hits.

For "whom the gods would make mad they" Google has 7 hits.

A chain of any length could be written that goes like this:
"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. Whom the gods would make mad, they first x. Whom the gods would x, they first y."
Composing such a chain extemporaneously is an oral activity for two people taking turns.

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Another approach is to compose a filler that denotes not an action (by the gods) but instead the gods' attitude or some non-volitional relationship toward the victim. Or the filler could denote an action (by the gods) that isn't purposeful or whose purpose isn't to destroy the victim.

Omitting the word "first" makes possible many such fillers that wouldn't make sense if that word were included.
"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad."

"Whom the gods ... [to] destroy, they [first] ...."

After replacing "would," replace "make mad" or "first make mad."

Some suggested replacements for "would":

must
need to
should
decline to
hesitate to
are loath to
are afraid to
refuse to
can't
don't
are not sure they should
are not sure they want to
are not in a rush to
are not in the mood to
just can't wait to
are ready to
expect to
expect to have to
expect to have to but don't want to
would rightly
would wrongly
would legally
would secretly
would slowly
would quickly
would more than
would not quite

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"Whom the gods would ... , they first make mad."

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"Whom the gods would ..., they first ... ."
Though commonly attributed to Euripides, the earliest known occurrence of the proverb whose English translation is "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad" is from the first century B.C., a Latin proverb that was an adaptation of a Greek one that predated Euripides. The provenance of the proverb and its English versions is given online at Wikiquote, which is Wikipedia's annotated compendium of famous quotations. To see it, go to <http://en.wikiquote.org>, type "Euripides" in the search box there and click the heading "Misattributed" at the top of the "Euripides" article. Or go there directly by going to <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Euripides#Misattributed>. 
Many completions of "Whom the gods would destroy, they..." can be found at Google by using either of the indented search phrases that are on p. 2 and p. 4 of this file.

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