Thou and You in Shakespeare

Modern English has only one second person pronoun: you. But Old English had two: thou for second person singular and you for second person plural. By the 13th century, however, people began employing you as a singular pronoun to convey politeness or formality.

At this stage, thou and you in English mirrored the French pronouns tu and vous or the Spanish tú and usted: one familiar, the other formal.

In the early-modern English of Shakespeare’s time, thou and you could indicate fine distinctions of social status and interpersonal relationships:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>thou</th>
<th>you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to social inferiors</td>
<td>to social superiors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to social equals (lower class)</td>
<td>to social equals (upper class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in private</td>
<td>in public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to express familiarity or intimacy</td>
<td>to express formality or neutrality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to show scorn or contempt</td>
<td>to show respect or admiration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thou
A speaker could use the familiar thou to address their social inferiors or to indicate friendship and intimacy.

When some one of high rank addressed someone of lower rank (King to subject, parent to child, husband to wife, teacher to student), they would use thou. The subjects, children, wives, and students — on the other hand — would address their betters as you.

The hierarchical use of thou made it an excellent way to put someone in their place, condescending to or insulting them. Calling someone thou, implied — all by itself — that they were inferior.

But thou could express intimacy as well as superiority. Close friends, romantic partners, husbands and wives (in private) would all use thou to address each other.

Speakers also addressed God as thou, signaling a deep spiritual intimacy between the believer and the deity.

The thou-forms are thou, thee, thy, thine, thyself

You
Speakers used you to convey respect and formality, especially in public settings. You could also convey a distant or cold emotional register.

Upper-class folk tended to address each other as you, even when they were close. Conversely, the lower classes tended to use thou among themselves.

The you-forms are you, your, yours, yourself, yourselves
**Shifting Between Thou and You**

Characters in Shakespeare will sometimes shift from one form of pronoun address to another during a conversation. Such changes signal a shift in the relationship between the speakers.

For example, once blind Gobbo realizes that Lancelot is his son, he switches from cautious formality to warm familiarity:

**Gobbo** I cannot think you are my son.

**Lancelot** I know not what I shall think of that, but I am Lancelot, the Jew’s man, and I am sure Margery your wife is my mother.

**Gobbo** Her name is Margery indeed! I’ll be sworn if thou be Lancelot, thou art mine own flesh and blood.

_The Merchant of Venice_ (2.2.81–86)

Benedict shifts from an intimate declaration of love to a more formal tone when he asks Beatrice a serious question:

**Benedict** Tarry, good Beatrice. By this hand, I love thee.

**Beatrice** Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.

**Benedict** Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero?

_Much Ado About Nothing_ (4.1.322–27)

And Bernardo shifts from giving Francisco a piece of friendly advice to asking him a professional question:

**Bernardo** ’Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco.

**Francisco** For this relief much thanks. ’Tis bitter cold, And I am sick at heart.

**Bernardo** Have you had quiet guard?

_Hamlet_ (1.1.7–10)

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**Thou and You in the Bible**

The King James translation of the Bible (1611) uses _thou_ and _you_ as singular and plural pronouns — reverting to the original function of the pronouns and ignoring the subtle shades of meaning they had in early modern speech. So the Biblical usage would have sounded archaic even to its original 17th-century readers.

Because of its use in the Bible and in poetry, _thou_ sounds stilted and old-fashioned to modern English speakers. But to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, _thou_ was less stuffy or formal sounding than _you_.

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