

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:

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

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)

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*.
