

**INVESTIGATE THE WAYS  
PRONOUNS *THOU* AND *YOU* WERE  
USED IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH.**

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By Lorna Birrell

# OLD USE

- ✘ In Middle English **'thou'** and **'you'** were not both singular pronouns.
- ✘ **'Thou'** was used as the singular.
- ✘ **'You'** was used as the plural.
- ✘ Both had variant forms:

	Variants		
<b>Thou</b>	<b>Thee</b>	<b>Thy</b>	<b>Thine</b>
<b>You</b>	<b>Ye</b>	<b>Your</b>	<b>Yours</b>

# OLD USE - VARIANTS

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- × ‘**Thy**’, ‘**your**’, ‘**thine**’, and ‘**yours**’ were all used as second person possessive pronouns
- × ‘**Ye**’ and ‘**thee**’ were used as the subject form, while ‘**you**’ and ‘**thou**’ were used as the object form or after prepositions
- × For instance:
  - ‘**ye** cannot serue God and Mammon’
  - ‘Therefore I say unto **you**’

# OLD USE

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- ✘ In the later half of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century **'you'** began to be used as a singular rather than a plural.
- ✘ This in turn left people with two options when addressing someone in second person:
- ✘ **'You'** or **'Thou'**

# EARLY MODERN ENGLISH USE

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- ✘ **'You'** became the polite form for addressing someone
- ✘ So if you didn't know someone well or wanted to get to know them better, you would address them with **'you'**
- ✘ **'Thou'** then became the intimate form to use when speaking to someone you were familiar with

# EARLY MODERN ENGLISH USE

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- ✘ When addressing someone of a higher station, you would use **'you'**
- ✘ It was expected that the superior person would then reply with **'thou'**
- ✘ The rules for using the different pronouns were far more complicated depending on the conversation, and could vary between people, however these were the general rules.

# CHAUCER

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- × 'The Canterbury Tales':

'Allas **thow** felle Mars, allas Iuno,  
Thus hath **youre** ire oure lynage al fordo...  
**Ye** sleen me with **youre** eyen, Emelye,  
**Ye** been the cause wherfore that I dye'

- × Addressing the gods with '**thou**' individually and then '**you**' together
- × Addressing the girl he loves with variants of the pronoun '**you**' because she is of a higher status

# CHAUCER

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- ✘ The Host addresses the Cook with **'thou'**

'Now tel on, gentil Roger, by *thy* name  
But yet I praye *thee* be nat wrooth for  
game...'

- ✘ But then addresses the Monk (his superior) with **'you'**

'Now telleth *ye*, sire monk, if that *ye*  
konne...'



# USE OF 'YOU'

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A petition of William Walysby, treasurer to Queen Katherine, to King Henry VI (1437)

*R h nous auouns graunte*

Please it to the Kyng oure souerain Lord of **youre**  
Benigne grace to graunte to **youre** humble seruant and  
Oratoure sir William Walysby Tresorer with the Quene  
**youre** moder the denerye of hastynges in the dyose of  
Chichester the which Prestewyke Clerke of **youre**  
parlement late had on who sowle god assoile And  
**youre** saide Oratour shal pray god for **you**.

*[in another hand] letter ent feust faite a Westministre le  
vijje. jeur de November. 1an &c xve.*

# USE OF 'YOU'

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*King Henry we have granted this*

May it please the king our sovereign lord out of **your** benign grace to grant to **your** humble servant and orator, Sir William Walysby, Treasurer with the Queen, **your** mother, the deanery of Hastings in the diocese of Chichester, which appointment the clerk of **your** parliament had recently had, may God bless his soul. And **your** said orator will pray to God for **you**.

*This letter prepared at Westminster on the 8th day of November, in the 15th year (i.e., of the reign of Henry VI)*

# USE OF 'YOU'

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- ✘ In this 'petition' from Sir William Walysby, we can see 'you' being used as the singular rather than the plural
- ✘ In accordance with the theory that 'you' was the polite form when addressing a superior, Sir William is using it to show respect for King Henry VI
- ✘ This confirms that a change had taken place in the use of second personal pronouns

# USE OF 'THOU'

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- ✘ 'Thou' was either used when addressing someone intimately or informally
- ✘ In the Bible there is a variation between the use of 'you' and 'thou', depending on who is being addressed
- ✘ Often when 'man' is being addressed 'thou' is used, for instance in the Ten Commandments
- ✘ This may be interpreted as God being close to 'man', or as God showing the distance between His power and 'man's

# USE OF 'THOU'

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## ✘ King James Bible Ten Commandments Extract

But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD *thy* God: in it *thou* shalt not do any work, *thou*, nor *thy* son, nor *thy* daughter, nor *thy* manservant, nor *thy* maidservant, nor *thine* ox, nor *thine* ass, nor any of *thy* cattle, nor *thy* stranger that is within *thy* gates; that *thy* manservant and *thy* maidservant may rest as well as *thou*.

# USE OF 'THOU'

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- ✘ Many examples may also be found in Shakespeare of the use of **'thou'**
- ✘ For instance in Henry IV part one, act 2, scene 4 when the young Prince and his old friend are playacting

“Do **thou** stand for me, and I'll play my father,” says Hal.’

- ✘ This could be seen as a Prince belittling someone of a lower rank, but knowing the context it is more likely showing the bond of friendship.

# VARIOUS EXAMPLES OF USE IN SHAKESPEARE

O knight **thou** lackest a cup  
of canary: when did I  
see **thee** so put down?

Do **you** not hear him?  
**You** mar our labour:  
keep **your**  
cabins: **you** do assist  
the storm.

Where hast **thou**  
been, sister?

Madam, I am here.  
What is **your** will?

So well **thy** words become  
**thee** as **thy** wounds;  
They smack of honour both.  
Go get him surgeons.

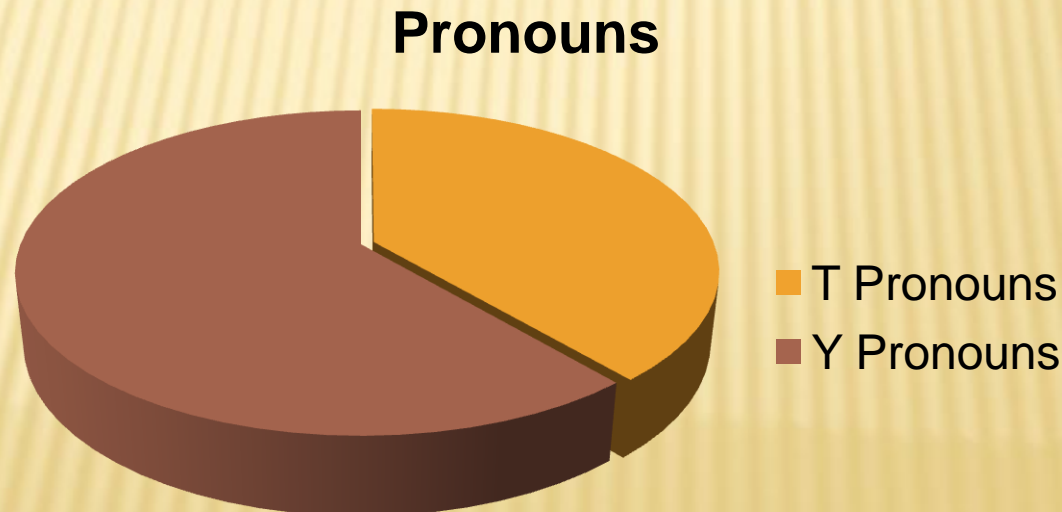
O, my heart bleeds  
To think o' the teen that I have turn'd **you** to,  
Which is from my remembrance! Please **you**,  
farther.

Good madonna, why  
mournest **thou**?

# SHAKESPEARE

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- ✘ In the works of Shakespeare there are 14,410 tokens of **'thou'** pronouns, and 22,767 tokens of **'you'** pronouns
- ✘ This includes **'you'** pronouns used as a plural





# SHAKESPEARE

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- ✘ Less **'thou'** pronouns were used in Shakespeare's later works than in his earlier works
- ✘ This shows a general decrease of the use of **'thou'** over the course of his writing career
- ✘ The **'you'** being favoured over **'thou'** also matches the general decline of **'thou'** in society

# THE DECLINE

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- ✘ Although popular in Early Modern English, the '**thou**' form ceased to be in general use by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century
- ✘ This supports the data collected about the use of '**you**' and '**thou**' in Shakespeare's works, one of the biggest influences of the language at time

# THE DECLINE

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- ✘ The '*thou*' pronoun also took with it the matching verb ending '*(e)st*' for forms like:  
*'thou* go*est*    *'thou* think*est*  
*'thou* see*st*
- ✘ This change contributed to the general decline of inflectional morphology
- ✘ Although it ceased in general use, the '**thou**' form continued in some regional dialects, religious styles and the language of the Quakers

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