

Seamus Cooney: A Note on Shakespeare's Grammar

In order to read Shakespeare and other pre-modern writings with full comprehension, you need to be sure you understand a few now-obsolete grammatical features of English. The chief one is the use of the second person singular. In Shakespeare's day -- and in poetry for centuries after it had become obsolete in vernacular speech -- the distinction between the second person singular and the second person plural was very much alive.

So first you need to grasp the grammatical forms. Next you need to become more aware of their connotations. You will find it helpful to draw on your knowledge of French, German, or Spanish -- languages which retain a similar set of connotations for the second person singular.

1. Grammatical forms

A: Pronouns

"In **Old English**, *thou* (and its related forms) was used for addressing one person; *ye* (and its related forms) for more than one. Within these categories, *thou* and *ye* were used as clause subject, *thee* and *you* as object.

"During **Middle English**, *ye* / *you* came to be used as a polite singular form alongside *thou* / *thee*, a situation which was probably influenced by French *vous* vs *tu*.

"During **Early Modern English**, [the language of Shakespeare's time] the distinction between subject and object uses of *ye* and *you* gradually disappeared, and *you* became the norm in all grammatical functions and social situations. *Ye* continued in use, but by the end of the 16th century it was restricted to archaic, religious, or literary contexts. By 1700, the *thou* forms were also largely restricted in this way."

-- *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, ed. David Crystal (CUP: 1995), p. 71

	Subject	Object	Possessive	
Singular	thou	thee	thine	thyself
Plural	you	ye	yours	yourself

B: Verb conjugations

	I	2nd person	he/she	we	you	they
<i>to be</i>						
Present	I am	thou art	is	are	are	are
Past	I was	thou wert	was	were	were	were
<i>to have</i>						
Present	I have	thou hast	has/hath	have	have	have
Past	I had	thou hadst	had	had	had	had
<i>to do</i>						
Present	I do	thou dost	does / doth	do	do	do
Past	I did	thou didst	did	did	did	did
<i>to see</i>						
Present	see	thou seest	sees/seeth	see	see	see
Past	saw	thou sawest	saw	saw	say	saw
<i>to grow</i>						
Present	grow	thou growest	grows/groweth	grow	grow	grow
Past	grew	thou grewest	grew	grew	grew	grew

2. Connotations

"By the time of Shakespeare, *you* had developed the number ambiguity it retains today, being used for either singular or plural; but in the singular it also had a role as an alternative to *thou / thee*. It was used by people of lower rank or status to those above them (such as ordinary people to nobles, children to parents, servants to masters, nobles to the monarch), and was also the standard way for the upper classes to talk to each other. By contrast, *thou / thee* were used by people of higher rank to those beneath them, and by the lower classes to each other; also, in elevated poetic style, in addressing God, and in talking to witches, ghosts, and other supernatural beings. There were also some special cases: for example, a husband might address his wife as *thou*, and she reply with *you*.

"Of particular interest are those cases where an extra emotional element entered the situation, and the use of *thou* or *you* broke the expected conventions. *Thou* commonly expressed special intimacy or affection; *you*, formality, politeness, and distance. *Thou* could also be used, even by an inferior to a superior, to express such feelings as anger and contempt. The use of *thou* to a person of equal rank could thus easily count as an insult, as Sir Toby Belch well knows when he advises Sir Andrew Aguecheek on how to write a challenge to 'the Count's youth' (Viola): 'if thou thou'st him some thrice, it shall not be amiss' (*Twelfth Night*, III.ii.42), himself using a demeaning *thou* in a speech situation where the norm is *you*. Likewise, the use of *you* when *thou* was expected (such as from master to servant) would also require special explanation."

-- *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, ed. David Crystal (CUP: 1995), p. 71