The Stories of English

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lexically creative authors in English literature. After their attentions, the language emerges with a new and confident character. And several basic linguistic notions – such as dialect, variety, and style – would come to be viewed in a fresh light at the end of the literary 'golden age'.

Interlude 12
Choosing *thou* or *you*

In the beginning, in Old English, the rules controlling the use of the second-person pronouns were straightforward:

> *thou* and its variant forms (*thee*, *thy*, *thine*) were used in talking to one person (*singular*);
> *you* and its variant forms (*ye*, *your*, *yours*) were used in talking to more than one (*plural*).

And within sentences:

> *thou* and *ye* were used as the *subject* of a clause: *thou/ye saw me*;
> *thee* and *you* were used as the *object* of a clause: *I saw thee/you*.

But things began to change during Middle English.

The first change was the emergence of *you* as a singular, noticeably during the second half of the thirteenth century. The same kind of development had already taken place in French, where *vous* had come to be used as a polite form of the singular, as an alternative to *tu*; and it seems likely that the usage began in English because the French nobility began to think of the English pronouns in the same way.

The second change took place some time later: during the sixteenth century the difference between the subject and the object forms gradually disappeared, and *you* became the norm in both situations. *Ye* was still in use at the end of the century, but only in contexts which were somewhat literary, religious, or archaic.

So, for anyone talking to one person, there was a choice in Early Modern English: *thou* or *you*. And quite quickly the language evolved a set of social norms, based on the distinction. We can see them already present in *Le Morte Darthur*, written between 1461 and 1470.[13] In Book VII, we read of Gareth arriving at Arthur's court. The king asks Gareth what he wants, addressing him with *ye*, which would be the expected polite form to an apparently upper-class visitor:

> Now ask, said Arthur, and ye shall have your asking.

Gareth then demands food and drink, as if he were a beggar, and this makes the king immediately change his tone, shown by a switch to *thou/thee*:

> Now, sir, this is my petition for this feast, that ye will give me meat and drink sufficiently for this twelvemonth, and at that day I will ask mine other two gifts.
>
> My fair son, said Arthur, ask better, I counsel thee, for this is but a simple asking; for my heart giveth me to thee greatly, that thou art come of men of worship, and greatly my conceit faileth me but thou shalt prove a man of right great worship.

Gareth's robust reply temporarily restores the king's confidence – but not for long:

> Sir, he said, thereof be as it be may, I have asked that I will ask.
>
> Well, said the king, ye shall have meat and drink enough; I never defended [denied] that none, neither my friend nor my foe. But what is thy name I would wit?
>
> I cannot tell you, said he.
>
> That is marvel, said the king, that thou knowest not thy name, and thou art the goodliest young man that ever I saw.

Only when Gareth later reveals himself to be the king's nephew, does *ye* return as Arthur's normal mode of address.

The social basis of the *thou/you* distinction was established by the sixteenth century. The *you* forms would normally be used:

- by people of lower social status to those above them (e.g., ordinary people to nobles, children to parents, servants to masters);
- by the upper classes when talking to each other, even if they were closely related;
- as a sign of a change (contrasting with *thou*) in the emotional temperature of an interaction.

The *thou* forms would normally be used:

- by people of higher social status to those below them (e.g., nobles to ordinary people, parents to children, masters to servants);
- by the lower classes when talking to each other;
- in addressing God;
- in talking to ghosts, witches, and other supernatural beings;
- in an imaginary address to someone who was absent;
- as a sign of a change (contrasting with *you*) in the emotional temperature of an interaction.

The old singular/plural distinction could still be expressed, of course. For example, in the Book of Common Prayer (p. 278), the *thou* forms tend to be used (there is some variability) when the minister is addressing an individual member of the congregation, whereas the *you* forms tend to be used when the minister is talking to the congregation as a whole. Thus we find the individual communicant addressed with *thee*: 'The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee'; by contrast, *you* is used in the general absolution: 'pardon and deliver you from all your sins'.

In the theatrical setting, the interest focuses on what is meant by a 'change in the emotional temperature', which applies to both forms. It is often the case that a switch from *you* to *thou* signals special intimacy or affection between two characters, whereas the reverse switch would signal extra respect or distance. But it all depends on context. Often, a switch to *thou* expresses social condescension or contempt. The use of *thou* to a person of equal rank would usually be an insult, in fact, as Sir Toby Belch is well aware when he advises Sir Andrew Aguecheek on how to write a challenge to an enemy: 'if thou thou'st him some thrice, it shall not be amiss' (*Twelfth Night*, III.ii.42), ironically using a disparaging *thou* to Sir Andrew in the process.

The crucial role of the context is clear in the opening scene of *King Lear*, when Lear is giving away his kingdom to his three daughters. He addresses his first two daughters, Gonerill and Regan, using *thou*: this would be the normal pronoun of parent to child. 'Of all these bounds . . . / We make thee lady', he says to Gonerill (I.i.76); and 'To thee and thine hereditary ever / Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom', he says to Regan (I.i.80). But when he turns to his favourite daughter, Cordelia, he switches to *you*: 'what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?' (I.i.85). Here, *you* is being used as a sign of special intimacy. But when Cordelia does not behave as he wishes, he is taken aback. He cannot quite believe it, persisting with *you*:

> Mend your speech a little / Lest you may mar your fortunes.

When Cordelia continues in her attitude, he hardens his tone, and the *thou* forms show it:

> LEAR But goes thy heart with this?
> CORDELIA Ay, my good lord.

And he eventually explodes in anger:

> LEAR So young, and so untender?
> CORDELIA So young, my lord, and true.
> LEAR Let it be so! Thy truth then be thy dower!

From affection to anger: within just a few lines, we can see *thou* being used in totally contrasting ways.

The *thou/you* distinction was quite well preserved until about 1590, when Shakespeare was beginning to write. It seems to have earlier been disappearing in everyday prose, for the Pastons (p. 178) make very little use of it, even in their more intimate exchanges. We might expect to find it in the more heightened emotional atmosphere of a play; but even there, at the turn of the century, it was by no means universal. Shakespeare makes great dramatic use of the distinction,[14] but Jonson, for example, uses it much less. Perhaps it was more a part of Shakespeare's linguistic intuition, having been brought up in Warwickshire, where *thou* forms were a feature of regional speech.

Thou disappeared from Standard English completely during the first half of the seventeenth century. It remained widespread in regional dialect (and would continue so into Modern English), and continued to be used in plays as an archaism. The distinction was sufficiently alive in the popular mind for it to become an issue mid century, when the Society of Friends movement began. Quakers disapproved of the way in which singular *you* had become part of an etiquette of social distance, and used *thou* forms to everyone, believing that this better reflected the spirit of the exchanges Christ would have had with his disciples. One of the first Quakers, Richard Farnsworth, in *The Pure Language of the Spirit of Truth* (1655), considers that anyone who 'cannot bear thee and thou to a single person, what sort soever, is exalted proud fresh, and is accursed'. He also had a grammatical reason: *thou* was a more exact usage, being a 'particular, single, pure proper unto one'.

Because *thou* forms were now rural and nonstandard, the Quaker usage offended many. The authorities, and people with high social positions or pretensions, considered it an insult to be addressed using these forms. George Fox, in his *Journal*, reports that he and his followers were

> in danger many times of our lives, and often beaten, for using those words to some proud men, who would say, 'Thou'st "thou" me, thou ill-bred clown', as though their breeding lay in saying 'you' to a singular

No other organization copied the practice.

The second-person pronoun system may have simplified in Standard English; but throughout the English-speaking world variant forms continued to be used. Some of these are described in Interlude 17 (p. 449).

Chapter 13 Linguistic daring

Whatever the feelings writers expressed about the inferiority of English compared to other languages, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, these had largely disappeared by the end. As we have seen in the two previous chapters, English experienced a huge lexical growth. The Classical origins of much of this vocabulary sharpened writers' sense of style, widening the range of choices which were available to characterize 'high' and 'low' levels of discourse, and offering the option of intermediate levels. Professional domains, such as science, law, and medicine, developed their expressive capabilities, becoming increasingly standardized. And standardization within the language as a whole made significant progress. All this was reinforced by an increased awareness of the nature of language and of linguistic performance, as seen in such treatises as Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* and Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (p. 295). The language was undoubtedly richer, in quantitative terms, than it had ever been. In 1600, a John Skelton could not have complained about a lack of words to 'serve his mind' (p. 288).

It is only to be expected that an age when linguistic resources are increasing so much in richness would be immensely stimulating to creative writers. Authors, we may suppose, have a particular ability to observe and assimilate into their work details of the contemporary scene, and the period was one which provided unprecedented opportunities for linguistic exploitation. Because lawyers, for example, had developed a standard style of discourse, this could be imitated, exaggerated, and parodied, and its vocabulary used in a range of appropriate and inappropriate contexts restricted only by the limitations of authorial imagination.[1] A good example occurs in the middle of Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* (IV.ii.192). A disguised Falstaff has just been beaten out of the house by Frank Ford, who thinks he is having an affair with his wife. Falstaff has indeed been making advances to both Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, much to their disgust, and at this point in the play they have already found two successful ways to humiliate him. Mistress Ford then wonders whether they have done enough: