

WS 9: Language in the play – Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*

Thou and you – what does it mean?

At the time Shakespeare was writing the people of England were speaking very much as we speak today. His plays were written in Early Modern English, which is similar to Modern English as we know it, and in that form almost immediately accessible to us. But what about all these *thees* and *thous*?

Modern English only has 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, *you* was employed as a singular pronoun to convey politeness and formality. In the English of Shakespeare’s time, *thou* and *you* could indicate fine distinctions of social status and interpersonal relationships. *Thou*, *Thee* and *Thy* could be used to express familiarity but was also used insultingly to someone you saw as inferior.

The Middle English pronouns:

Thou = You (when used as the subject of the sentence: “*Thou liketh writing.*”)

Thee = You (when used as the object of the sentence: “*Writing liketh thee.*”)

Thy = Your (possessive form of you: “*Thy blade well serveth thee.*”)

1. Copy and fill out the following table. Make use of the info box above. The table explores how Sir Toby and Fabian address Sir Andrew in this scene (as *thou* or *you*). Examine the difference. Explain the intention or effect behind the use.

character	you/thou quotation	line reference	effect/intention

2. Consider what you know about the usage of second person singular and plural pronouns in the German language as an index of social relations. Apply your knowledge to the following quote from Act 1 Scene 5 and give reasons why Olivia changes pronoun usage during her short monologue.

OLIVIA ‘What is your parentage?’
 ‘Above my fortunes, yet my state is well:
 I am a gentleman.’ I’ll be sworn thou art;
 Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions, and spirit
 Do give thee five-fold blazon. Not too fast! Soft, soft!
 Unless the master were the man – How now?
 Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
 Methinks I feel this youth’s perfections
 With an invisible and subtle stealth
 To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be. (CSS, I, v, l. 244)

Vocabulary

formality: the quality of being suitable for serious or official occasions – **familiarity:** friendly and informal behaviour – **insultingly:** in a way that is rude or offensive – **inferior:** lower, or of lower rank
blazon: coat of arms, marks of gentility – **to catch the plague:** fall in love – **to creep ... eyes:** it was felt that love entered the body through the eyes

(annotations adapted from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>; task 1 adapted from the CSS-edition of *Twelfth Night*: Shakespeare, William: *Twelfth Night* (Cambridge School Shakespeare, edited by Anthony Partington and Richard Spencer). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 82; information adapted from: <https://shakespearestudyguide.com/Thou.html>)

