

The Pronoun of Address in Some XVIth. Century English Plays

Introduction

IN THE Standard English of today, the pronoun of address is **you**, except for the liturgical usage of **ye** and a few survivals like *hauididu* (How d'ye do ?)¹. **Thou** and **thee** are used in prayer, while among the Friends the latter is used in the Nominative on the analogy of other Nominative forms with the sound "i."

In Old English times there was, in spite of many variant forms, no ambiguity in regard to the Singular and Plural of the second person pronoun and their use. The forms were as follows :—

	Singular	Dual	Plural
Nom.	θū	git	gē
Gen.	θīn	incer	ēower, iower
Dat.	θē	inc	ēow, iow
Acc.	θē (θec)	inc (incit)	ēow, iow (ēowic)

By Middle English times, the forms had changed to:

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	θū, θou, thou, etc.	ȝe, ye, etc.
Acc. Dat.	θe, thee etc.	ēōw, ou, ȝuw, you etc.

It was in the 13th century that there first arose, probably under French influence, a new usage whereby the plural **you** came to challenge—and eventually to usurp—the homely, native **thou**.

Kennedy has shown that the use of the two forms in the 13th century was mixed and that some of the plural forms may have actually meant plural; he mentions, however, the first known case of the "Formal Singular"² and its frequency in *Cursor Mundi* and the *Early South English Legendary*.

1. Wyld mentions the occurrence of *θenki* in some dialects.
2. "but ge wiθ us senden beniamin." Kennedy p. 87.

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In the 14th century the **you** seems to be a little more than a modest newcomer. Reviewing the work of Stidston, Byrne writes: "In summation then, the singular continues to be the natural pronoun, while the plural is the exceptional one. The plural is conceded to be cultural, though as yet not chivalrous, fashionable rather than popular, useful more than graceful, politic instead of sincere, but present and persevering."³

In the 15th century, the same writer continues, there is evidence to show that: "Nevertheless by this time there remains no hesitancy about the acceptance of **you** in the singular office. Not alone is the outsider now a welcome visitor, but it is even of the very household of the language, with claims and prerogatives as equal and unquestioned as those of the native **thou**."⁴

In so far as the 16th century is concerned and the area that is covered by the present paper, I realise that a much larger body of material needs to be scrutinised for any worthwhile contribution to the problem of the use of the pronoun of address in this period. I hope, however, that though its scope is limited, it will go a little way to help add clarity to a picture that is by no means clear, and a view that has by no means reached unanimity. That I have confined myself to drama—because of all forms of literature drama is peculiarly appropriate for the study of usage of speech forms—will commend itself to the reader.

Purpose

In his *History of the English Language*, A. C. Baugh has written as follows: "The 16th century saw the establishment of the personal pronoun in the form which it has had ever since. In attaining this result three changes were involved: the disuse of **thou**, **thy**, **thee**; the substitution of **you** for **ye** as a nominative case and the introduction of **its** as the possessive of **it**."⁵

The purpose of this article is to discover how far the first two statements are borne out in certain samples of English drama of the period.

3. Sister Byrne. p. xxxvi.
4. Ibid. p. xxvii.
5. Ibid. p. 299.

Material and Method

For my material I have used the first 21 plays in Hazlitt's *A Selection of Old English Plays* (London 1874), originally published by Robert Dodsley in 1744.

I made a count of all the occurrences of the pronoun of the second person—there were 8578 of them—in their various forms, under the following heads :

- A Thou
- B Thee
- C Thy
- D Thine
- E Thyself / Thyselves
- F You: Nominative Singular
- G You: Accusative Singular
- H You: Nominative Plural
- I You: Accusative Plural
- J You with Function words
- K Your (Singular use)
- L Your (Plural use)
- M Yours
- N Yourself / Yourselves
- O Ye: Nominative Singular
- P Ye: Accusative Singular
- Q Ye: Nominative Plural
- R Ye: Accusative Plural
- S Ye with Function words
- T Doubtful cases of You (re Number and Case)
- U Doubtful cases of Ye (re Number and Case)

The full data thus collected is given, for each of the plays and in gross totals, in Schedule A.

“ The Disuse of Thou, Thy, Thee ”

A comparative schedule (B), showing the use for each play of **Thou Thy, Thee, Thine, Thyself** and **Thyselves** on the one hand and the singular forms of **You, Ye, Your, Yourself** (and **Yourselves**) on the other hand, is given below. The plays are arranged in order, according to the percentage of the use of **Thou** etc., so that the reader may see and appreciate—what the figures clearly show—how divided is the usage. This fact is also demonstrated by the gross totals.

SCHEDULE A

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
Interlude of the Four Elements	73	57	31	7	—	15	39	1	3	8	33	2	—	—	92	—	2	—	—	—	6
Calisto and Melibaea	104	64	48	6	2	5	35	—	1	12	26	2	1	1	66	—	8	—	—	—	2
Everyman	81	71	45	3	1	16	44	—	1	17	33	2	—	—	51	—	6	—	—	—	2
Hickscorner	53	24	18	1	—	32	33	6	10	9	19	6	—	—	43	2	10	—	—	—	—
The Pardoner and the Friar	71	24	18	—	—	1	1	3	7	9	4	31	—	—	12	3	50	—	—	—	—
The World and the Child	50	43	18	1	—	—	34	1	5	4	20	2	—	—	26	—	3	—	—	—	—
God's Promises	122	62	182	6	2	—	7	1	1	2	1	11	—	—	—	—	5	—	—	—	—
The Four P. P.	25	9	18	1	—	13	31	8	4	10	54	13	2	4	113	3	43	—	—	—	5
Theristes	73	60	47	1	1	12	23	3	3	12	14	10	—	1	20	1	23	—	—	—	1
Interlude of Youth	69	71	24	—	1	19	60	1	5	9	27	2	—	—	50	2	4	—	—	—	—
Lusty Juvenius	33	6	33	2	3	130	59	8	4	24	80	12	—	2	10	—	4	—	—	—	—
Jack Juggler	81	31	28	3	—	68	26	17	8	24	25	9	—	2	5	—	3	—	—	—	—
Nice Wanton	18	15	13	1	—	15	35	—	2	8	52	4	—	2	67	—	6	—	—	—	—
History of Jacob and Esau	157	101	85	16	4	28	61	—	4	26	74	2	—	5	125	1	2	—	—	—	—
The Disobedient Child	91	51	45	6	2	8	15	1	3	10	15	4	—	2	26	4	12	—	—	—	—
Marriage of Wit and Science	90	72	62	5	9	115	43	8	2	33	102	3	—	16	18	—	5	—	—	—	—
New Custrom	52	37	35	4	—	95	22	10	1	14	48	1	—	1	6	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ralph Roister Doister	106	41	25	7	2	47	129	3	7	55	181	10	2	15	295	7	16	—	—	—	—
Gammer Gurton's Needle	160	73	67	11	1	60	46	4	3	13	91	4	7	4	105	2	9	—	—	—	—
The Trial of Treasure	48	33	33	4	—	80	39	11	3	25	46	11	1	3	25	6	5	—	—	—	—
Like Will to Like	129	53	47	2	4	85	44	35	16	40	34	19	2	2	12	—	4	—	—	—	—
Gross Totals	1686	997	822	87	31	851	820	120	93	364	979	159	15	61	1167	31	220	10	6	29	30

SCHEDULE B

Play	Number of Occ. of Thou etc.	Percentage	Number of Occ. of You etc.	Percentage
God's Promises	374	99.5	2	0.5
Pardoner and Friar	113	93.5	22	16.5
Disobedient Child	195	73.5	70	26.5
Thersistes	182	72	71	28
Calisto and Melibaea	224	62.5	133	37.5
Everyman	201	58	144	42
Like Will to Like	235	58	177	42
World and Child	112	56.5	87	43.5
Jacob and Esau	363	55	294	45
Jack Juggler	143	53	126	47
Interlude of Youth	164	51	158	49
Gammer Gurton's Needle	312	50	308	50
Interlude of the Four El.	168	48.5	179	51.5
Marriage of Wit and Science	238	44.5	294	55.5
Hickscorner	96	42.5	129	57.5
New Custom	128	42.5	172	57.5
Trial of Treasure	118	37	199	63
Lusty Juventus	77	21.5	281	78.5
Nice Wanton	47	21.5	171	78.5
Ralph Roister Doister	181	21	674	79
The Four P. P.	53	19.5	218	80.5
Total	3724		3909	

The divided usage of the **thous** and the **yous** may also be shown by means of the following schedule which makes a comparison between the gross totals of each of the items concerned, as follows :

Schedule C

Thou	.. 1686	You (Nom. Sing.)	.. 851
Thy	.. 922	You (Acc. Sing.)	.. 820
Thee	.. 997	Ye (Nom. Sing.)	.. 1167
Thine	.. 87	Ye (Acc. Sing.)	.. 31
Thyself/ves	.. 31	Your (Singular)	.. 979
		Yourself/ves	.. 61
Total	.. 3724	Total	.. 3909

A comparison of the counts for **thou** and for **ye/you** in the Nominative also gives similar results, as follows :

Schedule D

Thou	.. 1686	.. 45/
Ye/you (Nom. Sing.)	.. 2018	.. 55/
Total	.. 3704	.. 100/

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While Baugh's statement can only be finally proved by means of a chronological and comparative study of similar material, the evidence available here does seem to indicate that usage is divided to such an extent that his term "disuse" is hardly justified.

"The Substitution of You for Ye as A Nominative Case"

The following schedule shows the occurrences of **you** and **ye** in the Nominative Singular and Plural :

SCHEDULE E

Play	Nom. You Sing.	Nom. Ye Sing.	Nom. You Plural	Nom. Ye Plural
Interlude of the Four Elements	15	92	1	2
Calisto and Melibaea	5	66	—	8
Everyman	16	51	—	6
Hickscorner	32	43	6	10
The Pardoner and the Friar	1	12	3	50
The World and the Child	7	26	1	3
God's Promises	—	—	—	5
The Four P. P.	13	113	8	43
Thersistes	12	20	3	23
Interlude of Youth	19	50	1	4
Lusty Juventus	130	10	8	4
Jack Juggler	68	5	17	3
Nice Wanton	15	67	—	6
History of Jacob and Esau	28	125	—	2
The Disobedient Child	8	26	1	12
Marriage of Wit and Science	115	18	8	5
New Custom	95	6	10	—
Ralph Roister Doister	47	295	3	16
Gammer Gurton's Needle	60	105	4	9
The Trial of Treasure	80	25	11	5
Like Will to Like	85	12	35	4
Total	851	1167	120	220

From these figures it will be noticed that, taking the gross totals, **ye** is used much more frequently in the Singular than in the Plural. This is so for individual plays as well, except *God's Promises* and *Thersistes*. In regard to the use of **you**, with the single exception of *The Pardoner and the Friar*, the Singular use is by far the greater.

It should be noted that, out of a total of 340 plurals, **ye** occurs 220 times (65%) and **you** 120 times (35%); while, out of a total of 2018 singulars, **ye** occurs 1167 times (58%) and **you** 851 times (42%).

It is also instructive to compare the count of the **you** in the Nominative and in the Accusative, to see to what extent the latter is still the characteristic form. The grand total is in favour of the use of **you** in the Nominative, though only seven plays⁶ have more **yous** in this form than in the Accusative. This is shown below.

SCHEDULE F

Play	You, Nominative	You, Accusative
Interlude of the Four Elements	16	42
Calisto and Melibaea	5	36
Everyman	16	45
Hickscorner	38	43
The Pardoner and the Friar	4	8
The World and the Child	8	39
God's Promises	—	2
The Four P. P.	21	35
Thersistes	15	26
Interlude of Youth	20	65
Lusty Juventus	138	63
*Jack Juggler	85	34
*Nice Wanton	15	37
History of Jacob and Esau	28	65
The Disobedient Child	9	18
*Marriage of Wit and Science	123	45
*New Custom	105	23
Ralph Roister Doister	50	136
*Gammer Gurton's Needle	64	49
*The trail of Treasure	91	42
*Like Will to Like	120	60
	971	913

The evidence goes to show that the change (which began in the 14th century) in the use of **you** in the Nominative has gathered strength and constitutes a serious challenge to the sole use of **ye** in this Case. The evidence of Drama—a more truthful representation of the speech of the day—may be contrasted with the rigid and artificial maintenance of the distinction in the 16th century Prayer Book and the Authorised Version of the Bible. For example “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you.”⁷

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6. These have been starred.

7. Wyld states (p. 228-229): “The modern **you** is of course the old Dative. Caxton still uses **ye** for the Nominative and **you** only in oblique cases.”