'TOO WISE TO WOO PEACEABLY': THE MEANINGS OF THOU IN SHAKESPEARE'S WOOING-SCENES

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In *Much Ado About Nothing*, V. ii., the audience is finally offered a chance to see Beatrice and Benedick face-to-face as universally acknowledged lovers. Both Beatrice and Benedick have previously admitted, in IV. i., that they love each other, so at this point in the play, one is reasonably expecting to be presented with a love-scene: this Jack has now got his Jill and everything is fine, according to the book of Comedy.

However, the love-scene between Beatrice and Benedick turns out to be yet another of their battles of wits. Benedick has to woo Beatrice all over again and entreat her to stay; Beatrice has to deny and be disdainful:

Benedick. Sweet Beatrice, wouldst thou come when I called thee?
Beatrice. Yea, signior, and depart when you bid me.
Benedick. O, stay but till then!
Beatrice. 'Then' is spoken; fare you well now. And yet ere I go, let me go with that I came, which is, with knowing what hath passed between you and Claudio.
Benedick. Only foul words -and thereupon I will kiss thee.
Beatrice. Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath is noisome; therefore I will depart un Kissed.1 (V. ii. 41-51).

The fire-work display of wit continues in this fashion for several lines. Benedick woos and Beatrice disdains and their roles as wooer and wooed seem to call for an asymmetrical use of the pronouns of address. As a suitor, it is fit for Benedick to address Beatrice with thou whereas Beatrice, in her role as inaccesible lady, must reply with you. Yet we very well know that this is all for
the sake of Comedy; and, in case we didn’t, Benedick dispels our doubts when he tells Beatrice: ‘Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably’ (V. ii. 67).

The wooing-scene-cum-battle-of-wits continues for a few more lines, until a point is reached in which a change of conversational topic and a change of pronoun of address announce the end of the wooing-scene. Benedick has been addressing Beatrice with thou, and he suddenly changes to you: ‘And now tell me, how doth your cousin?’ (V. ii. 82). With the shift from thou to you, Benedick sheds the role of a wooer and takes up the role of a polite courtier enquiring about Hero’s health. The shift from thou to you contributes to signal that the wooing game is over.

The choice between two pronominal forms for the second person singular offered by Early Modern English has often puzzled scholars and commentators of the plays of Shakespeare. In a pioneering study on the pronouns of address, Sister St. Geraldine Byrne said: ‘thou answers as the pronoun of the heart; you the pronoun of the head’. Byrne had to resort to metaphorical language in an attempt to overcome the problem of accounting, in a neat, clean formula, for the varied and confused functions of each of these pronouns. The use and meanings of you and thou have proved elusive, partly because the choice is no longer available in current English, and partly because comparison with other European languages which have kept the distinction has only made matters worse, obscuring the peculiarities of Early Modern English pronouns of address.

Despite the difficulties involved, several studies have attempted to pin down the meanings of Early Modern English pronouns of address. Given the constraints of time and space, I will not discuss here the extant literature on the pronouns of address; instead, I will simply make a few observations which might help to follow the rest of this paper.

By the end of the 16th century -at least in the London area-you was increasingly becoming the most frequently used pronoun of address, the polite pronoun of symmetrical address, and the pronoun one would normally select unless one had reasons to do otherwise. Thou, instead, was usually reserved for occasions in which certain connotations had to be conveyed.

The selection of thou as pronoun of address could be determined by several factors. These factors were of very diverse nature but most of them fall into one of the following spheres of human behaviour: social relations,
attitudinal states of the speaker and rhetorical conventions. Social status could determine the selection of *thou*, because if a superior wanted to pull rank in front of a subordinate, *thou* could still carry the meaning of non-respectful pronoun. Social distance also affected pronoun choice: relatives, friends and all those who were on intimate terms could address each other with *thou*. An outburst of emotion -whether negative or positive, could result in the selection of *thou*, whether intentionally or not- in order to express love, care, affection or hatred, anger and scorn. Rhetorical convention required the use of the pronoun *thou* in apostrophes, that is whenever a speaker was addressing something or someone who was not present at the moment of speaking: even God was -and still is- addressed with *Thou*. Finally, convention also asked for the use of *thou* when addressing supernatural beings, such as ghosts, witches, devils and spirits.⁵

The meanings of *thou* could then be summarised as follows: the presence of the pronoun *thou* can connote the superior status or rank of the speaker, a certain degree of familiarity or intimacy between speaker and hearer, and a rise in the speaker’s emotional temperature; the use of *thou* can also indicate that the speaker is either talking to a supernatural being, or addressing an addressee who is not present.

Given these meanings of *thou*, it might be reasonable to suppose that if *thou* is the wooing-pronoun this is because of its capacity to express love and affection. Romeo and Juliet *thou* each other in the so-called balcony scene (*Romeo and Juliet*, II. ii) and Olivia addresses Cesario with *thou* in *Twelfth Night* when she makes her declaration of love:

Olivia:
Cesario, by the roses of the spring,
By maaidhood, honour, truth, and everything,
I love thee so, that maugre all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.
Do not extort thy reasons from this clause,
For that I woo, thou therefore hast no cause;
But rather reason thus with reason fetter:
Love sought is good, but given unsought is better.

(III. i. 151-158).
Romeo, Juliet and Olivia emphasise the intensity of their love with the use of the pronoun *thou*. However, it is often the case that positive emotion is not the main cause for the selection of *thou* as pronoun of address in wooing-scenes. In fact, it is rare to find instances of *thou* which only connote love or affection. Often enough ambiguity arises and it is possible to find more than one meaning for a particular instance of *thou*.

I would now like to explore how the multiplicity of meanings which can potentially be attached to *thou* contribute to make complex situations out of simple wooing-scenes. On many occasions, the potential ambiguity in the semantic content of *thou* shows that gender relationships have to be understood within a broader framework which necessarily includes social structures and rhetorical conventions. Wooing-scenes in renaissance plays frequently remind us of the fact that gender relations cannot escape the constraints of social status, social distance and linguistic usage.

A fitting example can be found, precisely, in *Twelfth Night* III.i, when Viola-Cesario is about to leave and Olivia makes him stay a little longer. Olivia has been addressing Cesario with *you* throughout their meeting but she now shifts to *thou*:

Viola: Grace and good disposition attend your ladyship!
You'll nothing, madam, to my lord, by me?
Olivia: Stay: I priihee tell me what *thou* think'st of me.

(III. i. 137-140).

Olivia’s shift to *thou* may express emotion suddenly felt, the painful pang of parting with Cesario but it also, inevitably, reminds us of the power differential existing between them: Olivia is a countess, Cesario is a mere page, a servant. Olivia’s *thou* to Cesario in the context of this speech act—a command—could be the *thou* of emotion but it could equally be the *thou* of social inequality.

Later on in the play, in III. iv, Olivia and Cesario meet again and Olivia addresses him with *you*. Yet when she is taking her leave, Olivia once more shifts to the wooing-pronoun: "Olivia: Well, come again to-morrow. Fare *thee* well;/ A fiend like *thee* might bear my soul to hell." (III. iv. 218-219).
Olivia’s leave-taking is deliciously ambiguous: her last sentence can be read as "you are a merciless devil because you will make me sin and live in hell" or as "you are so infernally beautiful that I would follow you anywhere, even to hell". The double-meaning of Olivia’s sentence is also reproduced in the meaning of thou: Olivia may be addressing Cesario with thou because she is emotionally aroused; but she may be doing so because thou is the pronoun of address usually given to devils and spirits.

Another interesting example of the potential indeterminacy of thou in Shakespearean wooing-scenes can be found in Measure for Measure, if what takes place between Angelo and Isabella can pass as a wooing-scene. In I. iv, Isabella visits Angelo for the second time in the play and her entreaties for her brother’s life only meet Angelo’s sexual advances. Angelo has been addressing Isabella with you but, at a very precise moment in the dialogue, he shifts to thou:

Angelo:
My unsoill’d name, th’austereness of my life,
My vouch against you, and my place i’th’state
Will so your accusation overweigh,
That you shall stifle in your own report,
And smell of calumny. I have begun,
And now I give my sensual race the rein:
Fit thy consent to my sharp appetite;
Lay by all nicety and prolixious blushes
That banish what they sue for. Redeem thy brother
By yielding up thy body to my will;
Or else he must not only die the death,
But thy unkindness shall his death draw out
To ling’ring sufferance. Answer me tomorrow,
Or, by the affection that now guides me most,
I’ll prove a tyrant to him. As for you,
Say what you can: my false o’erweighs your true.
(II. iv. 154-169).

Angelo’s shift from you to thou coincides with his final attempt to woo and win Isabella, and yet it is difficult to see in this thou the expression of
sincere love and affectionate emotion. Angelo’s thou to Isabella is more likely to be the thou of anger and rage, since Angelo is clearly annoyed because Isabella is not willing to comply; but Angelo’s thou is also the thou which indicates social status: he is Isabella’s superior in the social rank-scale and therefore the use of this pronoun is meant to remind her of the power differential existing between them. And this is in fact the very message conveyed by the whole speech: Isabella is totally powerless, nobody will believe her. It is her word against Angelo’s and his position of power settles the matter. Truth is always on the side of the powerful and the truth of the powerful is more powerful than the truth of the powerless.

Yet there is a further implication in Angelo’s use of this pronoun. With this thou, Angelo is expressing a social relation when we would expect him to express love and passion. This is perhaps one of the reasons why we, as an audience, feel inclined to condemn Angelo’s designs on Isabella while at the same time we exonerate Isabella’s brother Claudio. The use of this thou with imperatives (fit, lay, banish, redeem) tell us that Angelo’s desire for Isabella is not the result of love but rather the result of his desire to exert power over her, the power the Duke has conferred on him. Angelo’s sexual desire is just another manifestation of his desire for domination. It is not strange then that he woos Isabella not with the rhetoric of courtly love, not with promises and sighs, but with orders and commands. Angelo’s peculiar wooing style, however, also resorts to the use of thou and once again the return to you marks the boundary of the wooing-scene.

Love and affection are not then the reasons why Angelo thous Isabella. Neither are they the reasons behind Petruchio’s choice of pronoun to woo Katharina in The Taming of the Shrew. In II.i, Petruchio first addresses Katharina twice with you but he soon shifts to thou. Petruchio and Katharina are complete strangers, they cannot be on intimate terms since they have just met. This implies that Petruchio is taking a liberty in thouing Katharina. In fact, he is taking too many liberties because he gets told that he has no right to call Katharina by any other name than her full name:

Petruchio:

  Good morrow, Kate, for that’s your name, I hear.
Katherina:
    Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing;
    They call me Katherine that do talk of me.

Petruchio:
    You lie, in faith, for you are call’d plain Kate
    And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst;
    But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,
    Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,
    For dainties are all Kates, and therefore, Kate,
    Take this of me, Kate of my consolation,
    Hearing thy mildness prais’d in every town,
    Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded,
    Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs,
    Myself am mov’d to woo thee for my wife.
    (II. i. 182-194).

From the very beginning of their encounter, Petruchio is taking too many things for granted. He seems to leave no room for doubt: he is quite sure Katherina will be his wife. This arrogance and self-assurance suggests that Petruchio’s thou to Katherina is the thou of man to wife. For Petruchio, Katherina is already his wife, so he’s entitled to thou her. The thou from a husband to his wife -like the thou from a master to his servant- is always ambiguous: it can equally be the thou of intimacy and familiarity or the thou of social superiority. In either case, Petruchio is assuming too much too soon. Besides, from Katherina’s point of view, being addressed as thou by a complete stranger can only be tantamount to an insult.

Petruchio’s thou to Katherina is also called for by the rhetorical language of love which he draws on in his wooing:

Petruchio:
' Twas told me thou were rough, and coy sull
And now I find report a very liar
For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,
But slow in speech, yet sweet as spring-time
    flowers.
Thou canst not frown, thou canst not look askance
Nor bite the lip, as angry wenches will,
Nor has thou pleasure to be cross in talk.
But thou with mildness entertain'st thy wooers,
With gentle conference, soft and affable.

(II. i. 237-254).

With the rhetoric of courtly love, Petruchio asserts of Katherina everything Katherina knows to be false, and denies everything she knows to be true. In this context, thou, the pronoun of love and sincere emotion, becomes a vehicle for the expression of feigned affection. The whole wooing exercise is rendered ridiculous by the fact that besides being insincere it is also useless. Petruchio’s wooing of Katherina is completely superfluous: just a silly game. After all, there is no need for Petruchio to woo Katherina since Baptista, Katherina’s father, has given his consent to the marriage and the dowry has already been agreed upon. So what is the purpose of this wooing game? In Much Ado About Nothing, Benedick’s wooing of Beatrice becomes an occasion for a mutual display of wit, a clever verbal fencing in a game of one-upmanship. The aim of Petruchio’s wooing is more complex. Although it does show Katherina’s verbal agility, its main purpose is to mock and humiliate Katherina, who in spite of her shrewishness and her curstness is left without a say in the matter:

Petruchio:

Am I not wise?

Katherina:

Yes, keep you warm.

Petruchio:

Marry, so I mean, sweet Katherine, in thy bed.
And therefore, setting all this chat aside,
Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife; your dowry’r greed on;
And will you, nill you, I will marry you.
Now, Kate, I am a husband for your turn,
For by this light, whereby I see thy beauty,
Thy beauty that doth make me like thee well,
Thou must be married to no man but me.
For I am he am born to tame you, Kate,
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate
Conformable as other household Kates.

(II. i. 259).

In this final sprint of the wooing-scene, Petruchio’s thou is even more unnecesary, more false, more irritating. It only shows that will Katherina, nill Katherina, she will be Petruchio’s wife. The presence of thou reveals that in a patriarchal society in which women have no right to choose for themselves, linguistic structures can be manipulated to disguise the true system of power relations obtaining between women and their suitors. Women are ruled by men, their lives are in the hands of fathers, suitors and husbands but rhetorical language and the wooing pronoun help to sugar the pill. The social rite of wooing can then constitute a useful way of reinforcing the status quo of gender relations: women are wooed under the pretence that they can grant or refuse; but this position of power is fictitious because the real site of power is elsewhere. Wooing-scenes are nothing but language games.

The feigned affection conveyed by Petruchio’s thou to Katherina is even more obvious in Richard III I. ii, when Richard of York woos Anne Neville. Richard, like Petruchio, begins by addressing Anne with you but he soon shifts to thou and the shift coincides with the moment in which Richard begins to use the linguistic resources of courtly love: ‘Curse not thyself, fair creature - thou art both’ (I. ii. 132); ‘It is a quarrel most unnatural/ To be revenged on him that loveth thee’ (I. ii. 134-135); ‘Thine eyes, sweet lady, have infected mine’ (I. ii. 149). Like Petruchio, Richard is so confident of having already wooed and won that he offers his naked breast and his unsheathed sword to Anne; and he accompanies his action with rhetorical language and the pronoun thou, to counterfeit feelings which are false:

Richard:
Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword,
Which if thou please to hide in this true breast
And let the soul forth that adores the thee,
I lay it naked to the deadly stroke
And humbly beg the death upon my knee.
Nay, do not pause; for I did kill King Henry-
-But 'twas thy beauty that provok'd me.
Nay now, dispatch; 'twas I that stabbed young Edward
But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on.
Take up the sword again, or take up me.
(I. ii. 174-183).

Anne is offered the sword, the tool with which she is enabled to exert power but like the power to accept or refuse a suitor, it is a fictitious power. She is given a token of power, the sword, but she is denied the right to use it, since she is not entitled to administer justice and execute a murderer. So her refusal to exert the power she has apparently been offered is turned against her: it becomes evidence of her submission, her defeat. The next thing she does is to accept a ring from Richard. The wooing should then be over at this point. There is no need to woo when the wooed has already been won. And yet Richard continues to woo, with the rhetoric of courtly love and the pronoun thou, proving once more that his wooing is just a farce:

Richard:

Look how my ring encompasseth thy finger,
Even so thy breast encloseth my poor heart.
Wear both of them, for both of them are thine;
And if thy poor devoted servant may
But beg one favour at thy gracious hand,
Thou dost confirm his happiness for ever.
(I. ii. 203-208).

The role played by the pronoun thou in this farce is not insignificant. Angelo, Petruchio and Richard shift from you to thou when the wooing begins and they shift back to you when the wooing is over. The shift from thou back to you functions as a discourse marker which defines the boundary of the wooing-scene. The reappearance of the pronoun you signals the return to the established order. Like the revels of Twelfth Night, Shrove Tuesday or May Day, the wooing-scene constitutes a brief span of time during which power relations are momentarily turned upside down. In some of Shakespeare's plays,
the ritual of wooing appears to be just a show put on by men to make women believe they have power, to make them think that they are dominant when they are dominated, to persuade them that they can handle swords in a patriarchal society in which they are in fact handcuffed.

NOTES


5. See Yonglin, *op. cit.*