

'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 unkissed.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 inaccessible 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'.² 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.³ 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.⁴ *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 maidhood, 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).

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 unsoil'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 Katherina in *The Taming of the Shrew*. In II.i, Petruchio first addresses Katherina twice with *you* but he soon shifts to *thou*. Petruchio and Katherina are complete strangers, they cannot be on intimate terms since they have just met. This implies that Petruchio is taking a liberty in *thouing* Katherina. In fact, he is taking too many liberties because he gets told that he has no right to call Katherina 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 *you* were rough, and coy sullen
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'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 unnecessary, 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 adoreth *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 provokèd 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

1.- Quotations from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Taming of the Shrew* have been taken from the respective New Arden editions. Quotations from *Richard III* come from E. A. J. Honigmann's edition for the New Penguin Shakespeare.

2.- Byrne, St. Geraldine. *Shakespeare's Use of the Pronouns of Address; its Significance in Characterization and Motivation*. New York: Haskell House, 1970. First Published 1936. xxxii-xxxiii.

3.- The meaning of the pronouns of address has recently been discussed by Barber, C. "'You' and 'Thou' in Shakespeare's *Richard III*." *Leeds Studies in English*, NS, 12 (1981): 273-289; Brown, R. and Gilman, A. "Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies." *Language and Society* 18 (1989): 159-212; Hodge, R. I. V. and Kress, G. "The Semiotics of Love and Power: *King Lear* and a New Stylistics." *Southern Review* 15 (1982): 143-156; Leith, D. (1984) "Tudor London: Sociolinguistic Stratification and Linguistic Change." *MALS Journal* 9 (1984): 47-64; Wales, K. (1983) "'Thou' and 'you' in Early Modern English: Brown and Gilman Re-appraised." *Studia Linguistica* 37 (1983): 107-125; Yonglin, Y. "How to Talk to the Supernatural in Shakespeare." *Language in Society* 20 (1991): 247-261. Most of these recent studies review former literature on the field, but see also some of the seminal works on *you* and *thou*: Abbot, E. A. *A Shakespearean Grammar: An Attempt to Illustrate Some of the Differences between Elizabethan and Modern English*. Third edition. London: Macmillan, 1871; Brown, R. and Gilman, A. "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity" in Sebeok, T. A. (ed.) *Style in Language*. New York: MIT and John Wiley, 1960, pp. 253-276; Byrne, St. Geraldine. *Shakespeare's Use of the Pronouns of Address; its Significance in Characterization and Motivation*. New York: Haskell House, 1970. McIntosh, Angus "'As You Like It': A Grammatical Clue to Character". *A Review of English Literature* 4 (1963): 68-81; Mulholland, J. "'Thou' and 'You' in Shakespeare: a Study in the Second Person Pronoun." *English Studies* 48 (1967): 34-43; Quirk, R. "Shakespeare and the English Language" in Muir, K. and Schoenbaum, S. (eds.) *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 67-82.

4.- See Quirk, *op. cit.*, p. 70, Wales *op. cit.*, p. 121, and Leith *op. cit.*, p. 58.

5.- See Yonglin, *op. cit.*