“Thou” or “You”

One of the many subtleties that the Elizabethan audience would have appreciated in Shakespeare’s plays is the use of the pronominal pronoun. Many commentators offer a rather simplistic interpretation but, unfortunately for us, it is rather more difficult to interpret.

The extract below refers to “marked” and “unmarked” words. As I understand it modern linguistics says there is a hierarchy between apparent pairs or synonyms of words. So if, when I meet a friend, I ask “Are you well?” my friend accepts this as a commonplace greeting but if I ask “Are you unwell?” he’s likely to see it as a suggestion of the contempt he is bringing to his rival, the challenge to his rival, the fact that he is doing so in a social context and so no apparent contrast exists between them in the pronoun usage and so no opposition enters the situation. At a given moment both are using either you (as in Hal’s)

“How now, woolsack! What mutter you?” and Falstaff’s “You Prince of Wales!.. Are you not a coward?”II, iv, 127 ff) or else, as a little later in the same scene, they are both using thou (Falstaff’s “Dost thou hear me, Hal?”and the Prince’s “Ay, and mark thee too, Jack” ibid. 202).

The importance of the active contrast between you and thou is brought out excellently in the first scene of King Lear. Kent, Gloucester, Edmund and Lear all use you in speaking to each other as we should expect. Goneril, Regan and Cordelia address their father as you — again as we should expect. Lear addresses Goneril and Regan as thou, and again — from father to daughter — this is what we should expect. Against this background of perfect decorum and the fully expected, it should no doubt come as a surprise to us that Lear addresses Cordelia at first as you:

“what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?” (i, i, 84 f). So also 93 f.

It seems unlikely that these uses of you(r) are without significance in indicating a special feeling that Lear has for

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……..Scarcely less firmly ‘trodden under foot of men’ is our former awareness of another pronominal usage, the distinction between you and thou, though many studies have been published on this point, some of them noted below (p. 266). Even when we are intellectually aware of the distinction, however, it is hard to school ourselves to the appropriate reaction when we are in the theatre, and in any case there remain misconceptions among scholars themselves. It is often said that the old singular and plural are used in Shakespeare as they are used in Chaucer: and this is quite untrue; it is often said that in 1600 you was polite, formal usage but thou was familiar or insulting. This is a gross oversimplification: cf. McIntosh, Mulholland. The modern linguistic concept of contrast operating through marked and unmarked members can give us a truer picture. You is usually the stylistically unmarked form: it is not so much 'polite' as 'not impolite'; it is not so much 'formal' as 'not informal'. It is for this reason that thou can operate in such a wide variety of contrasts with it. At one extreme we have the solemnity and formality of religious discourse as in Edmund’s

“Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law My services are bound.” (King Lear 1 ii).

Then again we have the very antonym of this in pure contempt: there is Sir Toby's advice to Sir Andrew Aguecheek in drafting the challenge to his rival,

“Taunt him with the license of ink; if thou thou'st him some thrice, it shall not be amiss' (Twelfth Night 3, ii, 40 f).

But we need to notice that in this instance the device draws attention to the fact that while Andrew and Fabian are using the unmarked you to each other and to Sir Toby, Sir Toby is using thou to Sir Andrew with more than a suggestion of the contempt he is advising Sir Andrew to use with the count's serving man. It is important to realize that it is not Sir Toby's use of thou as such which conveys his lack of respect; it is the fact that he is doing so in a social context which makes it appropriate for other speakers to use you.

If we compare the exchanges between Falstaff and Prince Hal in Henry IV, we see sharply different values given to thou because the contrasts in which it operates are different. Both pass back and forth between the unmarked you and the marked thou of anger or intimacy: but there is no distancing between them in the pronoun usage and so no social opposition enters the situation. At a given moment both are using either you (as in Hal's

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the girl he calls “our joy” who has been, as France says, Lear’s “best object”, the argument of his praise, the balm of his age, the best, the dearest (ibid. 214-6). When, however, he is shocked by what he takes to be her lack of love, he uses thou — not now the thou of father to daughter but the thou of anger:

“But goes thy heart with this?” “Thy truth then, be thy dowert!” (104, 107).

This is what is meant by saying the importance lies in active contrast. Although you is the general unmarked form beside which the use of thou is conspicuous, the position is that in a relationship where thou is expected, you can likewise be in contrast and conspicuous. This becomes important again and again in the scenes that follow: Lear grows cool to Goneril and the change is reflected in the use of you:

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“Are you our daughter? ’Your name, fair gentlewoman?’ (i, iv, 218, 235), ……..

and he turns to Regan with his customary affectionate paternal thou for these two daughters:

“Beloved Regan, Thy sister’s naught” (n, iv, 131 f).

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“So fare you well...Fare thee well” (iv, v, 36, 40).

If it is only with difficulty that we today can respond to this contrast of you and thou, our sensitivity is still less in relation to the use of the second person pronoun with imperatives. The pronoun may have subject form or object form or it may be absent, and in some cases -17. according to Millward — all three possibilities can occur with the same


While it would be idle to pretend that these three forms of imperative were always carefully distinguished in meaning at this time, we must not assume that they were usually synonymous. Leaving out of account reflexive use like calm thee, it would seem that, beside an ‘unmarked’ imperative without any pronoun, the form with thou was emphatic; this is frequently clear from the metre or the context, as when the Second Murderer refuses to profit from the death of Clarence:

Take thou the fee, and tell him what I say. (Richard III i, iv, 275)