論　文

Thou and *You* in *The Beggar's Opera**

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I

John Gay's (1685-1732) *The Beggar's Opera* is one of the great successful comedies in the history of the London stage. The original production opened at the playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields on 29 January 1728, and ran for sixty-two performances in the first season.[1] The popularity of the play was due to its power to bring the audience to life. It was one of the satirizing dramas showing "vigorous and powerful attacks on a government which most of London hated"[2] and using the device of comparing statesmen to criminals.

Gay put lots of lively and funny, but real, scenes of the eighteenth century London underworld into the play, with most of its scenes laid in Newgate prison. He produces a kind of "an artistic heterocosm, a little world of its own, endlessly cheerful, yet always shadowed by betrayal, the pox, and the gallows."[3] There appear a lot of rustic or rough characters such as highwaymen, lower officials, rogues, and whores. In reality, no doubt, they did not speak like gentlemen or ladies in the polite world, but spoke with rough and vulgar expressions. Carey McIntosh comments on the eighteenth-century lower class people's language:

> In the very lowest social classes, among nonliterate working people and unemployed, English is entirely colloquial and entirely unregulated. Whatever got the message across was acceptable, including slang, profanity, dialect, thieves' cant, grunts, signs, gestures, jargon, and quotations from the Bible.[4]

The eighteenth century saw the middle class literate people follow the language regulations fixed by a plethora of grammarians. Charles Barber says that there were not many books called a *Grammar* until the eighteenth century, but that in that century "there was an absolute flood of them."[5] The people rushed to buy "the large number of handbooks on 'correct' or 'polite' English usage."[6] The cause of this phenomenon was explained by Barber:

> These prescriptive works had a quite overt class basis. They were written for the gentry, who represented perhaps ten per cent of the population, and aimed at codifying the usage of the upper classes. There are frequent references to the depraved language of common people, compared to the noble and refined expressions of the gentry.[7]

The eighteenth century classifies people in language as well as in class. So, the language of the common folks is different from that of the upper class people. Certain characteristics obviously appear in their speech.

In *The Beggar's Opera*, we notice that one character very frequently addresses the same character now with *thou* and now with *you* as follows:

> *Mrs Peachum*: What, is the Fool in Love in earnest then? I hate thee for being particular: Why, Wench, thou art a Shame to thy very Sex.
> *Polly*: But hear me, Mother--if you ever lov'd--
> *Mrs Peachum*: Those cursed Play-books she reads have been her Ruin. One Word more, Hussy, and I shall knock your Brains out, if you have any. (1.10)[8]

Mrs Peachum, a thieftaker's wife, scolds her daughter rudely for her falling in love with the young fop Macheath, by temporarily addressing her as *thou*, while Polly consistently addresses her mother as *you*, not *thou*. In the drama, we often find present such rare forms of the second person pronouns such as *thou*, *thy*, *thee*, and *ye* used when one character addresses another. The aim of this paper is to consider the switch either to the general second person pronoun *you* or to the archaic second person pronouns *thou* and *ye* as the characteristic of the common folk's speech in

the play.

Historically speaking, "In the earliest period of English the distinction between *thou* and *ye* was simply one of number; *thou* was the singular and *ye* was the plural form of the second person pronoun."[9] The use of the plural forms *ye* and *you* were also applied to a single person in the fourteenth century. Henry Cecil Wyld traces the phenomenon:

> The Pl. *yê, you* are already used, as in Mod. Engl., by Chaucer and other M.E. writers in polite and respectful address, applied to a single person. Davie (1307–27) uses both *þee,* Dat. S., and *ȝee,* Nom., in addressing our Lord; also *ȝou,* Dat. Pl., in addressing Edward II.[10]

Otto Jespersen explains the polite usage of the pronouns for the second person relating to its origin in history:

> The habit originated with the Roman Emperors, who desired to be addressed as beings worth more than a single ordinary man; and French courtesy in the middle ages propagated it throughout Europe. In England as elsewhere this plural pronoun *(you, ye)* was long confined to respectful address.[11]

The polite usage of the plural pronoun, by a single person, is associated with *the Royal "we" of majesty* by which kings and similarly exalted persons refer to themselves. The English language has such plural forms of pronouns that one person either speaks of himself or addresses another person in the plural.[12] Thus, the pronoun *you* was also destined to apply to a single person: it was used, in the social structure, by inferiors to superiors: by servants to their masters, by children to their parents, by a citizen to a nobleman, by a nobleman to the king. Also, between the upper-class people, *you* was used as the form of address between social equals.[13]

Thus, in the course of time, superior persons were addressed with the plural form *you*; the singular form *thou* was becoming the mark of the inferiority of the person spoken to. Barber remarks that "*thou* fell out of use in the standard language in the eighteenth century."[14] The eighteenth-century grammarian Robert Lowth (1710–1787)

notes in his *A Short Introduction to English Grammar: With Critical Notes* (1785) that "*Thou*, in the Polite and even in the Familiar Style, is disused, and the Plural *You* is employed instead of it; we say, *You* have; not *thou* hast."[15] It follows that the archaic form *thou* must have been a marked form and used in some specific situations in the century. Sterling Leonard comments on the usage of the second person pronouns:

> Of the forms effectually banned, a number, already long dead, were exhumed in the eighteenth century solely for critical obloquy. Such cases are clearly the confusion of *ye* and *you* and the mixture of *thou* and *you*, and probably the use of *which* referring to persons.[16]

Concerning the disappearance of *thou*, Jespersen says "politeness has led to the dropping of the forms *thou*, *thee*, and *ye* from the ordinary colloquial use."[17] In addition to the polite usage of the pronouns, the second person pronoun *thou* was actually becoming the emotional pronoun; the marker of familiarity or even intimacy or affection between the two interlocutors, or conversely of anger or contempt.[18] A. C. Partridge observes that "From the beginning of the seventeenth century a switch to either pronoun may be significant of emotional change in a speaker."[19] The eighteenth century is not when the pronoun thou was completely abandoned but when it survived with some new functions.

II

In *The Beggar's Opera*, it often seems that *thou* and *you* are used haphazardly, for sometimes a speaker switches from one to the other even within a single sentence. With closer examination, however, we find "most of such switches are motivated: there is a change of tone or attitude in the speaker."[20] Now we will look closely at the scenes where the second person pronouns are used in the drama, and see the eighteenth-century usage of the pronouns.

Polly loves Macheath secretly. Her mother Mrs Peachum encourages her boy Filch to report their love affairs:

> Come, *Filch*, you shall go with me into my own Room, and tell me the whole story, I'll give thee a Glass of most delicious Cordial that I keep for my own drinking. (1.6)

Mrs Peachum's voice becomes softer in changing *you* to *thee* as if she were a mother giving some sweets to her child to entice him to follow her wishes. The form *thee* expresses some affectionate feelings. We find this use of *thou* emotional. Partridge indicates "Changes from *you* to *thou* in the same sentence were usually indicative of rising emotion."[21] The *Thou* in this case "indicates intimacy, affection, tenderness."[22] Mrs Peachum often uses *thou* to suit the situation. When she discovers Polly's suitor is Macheath, she is disgusted at her imprudence in marrying the highwayman and cries angrily:

> If you must be married, could you introduce no-body into our Family but a Highwayman? Why, thou foolish Jade, thou wilt be as ill-us'd, and as much neglected, as if thou hadst married a Lord. (1.8)

The tone of Mrs Peachum's *thou* sounds awfully raged and astonished. Thus, *thou* is effectually used to express its user's emotion. The above *thou* like shows "anger, contempt, disgust."[23] Moreover, *thou* in the phrase "thou foolish Jade" is used in apposition to and preceding the noun phrase "foolish Jade" in the vocative to add more reproach or contempt. Mr and Mrs Peachum remonstrate Polly with such ill names as "Jade," "Hussy," and "Slut" in the play.

> *Peachum*: But if I find out that you have play'd the fool and are married, you Jade you, I'll cut your Throat, Hussy. (1.7)
> *Mrs Peachum*: You Baggage! you Hussy! you inconsiderate Jade! (1.8)

Polly hears of Macheath's inprisonment and hanging, and meets him to inform him of the situation and their imminent separation. He protests against this separation like a hero of a sentimental novel.

> *Macheath*: But to tear me from thee is impossible!
> *Polly*: Yes, I would go with thee, But oh!--how shall I speak it? I must be torn from thee. We must part.
> *Macheath*: How! Part!

Polly: We must, we must.-- My Papa and Mama are set against thy Life. (1.13)

In the couple's dialogue, pronoun usage properly expresses their great affectionate feelings. Macheath, however, is famous for being a playboy, as well. He gives other girls or whores generous words: "*Molly Brazen*! [*She kisses him.*] That's well done. I love a free-hearted Wench. Thou hast a most agreeable Assurance, Girl, and art as willing as a Turtle. (2.4)" After it becomes known he is a make-out artist, the lady's man is finally at a loss for words in the presence of his girlfriends, Polly and Lucy. They press him and swear in turns:

Polly: Am I not thy Wife?--Thy Neglect of me, thy Aversion to me too severely proves it.--Look on me.-- Tell me, am I not thy Wife?
Lucy: Perfidious Wretch!
Polly: Barbarous Husband!
Lucy: Hadst thou been hang'd five Months ago, I had been happy.
Polly: And I too. If you had been kind to me 'till Death, I would not have vex'd me (2.13)

At first Polly uses the possesive adjective *thy* three times expressing her heated emotions. After becoming calm, she changes *thou* to *you*.

The possesive pronoun *thine* appears once in the play. Polly knows Macheath will be sentenced to the gallows by her parents' charge, and tells him she must part with him. They cry over their grievious situation.

Polly: One Kiss and then--one Kiss--begone--farewell.
Macheath: My Hand, my Heart, my Dear, is so riveted to thine, that I cannot unloose my Hold.
Polly: But my Papa may intercept thee, and then I should lose the very glimmering of Hope. A few Weeks, perhaps, may reconcile us all. Shall thy *Polly* hear from thee? (1.13)

Throughout the play, the archaic pronoun *ye* appears only in the idiomatic phrase *look ye*. Wyld comments on *ye*:

Otherwise confusion exists among sixteenth and seventeenth century writes, *ye* and *you* being used indiscriminately as Nom. or Obj., Apart from liturgical use, *ye* only survives in Stand. Engl. in a few phrases: [h*áu* d*í* d*ū*], where [i], with loss of [j],

is due to its unstressed position, [þæŋkī] and [lɑkī], now old-fashioned, and obsolescent.[24]

Macheath is in Newgate prison, and is under its jailor Lockit. The highwayman complains about the uncomfortable jail and asks for lighter fetters for him:

> *Macheath*: Those, Mr *Lockit*, seem to be the heaviest of the whole sett. With your leave, I should like the further pair better.
> *Lockit*: Look ye, Captain, we know what is fittest for our Prisoners. When a Gentleman uses me with Civility, I always do the best that I can to please him. (2.7)

Here we see the darkness of eighteenth-century justice. Lockit naturally expects him to presnt a bribe as in the proverb "Money makes the mare to go." The phrase *look ye* is used to call attention to touchy situations, and appears several times in the play.

> *Mrs Vixen*: Look ye, Mrs. *Jenny* (2.6)
> *Lockit*: Look ye, *Lucy*--There is no saving him. (2.11)
> *Peachum*: Why, look ye, Mrs. *Dye* (3.6)

The interjection *pr'ythee* appears in the speech of one of highwaymen in the play. The gang assemble and talk about the news of the other members.

> *Ben Budge*: But pr'ythee, *Matt*, what is become of thy Brother *Tom*? I have not seen him since my Return from Transportation.
> *Matt*: Poor Brother *Tom* had an Accident this time Twelvemonth (2.1)

Ben and Matt are of the lower-classes, and we find the pronoun *thy* in Ben's speech. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*,[25] the interjection is "used parenthetically to add instance or deference to a question or request" (*pray* 8), and the form *pr'ythee* is "Archaic colloquialism for '(I) pray thee'" and the eighteenth-century form. Here the interjection *pr'ythee* suits Ben's position in society.

In comparison with *thou*, the pronoun *you* is used by the upper classes as the neutral, unemotional form of address between social equals. Even among the gang of highwaymen, they address one another with the pronoun *you* for its polite

usage. Macheath joins the gang.

> *Macheath*: Gentlemen, well met. My Heart hath been with you this Hour; but an unexpected Affair hath detain'd me. No Ceremony, I beg you.
> *Matt*: We were just breaking up to go upon Duty. Am I to have the Honour of taking the Air with you, Sir, this Evening upon the Heath? (2.2)

The tone of the dialogue sounds like that of the dialogue between knights assembled at the court. The rogues are very proud of their position as highwaymen, and their polite conversation sounds funny in that their doings are far from those of knights'.

Polly and Lucy's conversation has the same atomosphere as the above. After the affair among Macheath and them, the girls check each other's distance to him through the dialogue.

> *Lucy*: Dear Madam, your Servant.--I hope you will pardon my Passion, when I was so happy to see you last.--I was so over-run with the Spleen, that I was perfectly out of my self. And really when one hath the Spleen, every thing is to be excus'd by a Friend. Now *Roger*, I'll tell thee, because thou'rt my Son ...--I wish all our Quarrels might have so comfortable a Reconciliation.
> *Polly*: I have no Excuse for my own Behaviour, Madam, but my Misfortunes.--And really, Madam, I suffer too upon your Account. (3.8)

The girls speak like a upper-class lady, and use only *you* in addressing each other. It is of interest that Polly uses *thee* and *thou* in addressing her boy Roger. The class difference between the ladies and the servant is shown in their speech effectually.

Thus we see the pronouns of the second person *you*, *your*, *ye*, *thou*, *thy*, *thee*, *thine* in the drama. Those archaic pronouns appear in the various scenes in the drama. Historically, by the seventeenth century, *you* was the normal unmarked form of the singular pronoun in all classes without any pretentions to politeness, while *thou* was the form which carried such special implications as of emotion and social superiority.[26] The eighteenth century also had a transition period of the disuse of *thou*, which especially

strict grammarians promoted. The archaic pronouns, however, still had their own vigour giving emotiveness and familiarity to the tone of the conversation. Probably writers, including Gay, used the second person pronouns as the common folks did in their daily speech in the century.

Notes

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4. Carey McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Prs., 1986), pp. 7-8.
5. Charles Barber, *The English Language: A Historical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Prs., 1993), p. 204.
6. Barber, *English*, p. 205.
7. Barber, *English*, p. 205.
8. The edition used throughout is John Gay, "The Beggar's Opera," in Vol. II of *John Gay : Dramatic Works*, ed. John Fuller (Oxford: Clarendon Prs., 1983), pp. 1-65.
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12. Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles Pt. II* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1949), pp. 44-45.
13. Charles Barber, *Early Modern English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976), p. 208.
14. Charles Barber, "The Later History of English," in *The English Language*, Vol. 10 of *The Penguin History of Literature* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1933), p. 266.
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16. Sterling Andrus Leonard, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage 1700-1800* (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1962), p. 237.
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18. Jespersen, *Growth*, p. 232.
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20. Barber, *Early*, p. 210.
21. Partridge, p. 24.
22. Barber, *Early*, P. 209.
23. Barber, *Early*, p. 209.
24. Wyld, p. 229.
25. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Prs., 1989).
26. Barber, *Early*, p. 210.