



FAITH matters

May 15, 2023

Shakespeare, the Bible, and Thou

After parent–teacher conferences several years ago, a colleague of mine was mildly scandalized by a parent’s question about which *translation* of a Shakespeare play he was teaching. Well, Shakespeare was an English writer, and no translation was necessary! You would not be alone, though, if you have sometimes felt that a translation of Shakespeare was necessary, and indeed, there are editions that “translate” Shakespeare’s Early Modern English into contemporary English usage.

Many people are familiar with the Early Modern English of Shakespeare, but probably more are acquainted with the language of that period through their religious experiences with the Bible, prayer, and hymns. If it’s somewhat ridiculous to talk about a “translation” of Shakespeare, it’s truly absurd to refer to the Bible in its “original English,” when we know the Bible was written in Hebrew and some Aramaic in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament.

Shakespeare’s plays were written between 1590 and about 1611, and one of the great English translations of the Bible was the King James Version, approved by King James I in 1603 and published in 1611 (McArthur 120–121). The sixteenth century had seen the publication of several important English translations of the Bible, such as Tyndale’s New Testament, The Great Bible, The Geneva Bible, and The Bishops’ Bible (McArthur 59). Shakespeare himself, as we can tell from the plays, clearly knew The Geneva Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. In his book on the King James Bible, Alister McGrath suggests, “The King James Bible, along with the works of William Shakespeare, is regularly singled out as one of the most foundational influences on the development of the modern English language” (McGrath 253).

Old English dominated roughly from the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons to 1100, and Middle English lasted from about the Norman conquest in 1066 to 1400 or 1500 (Crystal 48). Between 1400 and 1800, Middle English developed into Modern English. The era of Early Modern English was accelerated by the introduction of printing in 1476, and the era encompassed Shakespeare and many of the English Bibles above, as well as the Renaissance and the Reformation.

One noticeable difference between Early Modern English and our current language behavior (Modern English) is in the use of second-person pronouns. We say *you* for both second-person singular and second-person plural, and for both nominative and accusative cases: “You will use various pronouns during the wedding ceremony” and “I will take you to the church on time.” In either example, *you* could refer to one person or to multiple people. For the genitive (possessive), we simply say *your*, whether we mean singular or plural. In Old English, *thou*, *thee*, and *thy* were used to address one person, while *ye*, *you*, and *your* were the plural forms. During the Middle English years, though, *you* (instead of *thou*) was often used as a polite form of address in the singular, perhaps because of the influence of French, which made a distinction between *vous* and *tu*. By the middle of the seventeenth century, *thou* was disappearing in favor of *you*.

Shakespeare’s plays, as well as the King James Bible, were written during years when both *thou* and *you* were used by English speakers but *thou* was declining. Shakespeare highlighted the differences between the polite and familiar pronouns and used them for characterization. *You* was used by characters who were addressing someone of higher social status and also when children addressed parents, or upper-class people addressed each other. *Thou/thee/thy* was used when characters addressed someone of lower social status, or when they had a close relationship, or when parents addressed children, or lower-status characters conversed with each other. Using the familiar *thou* could also signal a character’s contempt for the person addressed. In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, for example, Sir Toby knows he is likely to get Andrew Aguecheek (my translation: Sickface!) in trouble when he advises Sir Andrew (*TN* 3.1) that it would be a good idea to say *thou* to the Count’s Youth (the disguised Viola). When Hamlet taunts Ophelia, “Get thee to a nunnery! Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” (*Ham.* 3.1), he might reflect their close relationship, but he also means to be insulting, and he had earlier been addressing her as *you*. Shakespeare’s audiences were alert to the distinctions, and they would note any changes in pronoun usage, which might signal a change in the characters’ attitudes or relationships.

The King James Bible was also written during the time when use of the singular *thou* had mostly been replaced by *you*. Nevertheless, the King James Bible kept *thou* as the singular form of address “to God, a human being, or even the devil” (McGrath 267). One would think that translators who wanted people to be able to read the Bible in their own language, rather than in the original Hebrew or Greek, or in Latin translation, would want to match the language that people actually used in England in the early 1600s. But all of the Bibles for nearly a century had been revisions of other Bibles, and the specific charge of

the King James translators was that they should stay as close to the language of the Bishops' Bible "as the Truth of the original will permit" (McGrath 269). Later Bible translators tended to defer to the earlier Bibles as a matter of reverence or respect for tradition, and the King James translators didn't set out to have a profound impact on the development of the English language.

As I try for clarity in summarizing Early Modern English, I am met with one complexity after another! Even if the second person *thou* had been the more familiar term of address, the assumption might have been that it was more formal precisely because it was archaic. The religious hierarchy didn't always want a Bible in the vernacular, of course, and Bible printing wasn't legalized in England until 1537 (McArthur 120). The language was changing rapidly and moving toward standardization of spelling, grammar, and style, and political upheaval and religious reversals were always relevant during a time in England when people could be executed for the wrong views. King James I of England, formerly King James VI of Scotland (and son of Mary, Queen of Scots, who was executed in 1587) was presumed by Catholics to be more sympathetic to them than Elizabeth I had been, but he disappointed them when he was head of the Church of England. James disliked the Geneva Bible and its marginal notes and preferred the Bishops' Bible. Shakespeare had to be careful not to offend Queen Elizabeth prior to 1603, and then he had to avoid offending King James—and Shakespeare had to get past the censor, so he often had to imply indirectly without directly stating any criticism.

Even if you prefer the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, you've probably grown comfortable with the uses of *thou/thee/thy* in worship, prayer, and hymns. I like to think that the familiar *thou* is appropriate, given the intimate relationship that we have with God in prayer. That's fine for me, *now*, but it doesn't fully match the way the pronouns were used by English speakers in late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century England. Further, when we use the familiar *thou* as we address God, we certainly do not mean to overstate our status as human beings. If some of the facts seem contradictory, we could remember that even though *thou* was generally less formal than *you* in Early Modern English, published works, authors, and translators might nevertheless have deferred to older editions out of respect for tradition and out of the assumption that the older versions must have been more authentic.

You need not agree with me that all languages are beautiful and that the history of the English language is a fascinating subject, but you likely agree that our language behavior and understanding of language are important in a religious context, as they are in social, artistic, or political contexts. When we read or hear, "thou art with me, thy rod and thy staffe, they comfort me" (KJV), we should think about meaning, beauty, and devotion to God as we compare to "you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (NRSV). Communication of the Word of God is essential, but we would do well to remember the numerous human beings and centuries of human history that shaped the language of that communication.

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