

# Pronominal Power Play in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*

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## What's a pronoun?

- ✦ Pronouns are what we use to replace nouns.
- ✦ They come in first, second, and third person and can be singular or plural.
- ✦ In English today, we only have one second person pronoun, but that wasn't always the case.

## So what?

- ✦ There was a distinct difference between the two pronouns in Middle and Early Modern English.
- ✦ The social constructs in place during the time can be used as an analytical tool to look at period literature.

## The Play

- ✦ *The Witch* was written in the early seventeenth century and first performed in 1616.
- ✦ This was during the heyday of the witch prosecutions in England.
- ✦ The play follows four interconnecting storylines between characters of multiple social classes. These range from prostitutes to a duke and his duchess, as well as a witches' coven.
- ✦ The play is named after Hecate, the head of the witches' coven. She uses her magic to aid the other characters in their misdeeds, allowing them to surpass natural and social laws.
- ✦ In other words, her magic is power.

## The Author

- ✦ Written by Thomas Middleton
- ✦ 1580 – 1627
- ✦ Jacobean dramatist
- ✦ He also wrote masques and poetry
- ✦ He was one of the few playwrights who were successful with both comedies and tragedies



[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/Thomas\\_Middleton\\_1887\\_etching.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/Thomas_Middleton_1887_etching.jpg)

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Person Pronoun Over Time

	Old English	Early English	Middle / Early Modern English	Modern English
Singular	þu	thou	thou / you	you
Plural	ge	you	you	you

## Use of Thou and You

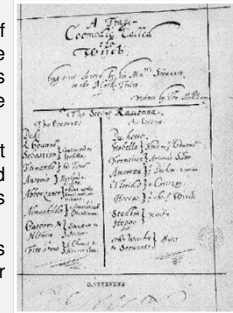
- ✦ **The you forms would normally be used:**
  - ✦ by people of a lower social status to those above them (e.g., ordinary people to nobles, children to parents, servants to masters);
  - ✦ by the upper classes when talking to each other, even if they were closely related;
  - ✦ as a sign of a change (contrasting with thou) in the emotional temperature of an interaction.
- ✦ **The thou forms would normally be used:**
  - ✦ by people of higher social status to those below them (e.g., nobles to ordinary people, parents to children, masters to servants);
  - ✦ by the lower classes when talking to each other;
  - ✦ in addressing God;
  - ✦ in talking to ghosts, witches, and other supernatural beings;
  - ✦ in an imaginary address to someone who was absent;
  - ✦ as a sign of a change (contrasting with you) in the emotional temperature of an interaction. (Reiff 70)

## Bibliography

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- ✦ Johnson, Anne Carvey. "The Pronoun of Direct Address in Seventeenth-century English." *American Speech* 41.4 (1966): 261-269.
- ✦ Reiff, Raychel Haugrud. "Choosing Thou or You to Reveal Ideal Relationships in 'The Knight's Tale.'" *Essays in Medieval Studies* (EssaysMS), 26 (2010): 69-84.
- ✦ "Thomas Middleton's *The Witch*." *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*. Ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997. 85-142. Print.
- ✦ Yonglin, Yang. "How to Talk to the Supernatural in Shakespeare." *Language in Society*, 20.2 (1991): 247-261.

## In the Play: Act 5, Scene 1

- ✦ An excellent example of pronoun usage and change demonstrating power roles can be seen in Act 5, Scene 1.
- ✦ Antonio has found that Aberzanes has impregnated his younger sister, and has called for him.
- ✦ Antonio is an upper class man, and Aberzanes is lower middle class.
- ✦ Handouts are located down below.



[http://www.tech.org/~cleary/witch\\_q.jpg](http://www.tech.org/~cleary/witch_q.jpg)

## Brief Analysis of the Scene

- ✦ The scene starts with Antonio welcoming Aberzanes into the room, using the formal pronoun "you".  
*Antonio: You are welcome, sir. (1)*
- ✦ Antonio challenges him to a sword duel, noting that Aberzanes holds a sword. He continues using the "you" pronoun.  
*Antonio: What blade have you got there? (4)*
- ✦ However, Aberzanes says that he can't draw it to fight, as it is nothing more than an accessory.  
*Aberzanes: To tell you truth, sir, 'tis only a holiday thing to wear by a man's side. (12-13)*
- ✦ At this point, Antonio grows angry and switches pronouns. By refusing to draw his sword, Aberzanes has lost his equality status.  
*Antonio: Draw it, or I'll rip thee down from neck to navel though there's small glory in't. (14-15)*
- ✦ Aberzanes continues to use "you" when speaking to Antonio, but Antonio has lost all respect for the other man.

## Conclusion

- ✦ Antonio's anger is obvious in the above scene, but the analysis of pronoun usage deepens the change.
- ✦ Even though Aberzanes had impregnated Antonio's sister, he was still enough of a "man" to be considered an equal. However, after refusing to draw his sword, he loses that privilege and never regains it.
- ✦ Similar situations of pronoun change being important can be seen in Act 1, Scene 2 and Act 5, Scene 2.