

The pronouns "you" and "thou" in much ado about nothing

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Historically, there has been a distinction between the pronouns “ thou” (“ thee”, “ thy”, “ thine”) and “ ye” (“ your”, “ you”), which later became “ you”. The use of one of these pronouns depended on social and pragmatic factors, including the position in the social ladder or the affectiveness that the speaker wanted to demonstrate (Fowler 1996; Culpeper 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the use of both pronouns by the main characters of William Shakespeare’s comedy “ Much Ado about Nothing”, Beatrice and Benedick, in the first scene of the fourth act. The interpretation of how these characters act and react is influenced by the representation of the play in the homonymous film by Kenneth Branagh (1993). In this scene, Benedick has discovered that Beatrice loves him. Meanwhile, Beatrice is enraged because her cousin has been publicly accused of cheating on her fiancé. Pronouns here are an accurate representation of these feelings.

To begin with, Beatrice addresses Benedick as “ you”. However, the choice of this pronoun does not have the same connotations during the whole scene. In the first sentences, the pronoun is used because the female character is of a lower status than him. Some researchers consider this pronoun a mark of dispassion, of lack of emotion (McIntosh 1963; Mulholland 1987, quoted from Culpeper 2002). It is noticeable that she does not use it to be less affective since she confesses her love for him using “ you”, but as a way of showing respect towards a superior in the social ladder.

BEATRICE: ‘ I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.’
(4. 1. 300-301)

Nevertheless, immediately after he rejects her request to kill Claudio, the pronoun is used to create distance between them, to be less affective towards him. It can even be considered a way to bribe Benedick to comply with her demand.

BEATRICE: I am gone, though I am here. There is no love in you. Nay, I pray you let me go. (4. 1. 307-308)

On the contrary, knowing that his feelings are requited, Benedick addresses Beatrice as "thou", a pronoun that may infer the sense of superiority by the speaker or that may be used to establish distance between both characters, yet this is not his intention. It is evident that Benedick is trying to demonstrate the affectiveness that he feels towards Beatrice, creating a more intimate atmosphere.

BENEDICK: Come, bid me do anything for thee. (4. 1. 302)

This attempt of intimacy, however, is futile once Beatrice loses her temper. The last appearances of this pronoun in the scene are expressed with the desperation of a man who has been asked to kill his friend by the woman he loves. He tries to appeal to the love that both of them have confessed to make her reconsider her decision.

BENEDICK: Tarry, good Beatrice. By this hand, I love thee. (4. 1. 339)

The insistence of Beatrice in her request provokes a shift from a pronoun to another; Benedick starts to address her as "you". He agrees to kill Claudio and that resolution turns the situation into a more formal one. The shift of

pronoun involves an emotional change of the character, in this case, he is establishing distance between them (Crystal 2003).

BENEDICK: Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wronged Hero? (4. 1. 343-344)

This distinction in the way Benedick addresses Beatrice is reinforced by the use terms of endearment. He begins addressing her as "sweet Beatrice", which later is substituted by the use of her name due to the desperation of the situation. Another term of endearment, "good Beatrice", is used to lure her to amend her decision before he decides to address her as "you".

To conclude, as it can be deduced from this paper, the differences between the pronouns "you" and "thou" in the play "Much Ado about Nothing" are not only related to the social class, but also to the context in which they are used. On the one hand, "you" is used by Beatrice as mark of subordination towards Benedick, although it later establishes distance and formality between both characters. On the other hand, "thou", which is reinforced by the use of terms of endearment, creates a more intimate setting for both lovers and expresses affectiveness. Address terms here are certainly an important aspect to understand the strong emotions portrayed in this scene.