The Usage of the Second Person Singular Pronoun *YE* as a Polite form of Address in Late Middle English

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The second person singular pronoun 'you' in modern English developed from the Middle English *ye* which was originally only plural. Though the distinction between *ye* and *thou* does not exist in Modern Standard English any more, a synchronic study of *ye* and *thou* in Late Middle English literature from a sociolinguistic point of view can help to explain the historic development and the survival of *ye* as a singular pronoun as well as explaining how it took over the function of *thou*. The use of the plural pronoun *ye* to refer to a singular person appeared in the Middle English Period. Used with increasing frequency, it finally expelled the original second singular pronoun *thou* from Modern Standard English.\(^1\) Besides the phonological reasons for this change\(^2\) the replacement of the original singular pronoun *thou* by the plural pronoun *ye* can be explained sociolinguistically with respect to politeness.

In Old English there were two second person pronouns, the plural *3e* and the singular *pu*, besides the dual pronoun *git*.\(^3\) In the early Middle

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1) In standard speech *thou* survives down to the 18th century.

2) As for phonological reasons for disappearance of *thou*, linguistic changes in verb conjugations should be considered. The verb form with *thou* is marked by an inflectional ending-*est* in the present tense, whereas the verb form with *ye* is not. The verb was unmarked for the first person singular and plural; second and third person plural; the third person singular, the ending was -*eth*. But by the end of the 16C the ending-*s* was regularly appearing in standard English, especially in informal registers, apparently spread from the northern dialects; and after the Restoration the-*eth* forms gradually disappear altogether. In contrast to the rest of the verbal paradigm, -*est* must appear increasingly archaic; and from the phonetic point of view more unwieldy, since it demanded an extra syllable (although syncope was common); and could result in awkward clusters (*reviseste*; cf. also past tense *pomisedst*, etc.)

3) The dual pronoun *git* did not survive beyond the thirteenth century. (Mustanoja, *Middle English Syntax*, 1960)
English period, because of partly the influence of French, the language of the court, the plural form of the second personal pronoun, *ye*, with its oblique case *you* and possessive *youre*, began to replace the singular forms *thou, thee, thy(n).* At the beginning it was employed to refer to a singular person in a very limited way similar to the use of the polite *vous* in French. In French the plural *vous* had already been used as a respectful or polite form of address.\(^5\)

The French practice of using *vous* influenced the English use of *ye* with a singular referent. However, the rules governing the selection of *thou* or *ye* as the appropriate form of address were not the same as those determining the alternation between *tu* and *vous* in French. A comparison of English translations with their French equivalents shows that there is no regular, mechanical substitution of a *thou* for a *tu* and a *ye* for a *vous*.\(^6\)

Many scholars have studied the English usage of the second singular person pronouns *ye* and *thou* independent of the French influence. Studies of the function of the second singular person pronouns *ye* and *thou* have been done by Kennedy (1915), who writes on the the thirteenth century usage, and Stidtson (1917), who writes on the fourteenth century usage. Based on their discoveries, Nathan (1957) writes on Chaucer's usage of *ye* and *thou* in the *Friar's Tale*. Walcutt (1935) and Johnston (1962) study the use of the second-person pronoun in *Troilus and Cressyde*. The most detailed analysis of the usage of the two second singular pronouns is, however, the one by William W. Evans, Jr. (1959), who examines the pronoun usage of the Gawain-poet in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In his dissertation he asserts that *ye* as the singular pronoun is "the norm in his romance," though "the historical singular-*thou*-was still the norm in colloquial speech."\(^7\) According to his conclusion, the Gawain-poet departs radically from fourteenth-century English reality in which the two second person singular pronouns were used altogether.

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4) Hereafter, for simplicity, I will use *ye* for three forms, *ye*, *you* and *youre*; *thou* for *thou*, *thee* and *thy(n).*

5) Arthur Garfield Kennedy, *Th Pronoun of Address in English Literature of the Thirteenth Century* (Stanford University, 1915) p. 23.
