



Early Modern English Inflectional Morphology: Not Just Another Pretty Spreadsheet

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“Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories....Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic.” Tolkien praises fantasy as an escape from poverty, oppression, and particularly the pressures of modern urban culture (*On Faerie Stories* 79). Archaism brings escape from modernity, comfort in those time-honored things which comprise the tale. Tolkien creates a diffuse mood of archaism throughout his legendarium with older language. Tom Shippey (2013) points out that Tolkien’s actual vocabulary is not obsolete, it’s the *style*, the syntax and morphology, which does the trick. His diction and style can easily be glossed by us Present English-speaking readers: forms old enough to have fallen out of every day use, but familiar enough for us to lose ourselves in the long-ago of the story, not in the confusion created by incomprehension.

Old English	Middle English	Modern English
500-1066	1066-1500	1500-present
680 - Caedmon’s Hymn	1066 - Battle of Hastings 1450 - Gutenberg’s printing press	1500-1700 - Early Modern English

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There are no hard dates for when one language ends and another begins in its place, of course. Language change is a constant, continuous, and dynamic process, so these dates are guidelines. The change from "mostly Middle English" to "mostly Modern English" moved with geography and the social classes of speakers. We're going to take from about 1500 to 1700 as Early Modern English.

Early Modern English follows just after the death of Mallory - it is the language of Spenser, Shakespeare, and the King James Bible translators. Every modern reader of English is familiar with the cadences, vocabulary, and structures of these writers, and these sounds evoke an archaic tone for modern readers. It's the sweet spot of both old-timey and recognizable which Tolkien used to create his archaic mood.

Early Modern English can be marked by syntax - the way that words go together. For example, during this time the Object-Subject-Verb sentence form was used more than in any other phase of English: "But the Palantir the king will keep" (*The Return of the King* 282).

It's easy to spot Morphology

"And *thou*, Melkor, *shalt* see that no theme may be played that *hath* not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that *attempteth* this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself *hath* not imagined."

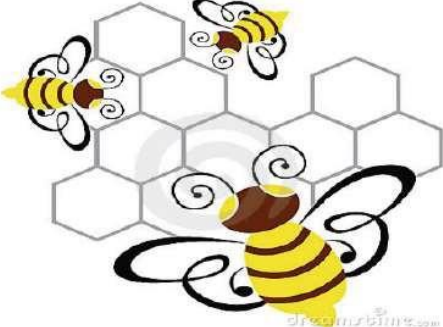
(*"Ainulindalë," The Silmarillion 17, emphasis Alden*).

It's even easier to spot Early Modern English by Morphology - the changes in words which change their functions. English - in all centuries - is an inflected language. Changed word forms which indicate changes in word function are *inflectional morphology*.

Some words have changed just a little!

Been, Eyen, Hosen, and Housen

Look! Bee-en!



Many of these inflectional forms have changed or dropped out of use since Early Modern English, such as *been*, *eyen*, *hosen*, and *housen*. Since it is an affix which usually changes, Present English readers still recognize and gloss the root words, use a few context cues to recognize the old plural forms of bee, eye, hose, and house and the Early Modern English forms simply add archaic flavor.

Morphology: Conjugating "To Knit"

	Singular	Plural
1 st person	I knit	We knit
2 nd person	You knit	You knit
3d person	He/she/it knits	They knit

	Singular	Plural
1 st person	I knit	We knit (-en, -eth, or -es)
2 nd person	Thou knittest	Ye knit (-en, -eth, or -es)
3d person	He/she/it knitteth	They knit (-en, -eth, or -es)

We say, "I knit" but "She knits", and that terminal "s" on *knits* indicates a change in the function of the word; in this case, *knit* has changed to having a third person singular subject.

In Early Modern English - and before - that inflection of the singular verb was even more obvious, I knit, thou knittest, she knitteth.

Declension of the Second Person Pronoun

	Singular	Plural
Subject	thou	ye
Object	thee	you
Possessive Adj	thy	your
Possessive Pronoun	thine	yours

Notice what happened with that pronoun? In Early Modern English, the second person personal pronoun declined thus.

Ye - the plural subject - dropped out of use after 1600, so it is a clear marker for Early Modern - or earlier - English.

The singular forms were also used less and less throughout the Early Modern English years. By 1700 those singulars were used for animals and children; only Quakers used *thou*, *thee*, *thy* in their former manner.

Throughout the *Ainulindalë*, Tolkien does not deviate from the forms in this table.

In the *Quenta Silmarillion*, the Elves use these forms almost all the time, the noble Men use them less, and the common Men not at all.

Great - we found a pattern - we've spotted the Early Modern English forms which create archaic mood, and we discovered how Tolkien used them to define classes and races of characters. Can we search these patterns even more deeply?

In the "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" (*Morgoth's Ring* 301-366) Finrod, High King of the Noldor, and Andreth, a noble woman famous for her wisdom, discuss philosophy and cosmology; almost the entire thing is dialogue. Of course they use these Early Modern English forms of the second person pronoun.

Beyond race and class, in this story Tolkien uses these forms even more subtly. Finrod's manner of addressing Andreth changes over the course of the story, indicating a change in Finrod's intentions and feelings toward Andreth.

*Tricksy passages in
The Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*

"What do ye know of death? Ye do not fear it, because you do not know it."

"What do ye ^{you} know of death? Ye do not fear it, because ~~you~~ ^{ye} do not know it."

In note 5, on the "Athrabeth," Christopher Tolkien writes: "The typist of C replaced the first *ye* by *you*; my father let this stand, but corrected the original occurrence of *you* to *ye*. On the opening page of the typescript he noted that *ye* is used for the plural only, and that *you* represents the Elvish pronoun of polite address," while *thou*, *thee* "represent the familiar (or affectionate) pronoun" (*Morgoth's Ring* 326). This distinction is not always maintained in the manuscript; but in a number of cases *you*, where *ye* might be expected, may be intended, and I have only corrected the forms where error seems certain." I clarify - *you* as a subject represents the singular Elvish pronoun of polite address. *Ye* is always the plural.

Tolkien continues to explain his father's usage of *thou*, *thee*, *thy* as well as the unusual use of it in another note:

The sentence 'But say not *thou* to me, for so he once did!' was an addition to the manuscript; Finrod has begun to address Andreth as *thou* from shortly before this point. But from here to the end of the text the usage is very confused, inconsistent in the manuscript and with inconsistent emendation to the typescript (both *thou* to *you*, and *you* to *thou*); it seems that my father was in two minds as to which forms Finrod should employ, and I have left the text as it stands (328).

I'm absolutely intrigued. I believe that rather than being "in two minds," Tolkien was absolutely clear on which form he wished to use, and moved between *you* and *thou*, *thee* with great deliberation.

So, of course, I made a spreadsheet... I make jokes about my spreadsheets - but really they're simply a tool for finding patterns in the text:

- There are 28 uses of the intimate singular *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine*; none of these are in question.
- There are 36 uses of the subjective case of the plural *ye*, all clear
- The subjective case of the formal singular *you* is used 70 times. I assume that the possessive and objective cases of *you* and *ye* are identical and therefore ambiguous since there is no reference to them, so I have not used them for my analysis. Forty nine times, *you* unambiguously indicates the subject form of the singular second person formal pronoun.

You is used six times in a manner which seems to be in error. Logic dictates that *ye* was intended in five of these; they are probably errors between Tolkien's hand and the typist's automatic use of *you* which Christopher Tolkien noted.

YOU is used five times when it is unclear whether the subject should be Andreth individually or the whole race of Men. Let's take these as singular will take them as accurate.

But remember that sixth time which looked like an error? Consideration of the text and subtleties of Quenya indicates that the last one is actually proper:

- "And not long are the years since you first met and your hands touched in this darkness" (323).

Finrod is speaking of Andreth and her sweetheart Aegnor. I expect to read "since *ye* first met."

Declension of the Second Person Pronoun...
translated from Quenya

	Singular	Dual	Plural
Subject	thou	you	ye
Object	thee	you	you
Possessive Adj	thy	your	your
Possessive Pronoun	thine	yours	yours

However, Quenya does have a dual number (Renk), used for two persons as distinct from a plural, and of course these characters were speaking in Quenya - the published work is merely a translation into Modern English. The editor gives us no indication of how Tolkien translated his dual pronouns in English. I posit that *you* in this line is proper, distinguishing the dual from *ye*, which everywhere else has referred to the entire race of Men.

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order	page		Comment	Unambiguously Thou	Ambiguously you - formal
110	324	If his heart ruled, he would have wished to take thee and flee far away		x	
111	324	Forsaking his kin, and thine.		x	
112	324	What of thee to thine?		x	
113	324	Thou has said thyself that there is no escape		x	
114	324	The Eldar have one kind, and ye another;			
115	325	So you feel now.	rebuke		x
116	325	But do you think of him?	rebuke		x
117	325	But would you wish that Elves and Men had never met?	giving up/getting distance		x
118	325	Is the light of the flame, which otherwise you would never have seen, of no worth even now?	giving up/getting distance		x
119	325	You believe yourself scorned?	giving up/getting distance		x
120	325	He would not have run before thee		x	
121	325	He would have stayed at thy side		x	
122	325	To uphold thee		x	
123	325	Then pity thou wouldst have had ...		x	
124	325	He would not have thee so shamed		x	
125	325	Now he will ever rememer thee in the sun of the morning		x	
126	325	And that last evening by the water of Aeluin in which he saw thy face		x	
127	325	Mirrored with a star caught in thy hair		x	
128	325	I might as well tell thee not to weep.		x	
129	325	In every stroke that he deals he see the Emeny wholong algo did thee this hurt.		x	
130	325	Andreth adaneth, the life and love of the Eldar swells much in memory; and we (if not ye) would rather have a memory that is fair...			
131	326	But you are not for Arda	formal, but it's a blessing		x
132	326	Whither you go	formal, but it's a blessing		x

We have remaining the section near the end, of which Christopher Tolkien writes "... it seems that my father was in two minds as to which forms Finrod should employ" (328). Crazy like a fox.

Finrod begins to address Andreth with *thou, thee, thy* only after Andreth cries out and weeps: "'Is there no bridge but mere words?' And then she wept again" (323). Andreth now grieves this separation by war and mortality from her beloved, and Finrod responds tenderly. Of course he uses the familiar, intimate forms of address *thou, thee* in trying to comfort her, his "beloved *adaneth*."

From Andreth's outburst to the end of the work, Finrod uses an intimate, personal, and caring tone, characterized by the use of *thou, thee, thy*. His use is perfectly clear and unambiguous, enhanced by the matching Early Modern English verb form. 'Yet then thou wert a maiden, brave and eager...'

After her outburst and weeping, Finrod does revert and call Andreth *you* - the singular formal - ten times.

"If I could speak any comfort, you would deem it lordly from one on my side of the sundering doom" (323). Since he is trying *not* to sound lordly, Finrod uses the formal register, lest he be misinterpreted as speaking down to Andreth. He has acknowledged that her bitterness colors everything she has said and understood in the conversation so far, and he is speaking carefully.

Finrod even uses both *you* and *thou* in a single paragraph.

Rebuke and Re-engagement

'Maybe not,' said Finrod. 'So you feel now. But do you think of him? He would not have run before thee. He would have stayed at thy side to uphold thee. Then pity thou wouldst have had in every hour, pity inescapable. He would not have thee so shamed. (p. 325)'

Even here, Finrod's word-choice is absolutely deliberate. "So you feel now. But do you think of him?" (325). These words gently rebuke Andreth; Finrod chooses to use *you* to create distance between Andreth and his words, to keep her from feeling them too bitterly. Then he speaks on his brother's behalf, making his brother's case as a loving husband. Finrod's choice to return to *thee* closes that distance-just-created, as though he were physically leaning forward to take her hand and speak to her grieving heart.

Near the end of their conversation, Finrod clearly pulls back again to the formal register.

His speech indicates that he is frustrated with his inability to convince Andreth of the truth of his words. He is respectfully withdrawing from the field of debate lest it become quarrelsome or more hurtful.

At the end of the "Athrabeth," Finrod closes with a blessing. He repeats *you* three times speaking directly to Andreth, and the entirely appropriate formal register marks his words as benediction.

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Tolkien doesn't tell us what the characters are feeling, that's an amateur's move. He didn't show us anything other than tears once and a held hand once. Could these complexities of relationship be encoded in the grammar for us readers to understand on the visceral level?

So, I did an experiment. I gave those last few pages to two readers who are not actors. I gave them no stage directions except this:

- When Finrod says THOU, THEE, he was to lean in and create intimacy
- When he said YOU, he was to create distance and respect

Let's see how they did...



http://www.mythgard.org/?attachment_id=7001

In the "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth," Tolkien uses *thou* and *you* to indicate the dynamic relationship between Finrod and Andreth. Finrod uses the different inflections to connote the balance of his caring for and respect for Andreth as she negotiates her complex emotions. Tolkien's linguistic subtlety pulls our heartstrings without saying one extra word - by embedding the deeper message of the "Athrabeth"—the eternal connectedness and sundering divide between Humans and Elves - in his grammar.

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