

The Grandeur of the Authorised Version

2011 sees the 400th anniversary of the publication of the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible. We are already hearing and reading pieces by the great and the good championing its merits ~ which are many. For its day it was an excellent effort and it has shaped both religion and language in Britain since 1611. However, not is all that it seems. This article, which I wrote in 1980, when the Alternative Service Book was being introduced, suggests that the AV, and to a lesser extent the BCP used language in a rather different way from Shakespeare, with whose splendours they are often compared. Whatever the merits of each of these corpora of literature, it is a mistake to bracket them together as all of a single kind. Hence my title for the piece ~ “The Languages of Cranmer and Shakespeare.” I have made some minor stylistic corrections to my original text, and there are a couple of comments (in this typeface) indicating where I have gained additional information.

Greg Forster. 24th Nov. 2010.

THE LANGUAGES OF CRANMER AND SHAKESPEARE.

G.S.F.

Comparison is often made between the language of Shakespeare and that of the King James Bible (AV) and the 1662 Prayer Book. So I decided to look more closely at some Shakespeare, and compare the two. I used Henry IV part ii, partly because I had a copy to hand, and also because it moves from palace to pub quite freely, and might be taken to reflect English usage in 1597 at various levels of society. It does not, however, reflect dialect variations, so far as I can see. The Northerners in the play are not obviously using language different from the Londoners.

I found it difficult to follow, despite the fact that I have acted in it, and have read it in this light before. I am sure that even with slow reading I missed many of the jokes, and much of the nuance in the more serious speeches. While not a foreign language it was strange language to me. This would be partly due to the change in the meanings of words, or their lapse from use altogether, and partly because of the change in patterns of speech and sentence construction.

I now understand, also, that Shakespeare invented many words which did not in fact enter the common language.

Henry VI ii dates from c.1597. The Book of Common Prayer dates for the most part from 1552, though it was reissued in its present form in 1662. Over this span of 110 years the English language changed considerably. 1662 BCP does not correspond to the language of Pepys' diary, but then it is not likely to have done so, belonging a century before. But neither does it correspond to the language of Shakespeare only half a century after Cranmer. I will demonstrate this with reference to the very obvious indicators of verbal forms and personal pronouns.

BCP uses *Thou* and *Thee* at all times as the second person singular with the verbal ending *-est* or *-st*. In the second person plural *Ye* is the nominative, and *You* the accusative. In the Third Person singular the verbal ending is always *-eth* or *-th*, in the present tense. Shakespeare's use is different, and more complex. *You* is both nominative and accusative in the plural. The 3rd sing. ending is usually *-es* or *-s*, except in words like *doth* and *hath*, which are somewhat irregular anyway.

Shakespeare's usage for the 2nd singular is complex. Even within one conversation one speaker can shift from *you* to *thee* and back in addressing the same person. However, the following points can be made; i) *You* is the normal respectful form. An inferior addressing his superior will always use '*you*'. '*Your Worship*' is always the correct form, never '*Thy Worship*'. ii) *You* also appears to be the correct form between husband and wife, as seen in Northumberland's talk with his lady. iii) *Thou* is used by superiors to their inferiors; a lord to a servant, or even the King to his son, who has just been caught, as it seems, stealing the crown ~ but also after he is forgiven. iv) *Thou* is used disparagingly. The prince addresses his father as *you*, but the crown, scathingly, as *thou*. The archbishop of York, after addressing his fellow conspirators as *You*, launches into a tirade against the vulgar mob (seen as a single individual) using *Thou*. Here I wonder whether Shakespeare is also actually 'taking off' the new ecclesiastical language. v) *Thou* is normal in pub (whorehouse) banter, but is dropped when the landlady wishes to be polite to her customer. vi) *Thou* is the form between 'buddies'. Poins addresses Prince Hal as *You* until the latter has shown that he is being pally, but later in the scene the Prince hints that come his kingship the palliness will be over, and Poins lapses back to *You*.

It is this last usage which is nearest to Cranmer's. It corresponds to the use in middle English (eg. Chaucer — a Londoner) in which *Thou* is the word of closeness, and *You*/*Ye* even in the singular the more distant. Cranmer's *Thou/thee* indicates the closeness of the worshipper to God and of the pastor to his flock. Even 50 years later this was becoming obsolete. It is retained now only in northern dialect (where correct use would be e.g. *Tha knows*, for BCP *Thou knowest*) where *You* is used for the outsider who may not know the dialect, and *Tha* with one's mates.

The mention of dialect brings out another point. Cranmer's book was a southerner's book. His use of *Thou*/*Ye* holds good for both Chaucer (southern) and the author of *Sir Gawain & the Green Knight* (North Cheshire) However the third person *-eth* ending is more distinctly regional; the north has always used *-es*, as seen in the *Gawain* Author's *-es* or *-e3*. (*-e3* = *-es* in plural nouns)

So where, in all this, does the King James/Authorised Version bible come? It uses *Thou/Thee* for all singulars and *Ye/You* for all plurals. Thus it does not correspond to the almost contemporary Shakespeare, but superficially appears to match Cranmer, except that it draws no distinction between intimate and non -

intimate conversations, honour or insult. I would suggest that its usage is in fact modeled not on English at all, but on Greek and Hebrew, which do not have this distinction between intimate and distant in the 2nd Sing. To ascertain this for certain one would have to study the documents indicating the intentions of the translators, and also of their predecessors. I have neither the pre-AV texts, nor the reference books, to go into this further. The bible used in the 1549 prayer book, like AV, follows 'translators' usage of *thou* for singular and *ye* for plural.

I have recently seen a copy of Tyndale's 1526 New Testament, in which the *ye/you, thee/thou* usage is the same as AV, and 3rd singulars are *-eth*. The modern introduction describes Tyndale's tribulations as a refugee translator, but does not seem to refer to his translation principles. His own preface is not reproduced.

What conclusions may be drawn from what I have said about use of those elements of our language in worship today? Probably nothing is proved directly, but a number of myths are removed.

i.) The modern use of *Thee* and *Thou* as exalted language either (rarely) in poetry or (more often) in hack verse, or in addressing the Almighty, is a complete reversal probably of Cranmer's and certainly of Shakespeare's intended usage.

ii.) One of the most significant contributions of the AV and its predecessors, and also the BCP, to the development of the English language is the *destruction* of the subtlety found in the Shakespearian use of *Thee/thou*, and so it paves the way for its complete abandonment in modern standard English except ecclesiastically. Such are the dangers of 'translationese'

Perhaps those matters are best left to the professors of English who indicated how they value of the BCP & AV in a recent petition, but do not, so far as I know, include them in their curricula. In a recent radio broadcast the recent Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, did in fact indicate that as a student he had studied the AV as a literary text.

We may evaluate the use of *Thou* and *You* in our contemporary worship, and if *Thou* scorns right, in the light of its contemporary connotations, and the theology we wish to express, then so be it. We should not, however, think that by keeping to the words of the BCP we are holding true to its writer's intentions.