

## Formal & Informal Address in Shakespeare's *Othello*

In the Renaissance, there were two forms of second-person address—the **formal** and the **informal**. *You* was the formal form of address, and *thou* was the informal or familiar.

- The **formal** form of address was used when an inferior was talking to a superior, when two business colleagues who were not close friends were speaking, or when the speaker wanted to maintain a distance. It was also the standard way for the upper classes to talk to each other.
- The **informal** was more intimate, to be used among friends, family members, and persons to whom the speaker wanted to imply closeness. *Thou* was also used by people of higher rank to those beneath them, and by the lower classes to each other.

**Read the passages below and discuss Shakespeare's usage of the formal and informal address and how that affects how we understand the meaning of the exchanges below. Address such issues as characterization, tone, audience, and mood.**

from Act I, scene i

*RODERIGO*

Tush! never tell me; I take it much unkindly  
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse  
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

*IAGO*

'Sblood, but you will not hear me:  
If ever I did dream of such a matter, Abhor me.

*RODERIGO*

Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.

from Act I, scene iii

*RODERIGO*

Iago, --

*IAGO*

What say'st thou, noble heart?

*RODERIGO*

What will I do, thinkest thou?

*IAGO*

Why, go to bed, and sleep.

*RODERIGO*

I will incontinently drown myself.

*IAGO*

If thou dost, I shall never love thee after. Why,  
thou silly gentleman!

*RODERIGO*

It is silliness to live when to live is torment; and  
then have we a prescription to die when death is our  
physician.