CHAPTER FIVE

Pronoun History

Pronoun forms are traditionally grouped as personal, possessive, reflexive, demonstrative, interrogative, and indefinite; and perhaps it is well to maintain these classifications for purposes of discussion of English pronoun history. One must note, however, that pronoun development in early English is far from uniform for these various categories. For some, such as the personal pronoun, the inflections have been quite well preserved. For others, such as the demonstratives, erosion has been considerable. Let us consider the groups in turn, using the Old English paradigms as a basis.

The personal pronoun in Old English includes the noun concepts of number, case, and gender, and additionally

that of person: *first* (I/we), *second* (you), and *third* (he/she/it/they). Number involves an aspect familiar to students of certain modern European languages but long gone from English, the *dual*, a set of forms used to indicate a special two-person relationship. The French second person form *tu* or the German *du* convey something like the sense of the Old English. (Obviously, a proper young Frenchwoman would balk, officially at least, at being addressed as *tu* on a first date.) In Old English, a full set of dual forms exist but are seldom encountered even at this early stage. In Ælfric's *Genesis*, Abraham addresses or refers to Isaac in the dual, but we may fairly assume that this special numerical concept was on its way out of the language even in its beginnings.[1] The Old English personal pronoun is declined as follows:

FIRST PERSON

	Singular	*Dual*	*Plural*
NOM.	ic	wit	wē
GEN.	mīn	uncer	ūre
DAT.	mē	unc	ūs
ACC.	mē	unc	ūs

SECOND PERSON

	Singular	*Dual*	*Plural*
NOM.	þū	git	gē
GEN.	þīn	incer	ēower
DAT.	þē	inc	ēow
ACC.	þē	inc	ēow

[1] We may assume, however, that the dual played some regular or considerable part in the parent Germanic.

THIRD PERSON

	Singular			*Common Plural*
	masc.	*fem.*	*neuter*	
NOM.	hē	hēo	hit	hīe
GEN.	his	hire	his	hiera
DAT.	him	hire	him	him
ACC.	hine	hīe	hit	hīe

A glance at these forms will reveal numerous obvious transferences into our modern speech. The first person forms *mine, me, we, our, us*; the second person *you, your*;[2] the third person *he, his, him, her* are all fairly apparent from the Old English. We must account then for the seemingly exceptional or unusual forms here.

Ic will not seem strange to the student of modern German; it is pronounced very like *ich*. Interestingly, the conservative Germanic Icelandic has a velar *k* in its first person masculine nominative, e.g., *ek*, certainly the proto-Germanic velar for the form, and the Germanic equivalent to Indo-European velar G (ego) under Grimm's Law. Modern English *I*, then, represents the end of a process of elimination: *ik, ic, I*, with Icelandic and modern German retaining the hard and soft consonants accompanying the vowel.

Analogy must account for the displacement of *gē* by *ēow* in the second person plural nominative, and likewise *hine* by *him* in the third person masculine accusative. The modern feminine *she* has never been fully accounted for, but it may

[2] Other of these forms, e.g., *þū, þīn, þē, gē*, survive today as Quakerisms.

reasonably be considered a fusion of the Old English third person feminine nominative *hēo* and *sēo*, a feminine nominative from the demonstrative pronoun declension.[3] The neuter *hit* was to lose its initial *h* in Middle English, although Chaucer and early Modern English occasionally disclose the older form, which still survives in the rustic American South ("Hit looks like rain"). The modern neuter possessive *its* may be accounted for by analogy with *-'s* from the Old English Class I noun declension (*it's* was the usual spelling for the form until about 1800); and it must have had to do with the decline in early English of grammatical gender and the desire to distinguish the natural neuter from the masculine. We find *it* ("by it young") and *his* ("that little candle throws his beams") as neuter possessives in Shakespeare.

The third person plural forms always occasion comment in that the Modern English *they, their, them* are Scandinavian (þei, þeir, þeim) replacements of the Old English. If the Old English forms had prevailed we would today employ *hi, here, hem*. Late Middle English sometimes offers a combination of the two languages: *thei, here, hem*.

The Old English possessive pronouns are mainly the genitive forms of the personal pronouns, e.g., *mīn, þīn, ūre, ēower, his*. An old reflexive form *sīn* sometimes functions for the third person possessive concept, masculine and feminine singular and plural. The possessive adjective forms (*my, thy*) develop in Middle English as the result of the pronominal *-n* dropping out, first when followed by nouns beginning with a consonant, then eventually by any nouns.

[3] We assume here the need to distinguish the feminine *hēo* from *hē*.

Early Modern English occasionally shows the pronoun ending in the adjective position (*mine* host), but since the seventeenth century the pronoun and adjective forms for the possessive have been regularly distinguished.

The history of the reflexive is a fusion of *self*, originally an adjective, with a preceding pronoun. Old English *ic self* is nominative for both pronoun and adjective. The modern equivalent *myself* suggests that somewhere in its development (probably in late Middle English) *self* was regarded as a noun modified by the possessive adjective. So too with *ourselves, yourself*, and *yourselves*. Thus, the occasionally heard, and grammatically "incorrect" *hisself* would appear to be logical for the third person; the regularly accepted *himself* actually casts *self* back into its original adjective role.[4]

The demonstrative pronoun in Old English consists of two sets of forms. These forms do a kind of double duty as adjectives or articles. The paradigms are as follows:

se (that, the)

	Singular			*Common Plural*
	masc.	*fem.*	*neuter*	
NOM.	se	sēo	þæt	þā
GEN.	þæs	þære	þæs	þāra
DAT.	þǣm	þære	þǣm	þǣm
ACC.	þone	þā	þæt	þā

[4] In the Biblical "Ætiewede se coccel *hine*" (the cockle showed itself, lit. *him*), we get the original sense of the pronominal reflexive.

þes (this)

	Singular			*Common Plural*
	masc.	*fem.*	*neuter*	
NOM.	þes	þēos	þis	þās
GEN.	þisses	þisse	þisses	þissa
DAT.	þissum	þisse	þissum	þissum
ACC.	þisne	þās	þis	þās

When we recognize that *se* and *þes* survive in Modern English only through the neuter singular nominative and accusative, we are confronted with perhaps the most extreme simplification in inflection in all of English language history. The modern German still has its *der, die, das* complication for the definite article, and the Romance languages have their gender agreement between definite article and noun; but Modern English takes the article for granted as probably the simplest of all grammatical concepts. In Old English the *se* declension, especially, is wide ranging indeed. Its forms could particularize, in the modern demonstrative sense ("*þæt* was god cyning," that was a good king), or simply function as a personal pronoun. The following sentence from the *St. Matthew Gospel* illustrates usage of *se* as both a personal and relative pronoun and as an article, and also shows *þes* as an adjective: "*Ælc þāra þe þās* mīn word gehīerþ, and *þā* wyrcþ, biþ gelīc *þǣm* wīsan were, *sē* his hūs ofer stān getimbrode." (Each of those that hear these my words and follow [lit., work] them, be like the wise man who built his house on stone.) *þāra* (of those), a genitive plural, is a personal pronoun here, possessing *Ælc* (each). *þā* (them) is also a personal pronoun, with *word* (words) as its accusative neuter plural antecedent.

þǣm (the) is a definite article, modifying the dative masculine singular *were* (man).[5] *Se* (who) is a relative pronoun, having reference to *were* in the main clause. *þās* (these), as a form of *þes*, functions as an adjective here, modifying *word*. The place of *se* in early English grammar is further complicated by the fact that while it yields the Modern English *that* from the neuter singular, we must look elsewhere for our modern *the*. The most frequently used relative pronoun in Old English is the undeclined *þe* (who/which/that). By analogy with this form, and from the initial *þ* of many of its singular and plural forms, *se* becomes *þe* in Middle English.[6]

In addition to the above paradigms for *se* and *þes*, there exist for each in the singular, separate instrumental forms. *þȳ* and *þȳs* are among the few distinct instrumental forms in Old English, where the dative case regularly includes the instrumental function. Thus, in the Modern English *the sooner the better*, the first article goes back to the notion of *þȳ sōnra*: (because) the sooner (therefore) the better.

The Modern English interrogative pronouns *who, which*, and *what* derive from Old English *hwā, hwylc*, and *hwæt*. The paradigms for the first and third of these are clearly related, as masculine and neuter respectively:

masc.		*neut.*
hwā	NOM.	hwæt
hwæs	GEN.	hwæs
hwǣm	DAT.	hwǣm
hwone	ACC.	hwæt

[5] Cp. the early Modern English "like unto the man."

[6] A phrase like *ye olde hocke shoppe* actually shows a misreading of *þe* and has nothing to do with any historical *y* sound here.

Hwylc is patterned according to one of the two Old English adjective declensions.[7] Our modern adverbs *why* and *how* were originally instrumental forms in the interrogative declensions. *Who* deserves comment in that, unlike *what*, it broadens its function from interrogative to relative.[8] For Middle English, the neuter singular *þæt*, from the *se* declension, served as the basis for a general relative for all genders, much as *þe* had for Old English. In early Modern English *who* and *whom* (from the dative singular of *hwā*) occur as relatives ("Who steals my purse steals trash," "her Maiestie, whom abruptely he terneth Elysa"). *Which*, too, assumed a relative function in early Modern English, mainly for neuter antecedents (but note "Our Father, *which* art in heaven").

The indefinite pronoun forms in Old English are quite numerous and may best be represented as evidence of a particular strength of the earliest phase of the language, the development of compounds. Around the roots *hwā*, *hwæper* (lit., whether, which of two), *hwylc*, and *wiht* (whit/wight) are built the following: *æghwā* (each one), *æthwā* (each one), *ahwā* (any one), *gehwā* (every one); *æghwæper* (each of two), *ahwæper/ohwæper/awper/owper* (either one), *hahwæper/nohwæper/nawper/nowper* (neither one); *æghwelc* (each one), *gehwilc* (every one), *hwelchwugu* (some one), *samhwilc* (some); *awiht/owiht/awuht/owuht/aht/oht* (lit., aught, anything), *nawiht/nowiht/nawuht/nowuht/naht/noht* (lit., nought, nothing). The variant spellings here illustrate the simplification of compounding. Other indefinites that yield modern pronoun forms are *ǣlc* (each), *ǣnig/nǣnig* (any/not any), *ān/nān* (one/none).

[7] For the distinction between strong and weak adjective forms in Old English, cf. chapter seven.

[8] Shakespeare's "*What* you will" suggests the indefinite dimension to that pronoun.