# Opinion





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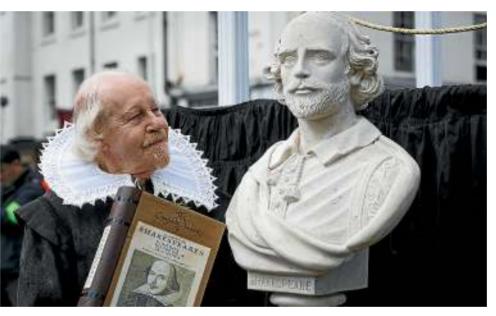
t the time of Shakespeare, the English language was changing rapidly. A number of very important developments all happened at the same time.

One of those was the loss of thou, another was the introduction of -s on verb forms like gives, takes, prefers and so on. Shakespeare exploits the period of vacillation, using *thou* not just for a single person, but also to indicate some degree of intimacy or disparagement, alongside the incoming polite form you, and using the older -th form (giveth, taketh, preferreth)

alongside the newer -*s* form. But since Shakespeare's day, the use of thou has almost disappeared except in some dialectal forms and some religious language, and the *-th* form of verbs has vanished. When such things happen,

people slowly forget how they were used. For everyday interaction this is fine. But every so often, we feel the need for some archaic expression for the sake of effect, and then it can become clear just how much has been forgotten.

Let us consider *thou*, first. *Thou* is a subject pronoun (just as *they* is a subject



## Shakespeare could mix up old and new, but modern writers often get it wrong. GETTY IMAGES It maketh not sense

## Language Matters

pronoun in current English) and the corresponding object pronoun was thee (matching them as an object pronoun). When we find the following in a 2011 novel, we know something is not right: There but for the grace of God go thee. Who does the going? You do, so the form should be thou. But if the pronoun is thou, the verb should agree with that and be goest

If the author is not trying to make a point about the character depicted, they are getting themselves into trouble.

Even Shelley seems to get tangled up. Hail to thee, blithe spirit (thee is right here, after the preposition to), Bird thou never wert. Thou wert is perfectly correct - or at least in line with the usage of the King James version of the Bible - if it is subjunctive (as in modern English if I were you).

But there seems to be no reason to

o hear Defence Minister Peter Dutton talk, one could be forgiven for thinking we are

about to plunge into war just as we begin to see an end to our Covid-19 confinement. "The only way you can preserve peace is to prepare for war, and be strong as a country. Not to cower, not to be on bended knee and be weak," he said on Anzac Day. It is clear that Dutton wants us to see this dichotomy between strength and weakness as one that separates the Coalition from Labor.

There is nothing wrong with national security issues being debated in a campaign, but there is a need for care because incendiary remarks can be counterproductive to national security.

novel, Why hath we been given the command to row?, hath must be wrong because we could not replace it with modern has. Perhaps it looks archaic,

have a subjunctive here, so we would expect Bird thou never wast. However, the Oxford English Dictionary says that, outside the Bible, wert has been used for the simple past, so Shelley is saved. What about the old -th forms? Recall that these appear where we now have -s, and nowhere else. So in a line from a 2010

perhaps it is an error on the part of the author, but someone has lost track of their English grammar. Similarly, from The Dominion Post in 2012, An All Blacks side whose cup is threatening to runneth over, runneth makes no sense in the sentence, even if it

recalls the biblical expression. Finally, we find a similar problem, albeit in a slightly different environment, in a 2008 novel: Maybe the clothes do maketh the man. Could we say makes

here? No, we need make. So maketh does not make sense, and in this case does not even recall the original, assuming it was from Mark Twain (probably based on the German Kleider machen Leute); the older version is manners maketh the man-where *manners*, like *measles*, could be singular.

I do not want to suggest writers should avoid archaisms where they are appropriate, but here the grammar is being used as a symbol, not meaningfully, and where you get the grammar wrong, you confuse the message (and often your readers).

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and point-scoring

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We have entered an era when the Viewpoint global balance of power is in flux. The

question is whether we can debate these problems without descending into misty-eyed patriotism or partisan point-scoring.

Prime Minister Morrison says he has been assured by his Solomons counterpart, Manasseh Sogavare, that there will be no Chinese military base in the islands. Whether that promise holds we will need more than just talk of strength and historical analogies to keep us secure. We will need allies in the region and the world that are on the same page as us and clarity on what our political leaders plan to do, in war and peace. The bluster of the past week is no substitute.