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At 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

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 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, 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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## THE AGE

# Avoid patriotism and point-scoring

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

To 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.

## Viewpoint

We have entered an era when the 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.