



Shakespeare and the Law

Inner Temple Library

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A playwright, poet and actor, William Shakespeare is considered by many to be the greatest English author and the leading dramatist of the Elizabethan theatre. The 450th anniversary of his birth falls in April 2014, so it is an opportune time to celebrate his life and works, among which are 38 attributed plays, 154 sonnets, and three narrative poems, which are still loved and regularly performed.

What may be less well known are the links between Shakespeare and the law. References to the law, lawyers, and legal maxims occur frequently in his works, to such an extent and with such accuracy that some scholars believe that he was a student of the law at the Inns of Court, or even that the works attributed to him were written by Gray's Inn member Francis Bacon.

The Inner Temple Library holds many titles by or about Shakespeare, including several which consider the links between Shakespeare and the law and which were highlighted in a display in the Library in April 2014.

Selected Shakespearean Material



in the Inner Temple Library

Arlidge, A. Shakespeare and the Prince of Love : the feast of misrule in the Middle Temple. London : De la Mare, 2000.

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Barton, D. Links between Shakespeare and the law. London : Faber & Gwyer limited, 1929.

Bridgewater, H. Evidence connecting Sir Francis Bacon with "Shakespeare". London : G. Lapworth, 1949.

Campbell, J. Shakespeare's legal acquirements considered. London : J. Murray, 1859.

Elton, C. William Shakespeare, his family and friends. New York : E. P. Dutton & company, 1904.

Greenwood, G. Lawyers and Shakespeare. London : R. Brimley Johnson, 1903.

Keeton, G. Shakespeare's legal and political background. London: Pitman, 1967.



Penzance, J. Lord Penzance on the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy: a judicial summing-up. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, Ltd. St. Dunstan's House Fetter Lane, Fleet Street, E. C., 1902.

Phillips, O. Shakespeare and the lawyers. London: Methuen, 1972.

Rushton, W. Shakespeare's legal maxims. Liverpool: Henry Young & Sons, 1907.

Shakespeare, W. Mr William Shakespeare's comedies, histories and tragedies. Published according to the true Original copies (4th edit.). London: Printed for H. Herringman, E. Brewster and R. Bentsley, 1685.

White, E. Commentaries on the law in Shakespeare, St. Louis, Mo.: The F. H. Thomas law book co., 1911.

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Selected Legal Quotations

from Shakespeare



"The justice,

In fair round belly, with good capon lined,

With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,

Full of wise saws and modern instances."

(As You Like It)

"Stays it still with lawyers in the vacation:

For they sleep between term and term,

And then they perceive not how time moves."

(As You Like It)

"The rusty curb of old father antic the law?"

(Henry IV^o Pt.1)

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

(Henry V^o Pt.2)

"When law can do no right,

Let it be lawful, that law bar no wrong: ...

Since law itself is perfect wrong,

How can the law forbid my tongue to curse?"

(King John)

"See how you ' justice rails upon you ' simple thief.

Change places ; and handy-dandy, which is the justice,

Which is the thief?"

(King Lear)

"Even-handed justice "

(Macbeth)

"Good counsellors lack no clients. "

(Measure for Measure)

"The law hath not been dead, though it hath slept;

Those many had not dared to do that evil,

If the first man, that did the edict infringe,

Had answer 'd for his deed. "

(Measure for Measure)





*"We must not make a scare-crow of the law,
Setting it up to fear the birds of prey,
And let it keep one shape, till custom make it
Their perch and not their terror."*

(Measure for Measure)

*"The jury, passing on the prisoner's life,
May, in the sworn twelve, have a thief or two
Guiltier than him they try: What's open made to justice,
That Justice seizes. What knows the laws,
That thieves do pass on to thieves?"*

(Measure for Measure)

*"In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt,
But, being season'd with a gracious voice,
Obscures the show of evil?"*

(Merchant of Venice)

*"I charge you by the law,
Whereof you are a well-deserving pillar."*



(Merchant of Venice)

*"A fish hangs in the net, like a poor man's right
in the law; 'twill hardly come out."*

(Pericles)

*"Do as adversaries do in law,
Strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends."*

(Taming of the Shrew)

*"Pity is the virtue of the law,
And none but tyrants use it cruelly."*

(Simon of Athens)

*"Crack the lawyer's voice,
That he may never more false title plead,
Nor sound his quillets shrilly."*

(Simon of Athens)

April 2014