Module Description:

On 11th May 1612 Shakespeare would climb the stairs from Westminster Hall (a place we visited in chapter two) and enter the Court of Requests. He had been summoned there in order to give his testimony in a legal case relating to his time as a lodger in Silver Street; the case in question was a family dispute, in which a Mr Belott sought damages for a dowry of £60 he believed he was promised but never paid when he married the daughter of Shakespeare's former landlord Mr Mountjoy in 1604. Shakespeare affirms that he knows both men, and that Belott had been promised a ‘portion’ (or dowry) but claims that he cannot remember how much. A court clerk took down what was said, thereby preserving the only instance of Shakespeare's own speech to survive from his lifetime. 'We know the thousands of lines he wrote in plays and poems,' writes Charles Nicholl, 'but this is the only occasion when his actual spoken words are recorded'. The fact that this legal document is our sole remaining trace of Shakespeare’s own voice is indicative of the highly litigious nature of Elizabethan society and such interactions with the law seem to have been commonplace for early modern Londoners. This course explores the playwright’s connection to the legal world of his city, exploring his relationship to the different kinds of law practised there, to the Inns of Court (at which some of his plays were first performed), and his awareness of the legal implications of current debates around governance and succession.

Open to students from the English Department and School of Law, and co-taught by faculty from both of these subject areas, this course will provide a unique opportunity to revisit Shakespeare’s writing afresh in the year that marks 400-years since his death, on 23rd April 1616. We will explore four of his major plays (The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure, Julius Caesar and Richard II) as well as the Sonnets, spending two weeks on each of these texts in order to present a variety of perspectives, literary and legal. In the first half of the course we will be concerned with the role of the law in mediating the place of the individual within society, considering private legal issues pertaining to marriage, betrothal, contracts, property and inheritance. After reading week we will look outwards to the public aspects of Elizabethan law that Shakespeare would have been familiar with, addressing the legal implications of early modern debates about the power of the monarch, the responsibilities of a nation towards its ruler (and vice versa), and principles governing the succession.

In our final week we will hold moot debates, to be presided over by a visiting Judge from the Dickson Poon School of Law, in which certain key premises regarding Shakespeare’s works are tried and tested in a format that was used for the teaching of the law in his own lifetime. This will form part of the assessment for the module, carrying a 15% participation grade weighting. A long essay (3,500 words) will account for the remainder.

Lecture/Seminar Programme:

1. Introduction – Shakespeare’s dealings with the law: Measure for Measure (I)
2. Betrothal and Marriage: Measure for Measure (II)
3. Betrothal and Marriage: The Merchant of Venice (I)
4. Contracts and Bonds: The Merchant of Venice (II)
5. Contracts and Bonds: The Sonnets (I)
6. Reading Week
7. Property and Inheritance: The Sonnets (II)
8. Republicanism vs. Monarchy: *Julius Caesar* (I)
10. Republicanism vs. Monarchy: *Richard II* (I)
11. Individual and Society: The *Richard II* (II)
12. Moot debates

**Selected Bibliography:**

Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Elizabeth Goldring and Sarah Knight, eds., *The Intellectual and Cultural World of the Early Modern Inns of Court* (Manchester, 2011)


Karen Cunningham and Constance Jordan (eds), *The Law in Shakespeare* (Basingstoke, 2010)


Daniel J. Kornstein, *Kill All the Lawyers? Shakespeare’s Legal Appeal* (New York, 2005)

