

# Woe is me, a lawyer



Shakespeare's disdain for the profession has, unfortunately, transcended generations, explains **Richard Barr**



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**I** did not in my case drop as "the gentle rain from heaven". It bore a much closer resemblance to a lead balloon.

When I was young and green about the gills, I once decided that the local magistrates would benefit from a touch of Shakespeare. I cannot now think how I believed it would do any good, but in entering a plea in mitigation I appealed to their worships' literary side.

I gave them a dose of Portia's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*.

"The quality of mercy is not strained," I began.

"Excuse me, Mr Barr, what do you mean by 'strained'?"

"Well, er, what comes naturally."

"Like straining on the toilet, Mr Barr?"

"Not exactly. I meant that your worships would instinctively know when it was right to grant mercy to Gladys after she was

caught stealing a piece of fish for her cats. I feel that it droppeth as the gentle rain..."

And that was the first and last time I ever quoted Shakespeare in court.

Shakespeare is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of all time, but by whom? Am I alone in having over the years endured the bum-numbing experience of a Shakespeare play, with its characters strutting around like performing poodles, uttering antiquated expressions that are almost as incomprehensible as the average commercial lease?

Now that sufficient distance has been put between me and school exams I am slowly rediscovering the Bard. His plays may have been tedious, but he did say some pithy things about law and lawyers, so perhaps I can inspire someone else to try a little Shakespeare in court (or at least on each other) with more success than I had.

Let's start with something for the Lord Chancellor when he next decides to cut back legal aid still further: "Help, master, help! Here's a fish hangs in the net, like a poor man's right in the law."

Those who want to challenge a juror might like to point out this to the judge: "The jury, passing on the prisoner's life, May in the sworn twelve have a thief or two Guiltier than him they try."

And if you do not like your opponent in a case, try this

(and then hide): "Crack the lawyer's voice, That he may never more false title plead."

And who has not seen two barristers at each other's throats in court, only to depart (virtually) hand in hand at the end of the hearing? Shakespeare put it this way: "And do as adversaries do in law, Strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends."

Hamlet was miserable anyway, but he certainly had a thing or two to say about lawyers: (when examining the skull from a grave) "Why, may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?"



**We are never going to be as loved as nurses or admired as firemen**

We are left with the distinct feeling that Shakespeare was none too keen on lawyers. In his formative years he must have been let down by a lawyer (and there was no SRA to sort out the problem). The most famous anti-lawyer quote comes of course from *Henry VI* part 2, a play which I have never seen and as far

as I know has only ten memorable words in it: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

I like to think that if anyone carried out that instruction we would be missed, but not, unfortunately, in some quarters, for nothing has changed in the 400 years or so since Shakespeare's death.

Writing in the *Daily Mail* in 2011, Richard Littlejohn endorsed Shakespeare's comments, and added some of his own: "There are times when I'd be happy to see the streets running with the blood of those spiv lawyers behind those adverts on daytime TV, which promise the gullible and greedy a fortune in 'comp-en-say-shun' for the most trivial injury."

We are never going to be as loved as nurses or admired as firemen. We are not yet despised as much as politicians (unless we are a lawyer and a politician), but we do seem to be singled out for more censure than most professionals.

Time methinks (as Shakespeare might have said) for a mascot to get the public to love us. Meercats have already been taken, but how about making our emblem a soft cuddly dog? Yes forsooth a Lawbrador is what is needed. So my fellow countrymen (particularly solicitors) once more unto the breach dear friends...

*Exit pursued by a Labrador* **SJ**