

**Dr Peter Sillitoe, ShaLT**

**Collection Enhancement Report No. 20 for the V&A, Theatre and Performance  
Department (May 2013)**

***The Inns of Court***

**NB:** Earlier, the ShaLT Collection Enhancement Reports have used the printed collections at the National Art Library (particularly the unique Dyce Collection) to highlight printed texts in terms of issues such as authorship and genre. However, bearing in mind that the key outreach goal of the AHRC funding for the project was to further public awareness about the actual theatre sites (The Theatre, Blackfriars, and so on) it seems highly appropriate for a series of reports to focus on the actual theatre spaces. Thus, this report highlights the Inns of Court. Indeed, it is envisaged that the T&P Department at the V&A might be able to host a small exhibition of Dyce material in terms of the actual Shakespearean London Playhouses. With this in mind, this report picks-out printed work at the V&A that links to the Inns of Court. This topic should prove interesting to visitors to a potential exhibition because often the title page is the only evidence we have for the performance of a play at a certain location.

The Inns of Court were established for the training of London's lawyers. But in this period the students often organised and acted in plays and masques at winter festival times at the Inn's hall. Indeed, the Inns of Court still are London's premier colleges for the training of lawyers (barristers and judges). In the Shakespearean period the four locations were sometimes referred to as 'the third university' after Oxford and Cambridge, since the young men who studied to qualify in the law - often wealthy and socially well-connected - occupied these elite spaces. Such student lawyers lived and worked as 'members' at an inn of court, and often frequented the nearby indoor theatres, including the Blackfriars, Whitefriars, Cockpit and Salisbury Court.

Two of the four sites – Inner Temple and Middle Temple – were located centrally in the capital below the Strand to the east of Temple Bar, while Lincoln’s Inn was just north of the Strand. Gray’s Inn was positioned further north on a north-south axis along the western edge of Gray’s Inn Road.

The students at the four Inns of Court also often organised and acted in plays and masques at winter festival times at the Inn’s hall, priding themselves on their ‘rhetorical’ powers of persuasion, an essential part of a good lawyer’s professional equipment. The tradition is still carried on today when Inn members create and perform in Christmas shows. However, in the Shakespearean period all four sites should be considered authentic ShaLT performance locations in their own right, since their indoor halls were used as performance spaces for visiting playing companies. Most famously, in 1594 the Lord Chamberlain’s Men put on Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* at Gray’s Inn, whilst his *Twelfth Night* was staged at Middle Temple in 1602.

Furthermore, thanks to recent research it is now clear that plays were performed very regularly indeed at the four Inns of Court – but especially at Inner Temple - so they have a firm place in this history as alternative sites for theatrical performance in the period. However, as with the court performances, these activities were not open to the fee-paying public, but were provided to entertain and instruct the socially élite audiences of lawyers. The Inns of Court are important, since we can positively identify them as performance sites for various plays, many of them known, and including those by Shakespeare mentioned above.

### **The Inns of Court and the V&A Collection**

The image below (courtesy of the V&A Museum) is taken from Ben Jonson's dedication to the Inns of Court from his *Works*.

TO THE NOBLEST  
NOVRCERIES OF HVMA-  
NITY, AND LIBERTY,  
IN THE KINGDOME:

The Innes of Court.



*V*nderstand you, Gentlemen, not your houses : and a worthy succession of you, to all time, as being borne the Iudges of these studies. When I wrote this Poeme, I had friendship with diuers in your societies ; who, as they were great Names in learning, so they were no lesse Examples of liuing. Of them, and then ( that I say no more ) it was not despis'd. Now that the Printer, by a doubled charge, thinkes it worthy a longer life, then commonly the ayre of such things doth promise ; I am carefull to put it a seruant to their pleasures, who are the inheriters of the first fauour borne it. Yet, I command, it lye not in the way of your more noble, and vse-full studies to the publike. For so I shall suffer for it : But, when the gowne and cap is off, and the Lord of liberty raignes ; then, to take it in your hands, perhaps may make some Bencher, tinted with humanity, reade : and not repent him.

By your true Honorer,

BEN. IONSON.

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