



## Shakespeare's Binding Language

By John Kerrigan

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### Shakespeare's Binding Language By John Kerrigan

This remarkable, innovative book explores the significance in Shakespeare's plays of oaths, vows, contracts, pledges and the other utterances and acts by which characters commit themselves to the truth of things past, present, and to come. In early modern England, such binding language was everywhere. Oaths of office, marriage vows, legal bonds, and casual, everyday profanity gave shape and texture to life. The proper use of such language, and the extent of its power to bind, was argued over by lawyers, religious writers, and satirists, and these debates inform literature and drama.

*Shakespeare's Binding Language* gives a freshly researched account of these contexts, but it is focused on the plays. What motives should we look for when characters asseverate or promise? How far is binding language self-persuasive or deceptive? When is it allowable to break a vow? How do oaths and promises structure an audience's expectations? Across the sweep of Shakespeare's career, from the early histories to the late romances, this book opens new perspectives on key dramatic moments and illuminates language and action. Each chapter gives an account of a play or group of plays, yet the study builds to a sustained investigation of some of the most important systems, institutions, and controversies in early modern England, and of the wiring of Shakespearean dramaturgy. Scholarly but accessible, and offering startling insights, this is a major contribution to Shakespeare studies by one of the leading figures in the field.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"...Kerrigan investigates a wide variety of culturally specific norms governing this language and how Shakespeare interrogates those norms in his plays. For example, in examining *Love's Labours Lost*, Kerrigan points out that in Shakespeare's time, Cambridge and Oxford students were required to take a three-year pledge of celibacy to live with friends and study- a fact that makes the initial vow of the play comprehensible. The play suggests that Shakespeare found these pledges ridiculous and possibly tragic. In other chapters, Kerrigan addresses oaths of revenge, money and its bonds, matrimonial pledges, promises of loyalty to government, and swearing to God or gods. Each form of binding language has a historically specific constellation of meanings that Kerrigan uses to inform the plays. A fascinating, fresh, and erudite look at Shakespeare's plays." --B. A. McGowan, *CHOICE*

"Given this year's 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, there was always going to be a slew of new publications; few, I suspect, will have as long-lasting an effect as John Kerrigan's. His field of inquiry is both straightforward and complicated. It is almost retrospectively obvious that Shakespeare's plays contain a great amount of vows, oaths, swearing both covenantal and vulgar, pledges, promises and imprecations. The same might be said for a great many playwrights' works; but the depth of subtlety which Kerrigan finds in the handling of these specific rhetorical forms is compelling." --Stuart Kelly, *The Spectator*

"When you've spent most of your life teaching Shakespeare's plays, you don't expect to stumble upon a book that makes you feel you've failed to understand something essential about them. John Kerrigan's *Shakespeare's Binding Language* is just such a book...a profoundly rewarding book. It will prove indispensable, not only for those who enjoy reading the plays, but also for those who direct and act in them." --James Shapiro, *Books of the Year 2016, New Statesman*

"interesting general history...skilled exercise of literary criticism...the sheer intricacy of individual instances in Shakespeare is amazing...a convincing portrait of the artist as inquirer." --Michael Wood, *London Review of Books*

"A monumental intervention. This elegant and elaborate examination of the intertwined languages of law and drama will have a lasting impact on the field." --Willy Maley, *Times Higher Education Supplement*

"a massive, complicated and brilliant interpretation of the oaths, vows and promises that bind the characters in virtually every one of Shakespeare's plays...Shakespeare will only endure if we continually reinvent and reinterpret him, and Kerrigan has done just that. We will still be digesting his masterly work on vows and oaths by 2023 and the next Shakespeare celebration, the 400th anniversary of the First Folio's publication." -

-Jerry Brotton, *The Daily Telegraph*

"*Shakespeare's Binding Language* is among the most imaginative books on Shakespeare to be published this year....Kerrigan's view of Shakespeare's characters as bound in a tangle of conflicting promises is...unique and refreshing" --Independent, *Indybest*

"Scintillating...brilliant...both deeply learned and freshly attentive to the language of the plays. ...criticism at its fighting weight and on the front foot, dancing, feinting, and then deftly deploying the knockout citation...It is a great achievement" --Emma Smith, *Times Literary Supplement*

"wide-ranging, remarkably original study,...a monumental achievement" --Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Review of English Studies*

"Kerrigan is a scholar of boundless critical energy [and] formidable scholarship...spellbinding ...Hefty as a doorstop, *Shakespeare's Binding Language* is also edgy as a letter-opener....It is the gage and measure of where we are with Shakespeare's verbal artistry, and critics will ponder its findings for years to come" --Willy Maley, *Spenser Review*

"shines new light on the vast array of characters in the canon...Kerrigan's investigations go the very heart of Shakespeare's world..." --*Stratford-on-Avon Observer*

"mighty and magisterial...a timely and erudite book that will surely transform our understanding of the context in which Shakespeare worked and his achievement in producing works that reflect so intelligently on the complicated loyalties demanded by society....Few works on Shakespeare written in the past 20 years contain so many insights." --Andrew Hadfield, *Irish Times*

"[S]ome of the most enjoyable moments are found in the subtle, but suggestive, points made about the better known works, such as the onomastics of the tragedies...New Historicism still has much to offer the field of Shakespeare studies." --Juliet Gordon, *The Use of English*

About the Author

**John Kerrigan** was brought up in Liverpool. After studying at Oxford he went to a lectureship at Cambridge, where he is Professor of English 2000 and a Fellow of St John's College. He has published on many subjects, from classical drama through Renaissance literature to modern British and Irish poetry.

Among his books are an edition of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and *A Lover's Complaint*, *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*, and *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603-1707*. He has lectured in many parts of the world, and writes for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books*. He is a Fellow of the British Academy.

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### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Frank Johnson:**

Book is to be different for every grade. Book for children right up until adult are different content. We all know that that book is very important usually. The book Shakespeare's Binding Language was making you to know about other understanding and of course you can take more information. It doesn't matter what advantages for you. The reserve Shakespeare's Binding Language is not only giving you more new information but also to become your friend when you sense bored. You can spend your own personal spend time to read your e-book. Try to make relationship with all the book Shakespeare's Binding Language. You never really feel lose out for everything in case you read some books.

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#### **Eddie Bussell:**

Reading can called mind hangout, why? Because when you find yourself reading a book specially book entitled Shakespeare's Binding Language your head will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in every single aspect that maybe unfamiliar for but surely will end up your mind friends. Imaging just about every word written in a reserve then become one type conclusion and explanation that maybe you never get prior to. The Shakespeare's Binding Language giving you a different experience more than blown away your

mind but also giving you useful info for your better life in this particular era. So now let us explain to you the relaxing pattern is your body and mind will be pleased when you are finished examining it, like winning a sport. Do you want to try this extraordinary wasting spare time activity?

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