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# West Virginia Law Quarterly and The Bar

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## OPHELIA'S CRIME OF *FELO DE SE*

To Elizabethan Englishmen, common law was almost common knowledge, for laws were comparatively few and most of them merely codified ancient custom. Even Shakespeare's clownish gravediggers in *Hamlet* knew enough law to misuse legal Latin; and the miscellaneous audience that saw the play, moreover, must have realized this misuse or the joke would have been lost. Shakespeare himself, though his legal knowledge was "neither profound nor accurate",<sup>1</sup> was not entirely ignorant of law. His father, illiterate as he was, had held in his better days the highest municipal offices in Stratford, and seems to have been notably litigious. The dramatist, as shareholder in a company of players, must have had an interest in the many legal battles of this new profession

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<sup>1</sup> 1 UNDERHILL, SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND (1917) 381.