

**Warmer – Thinking about crime and punishment**



*The photograph shows a famous punishment from Shakespeare's times. What do you think it was? Why was it used?*

**Task 1 – Vocabulary: crimes in Shakespeare's times**

**a.** Match the crimes from Shakespeare's times to their meanings.

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Treason            | a. Doing magic  |
| 2. Witchcraft         | b. Planning to do something bad to your country, e.g. kill the king or queen. |
| 3. Public drunkenness | c. Stealing money and jewellery from people.                                  |
| 4. Pickpocketing      | d. Having had too much to drink (when outside).                               |

**b.** How do you think these crimes were punished in sixteenth century England?

**Task 2 – Reading: crime and punishment in Shakespeare's times**

Read the text. Work in pairs to answer the questions.

- a. What crime is committed in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*?
- b. Why did pickpockets often have less than ten fingers?
- c. What two crimes were women often accused of?
- d. Why was punishment in Shakespeare's times like going to the theatre?
- e. Which punishment seems the most unfair to you? Why?
- f. Were any of your ideas from **Task 1** correct?

**Crime and Punishment in Sixteenth Century England**

Shakespeare wrote about treason in his famous play, *Macbeth*. In this tragedy, Macbeth and his wife are guilty of treason when they plan to kill King Duncan, and in the end, they both pay with their lives. In Shakespeare's times, treason was punished by hanging and dismemberment.

Punishments for less serious crimes were often very severe. For example, pickpockets got one finger cut off every time they were caught. Sometimes, people were sentenced to years in prison for stealing very little.

Women had a very hard time in sixteenth century Britain – even when they hadn't done anything wrong. If a woman spoke too much or disagreed with her husband, she could be accused of being a "scold". Such women were punished in a horrible way. They had to wear a "scold's bridle", a very heavy piece of metal head wear which pushed down on the tongue and stopped the woman from speaking. If you were a poor, unmarried woman with a pet cat you might be charged with witchcraft. The punishment for this "crime" was death, often by drowning.

In Shakespeare's times, punishment was public entertainment, a bit like going to the theatre. For example, crowds of people came to the streets to watch people being punished for drinking too much in public. These "criminals" had to wear a "drunkard's shirt" (a wooden barrel) and walk around the streets while people laughed at them.

**Task 3 – Vocabulary: crime and punishment**

a. Complete the sentences with one word only.

1. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron is punished \_\_\_\_\_ being buried alive.
2. At the end of *Othello*, Iago is sentenced \_\_\_\_\_ death.
3. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is charged \_\_\_\_\_ attempted murder.
4. In *Hamlet*, the Prince of Denmark accuses his uncle \_\_\_\_\_ killing his father.
5. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katharine is punished \_\_\_\_\_ being strong minded.
6. Macbeth and his wife are guilty \_\_\_\_\_ treason.

b. Identify the odd one out in each group and say why.

- |                  |         |               |                  |
|------------------|---------|---------------|------------------|
| 1. judge         | jury    | criminal      | courtroom        |
| 2. prison        | treason | hanging       | drunkard's shirt |
| 3. trial         | verdict | sentence      | thief            |
| 4. rob           | murder  | steal         | borrow           |
| 5. punishment    | commit  | accuse        | steal            |
| 6. dismemberment | prison  | scold's bride | drunkard's shirt |

**Task 4 – Roleplay: inside a Shakespearean courtroom**

Work in groups of four. Your teacher will give you information about a crime from Shakespeare's play, *The Merchant of Venice*.

Work with people who have the same role as you and prepare what you are going to say.

Then act out your role play. When you are not acting, you are one of the jury.

Decide if the accused is guilty or innocent.

If guilty, what should the Shakespearean punishment be?



Shylock's trial in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene I, by Shakespeare  
From *The Illustrated Library Shakespeare*, published London 1890