Despite their apparent separation, law and literature have been closely linked fields throughout history. Linguistic creativity is central to the law, with literary modes such as narrative and metaphor infiltrating legal texts. Equally, legal norms of good and bad conduct, of identity and human responsibility, are reflected or subverted in literature’s engagement with questions of law and justice. Law seeks to regulate creative expression, while literary texts critique and sometimes openly resist the law. Kieran Dolin introduces this interdisciplinary field, focusing on the many ways that law and literature have addressed and engaged with each other. He charts the history of the shifting relations between the two disciplines, from the open affiliation between literature and law in the sixteenth-century Inns of Court to the less visible links of contemporary culture. Each chapter is organized around close analysis of a famous trial or literary-legal encounter. The wide resonance of such trials illuminates the cultural centrality of law, and the social responsiveness of literature. This book provides an accessible guide to one of the most exciting areas of interdisciplinary scholarship today.

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‘Poetry, like the law, is a fiction’, wrote William Hazlitt in a critical essay of 1816. Hazlitt the critic took as his subject all aspects of his society’s culture, including the connections between law, literature and power. He analysed the rhetoric of the lawyers and the legislative acts of politicians as products of a legal imagination comparable with the literary imagination of the poets. He examined the effects of those imaginings on the people, who were subjects of the law as well as readers of literary fictions. With characteristic forthrightness, he appended an aesthetic judgment to the comparison: ‘Poetry, like the law, is a fiction; only a more agreeable one.’

This book shares the conviction that law and literature have common properties of language and vision. In it I try to show how this connection matters, how it works to shape a culture’s notions of justice and legal entitlement. The first three chapters explore the bases for linking law and literature; the next six present a historical account of shifts in their relationship in Anglophone culture from the Renaissance to the present.

In undertaking this study I have had the benefit of advice and support from many colleagues at the University of Western Australia. I would particularly like to thank Daniel Brown, Victoria Burrows, Tanya Dalziell, Gareth Griffiths, Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, Judith Johnston, Gail Jones, Andrew Lynch, Ian Saunders, Bob White and Chris Wortham. For administrative support I am grateful to Sue Lewis and Linda Cresswell. I would also like to acknowledge the pleasure and profit I have derived from conversations with Michael Meehan, Penelope Pether, Simon Petch, Peter Rush, Richard Weisberg and other Law and Literature scholars. Over many years Hilary Fraser and Richard Freadman have provided inspiration as well as guidance. My brother Tim Dolin has generously shared his great critical acuity. However, the author accepts liability for any mistakes herein.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the financial support of an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant, which funded time to write, research
assistance and travel to archives. My research assistants, Victoria Bladen, Duc Dau and Catherine Johns, found an abundance of material and offered accurate summaries and fruitful suggestions. I would also like to thank my own university for the award of UWA Research Grants enabling me to concentrate on this study through teaching relief. I have drawn heavily on the resources of the Scholars’ Centre in the UWA Library and would like to express my appreciation to Dr Toby Burrows, the Director, and the staff there, for their efficiency and expert help. I wish to thank the staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for assisting me to make use of their unrivalled collection.

I am deeply grateful to Cambridge University Press: to my editor, Ray Ryan, for supporting this project from its inception, and for his encouragement and advice. I would also like to thank the assistant editor Maartje Scheltens, and the readers of both the original proposal and the manuscript, whose suggestions were extremely helpful. For permission to reproduce the image on the cover, Hogarth’s *The Bench*, I am grateful to the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. The following material is reproduced by permission of the copyright holder: ‘Mending Wall’ from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Latham © 1969. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and company, LLC.

My greatest debt is to my wife, Jane Courtney, for her love and good counsel, and to our children, Patrick, Michael and Anna. Their love of words and stories, their questioning of law (and literature) have been an indispensable counterpoint to the writing of this book.