



## Gild the Lily

Gilding the lily means **improving or decorating something that is already perfect, and therefore spoil it**. It's a common misquotation of a line from William Shakespeare's 1595 play *King John* IV.2:



*Therefore, to be possess'd with double pomp,  
To guard a title that was rich before,  
To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,  
To throw a perfume on the violet,  
To smooth the ice, or add another hue  
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light  
To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,  
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.*



The context of that speech in the play is King John's satisfaction with his second coronation - "Here once again we sit, once again crown'd". His courtiers aren't so positive about it, calling the crowning 'superfluous'. The use of Shakespeare's text to denote unnecessary ornamentation is fairly straightforward. After all, literally 'to gild' is to cover with a thin layer of gold, so **'gilding refined gold' is obviously unnecessary**; however, as the quotation above clearly shows, 'gild the lily' doesn't appear in the original. The term **'paint the lily'** was common in the **20<sup>th</sup> century**, with the same meaning we now apply to 'gild the lily'; clearly, this is the correct quotation. The two versions coexisted for a time, although 'paint the lily' is now hardly ever used.