

**SHAKESPEARE'S BONES; THE PROPOSAL
TO DISINTER THEM CONSIDERED IN
RELATION TO THEIR POSSIBLE BEARING
ON HIS PORTRAITURE: ILLUSTRATED BY
INSTANCES OF VISITS OF THE LIVING TO
THE DEAD**

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Shakespeare's bones; the proposal to disinter them considered in relation to their possible bearing on his portraiture: illustrated by instances of visits of the living to the dead by C. M. Ingleby

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VISITS OF THE LIVING TO THE DEAD.

BY

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This Essay

IS RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED

TO

THE MAYOR AND CORPORATION OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON,
AND THE VICAR
OF THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY THERE,

BY THEIR FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE,

THE AUTHOR.

SHAKESPEARE'S BONES.

THE sentiment which affects survivors in the disposition of their dead, and which is, in one regard, a superstition, is, in another, a creditable outcome of our common humanity; namely, the desire to honour the memory of departed worth, and to guard the "hallowed reliques" by the erection of a shrine, both as a visible mark of respect for the dead, and as a place of resort for those pilgrims who may come to pay him tribute. It is this sentiment which dots our graveyards with memorial tablets and more ambitious sculptures, and which still preserves so many of our closed churchyards from desecration, and its ancient tombs from the molestation of careless, curious, or mercenary persons.

But there is another sentiment, not inconsistent with this, which prompts us, on suitable occasions, to disinter the remains of great men, and remove them to a more fitting and more honourable resting place. The Hôtel des Invalides at Paris, and the Basilica of San Lorenzo Fuori le Mura at Rome,* are indebted to this sentiment for the possession of relics which make those edifices the natural resort of pilgrims as of sight-seers. It were a work of superfluity to adduce further illustration of

* See *The Times*, July 14 and August 8, 1881.

the position that the mere exhumation and reinterment of a great man's remains, is commonly held to be, in special cases, a justifiable proceeding, not a violation of that honourable sentiment of humanity, which protects and consecrates the depositaries of the dead. On a late occasion it was not the belief that such a proceeding is a violation of our more sacred instincts which hindered the removal to Pennsylvania of the remains of William Penn; but simply the belief that they had already a more suitable resting-place in his native land.*

There is still another sentiment, honourable in itself and not inconsistent with those which I have specified, though still more conditional upon the sufficiency of the reasons concurring to the act: namely, the desire, by exhumation, to set at rest a reasonable or important issue respecting the person of the deceased while he was yet a living man. Accordingly it is held justifiable to exhume a body recently buried, in order to discover the cause of death, or to settle a question of disputed identity: nor is it usually held unjustifiable to exhume a body long since deceased, in order to find such evidences as time may not have wholly destroyed, of his personal appearance, including the size and shape of his head, and the special characteristics of his living face.

It is too late for the most reverential and scrupulous to object to this as an invasion of the sanctity of the grave, or a violation of the rights of the dead or of the feelings of his family. When a man has been long in the grave, there are probably no

* Jordan's Meeting-house, near Chalfont St. Giles, Bucks. See *The Times*, July 20, 1881.

family feelings to be wounded by such an act: and, as for his rights, if he can be said to have any, we may surely reckon among them the right of not being supposed to possess such objectionable personal defects as may have been imputed to him by the malice of critics or by the incapacity of sculptor or painter, and which his remains may be sufficiently unchanged to rebut: in a word we owe him something more than refraining from disturbing his remains until they are undistinguishable from the earth in which they lie, a debt which no supposed inviolable sanctity of the grave ought to present us from paying.

It is, I say, too late to raise such an objection, because exhumation has been performed many times with a perfectly legitimate object, even in the case of our most illustrious dead, without protest or objection from the most sensitive person. As the examples, more or less analogous to that of Shakespeare, which I am about to adduce, concern great men who were born and were buried within the limits of our island, I will preface them by giving the very extraordinary cases of Schiller and Raphael, which illustrate both classes: those in which the object of the exhumation was to give the remains a more honourable sepulture, and those in which it was purely to resolve certain questions affecting the skull of the deceased. The following is abridged from Mr. Andrew Hamilton's narrative, entitled "The Story of Schiller's Life," published in *Macmillan's Magazine* for May, 1863.

"At the time of his death Schiller left his widow and children almost penniless, and almost friendless too. The duke and duchess were absent; Goethe lay ill; even Schiller's brother-

Schiller.

Schiller. in-law Wolzogen was away from home. Frau von Wolzogen was with her sister, but seems to have been equally ill-fitted to bear her share of the load that had fallen so heavily upon them. Heinrich Voss was the only friend admitted to the sick-room; and when all was over it was he who went to the joiner's, and, knowing the need of economy, ordered 'a plain deal coffin.' It cost ten shillings of our money.

In the early part of 1805, one Carl Leberecht Schwabe, an enthusiastic admirer of Schiller, left Weimar on business. Returning on Saturday the 11th of May, between three and four in the afternoon, his first errand was to visit his betrothed, who lived in the house adjoining that of the Schillers. She met him in the passage, and told him, Schiller was two days dead, and that night he was to be buried. On putting further questions, Schwabe stood aghast at what he learned. The funeral was to be private and to take place immediately after midnight, without any religious rite. Bearers had been hired to carry the remains to the churchyard, and no one else was to attend.

Schwabe felt that all this could not go on; but to prevent it was difficult. There were but eight hours left; and the arrangements, such as they were, had already been made. However, he went straight to the house of death, and requested an interview with Frau von Schiller. She replied, through the servant, 'that she was too greatly overwhelmed by her loss to be able to see or speak to any one; as for the funeral of her blessed husband, Mr. Schwabe must apply to the Reverend Oberconsistorialrath Günther, who had kindly undertaken to see done what was necessary; whatever he might direct, she would approve