

Mr. J. Parker Norris on "Shakespeare's Bones." The *Manhattan* for July contains an interesting paper by Mr. J. Parker Norris of Philadelphia on the question, "Shall we Open Shakespeare's Grave?" Like Dr. Ingleby, in his little book on *Shakespeare's Bones* (noticed in the *World* some months ago), he answers the question in the affirmative. Eight years ago, as he states, he "suggested the advisability of opening Shakespeare's grave and reverently examining his remains." The proposition, as when repeated more recently, was received with a storm of abuse, "each critic vying with his brother in heaping opprobrious epithets on the

head of him who had dared to suggest what appeared to them to be a desecration of the poet's tomb." If Mr. Norris and Dr. Ingleby had proposed to start a "dime museum" with the poet's bones, or to sell them to a "super-phosphate" factory, the outcry might have been more reasonable, but it could not have been more bitter and vituperative. And yet we venture to say that these gentlemen have as deep and true a love and reverence for Shakespeare as any of their loud abusers.

Is there anything inconsistent with such love and reverence in the proposition to examine the grave in the Stratford chancel? One of these critics reminds us that Shakespeare is not merely a great poet, but in a sense the "personal friend" of the wide world of his readers and students. That of course "goes without saying"; but surely we may open the grave of a dear friend with loving and reverent purpose — to see whether the dear remains are still there or have been stolen away by some sacrilegious hand; and, if still there, to restore their crumbling receptacle, and to seal and secure it from future disturbance or desecration. In the case of Shakespeare's grave, it is obviously desirable to do this — if for no other reason — in order to put an end once and forever to the curiosity concerning his bones which does and will crop out again and again, giving rise to controversy and ill feeling among his friends. If the grave has already been opened and robbed, it was probably from this irrepressible curiosity; and so long as the curiosity remains unsatisfied, the risk of such sacrilege will continue — and it is a serious risk, considering the comparatively exposed and unguarded situation of the grave. Let it be opened, if at all, by those who have a right to do it; and after proper examination of its contents, if any there be, let the facts be authoritatively published, and the vault securely closed, never to be reopened by mortal hand. What friend of Shakespeare will not feel relieved to have such authoritative information as to the facts in the case, such clear assurance for the future safety and sanctity of the grave? And what a burden of care and anxiety would thus be taken from the ecclesiastical guardians of the "pilgrim shrine!"

Those who oppose the opening of the grave tell us again and again that it is almost certain that it contains at best nothing but a handful of unrecognizable dust, and very likely not even that; but, if so, the settling of this fact cannot be regarded as in itself a desecration, while it is certain to prevent desecration in the future — for a secret and violent disturbance of the place from motives of curiosity or greed would be a sacrilege to shock the civilized world. On the other hand, if these people are wrong, and Shakespeare's bones still lie in the dilapidated vault (for there is abundant testimony that its walls were in a tumble-down condition years ago), the remains should be suitably re-coffined, and the vault properly repaired and made absolutely secure against violation. It could easily be made so strong as to resist any possible attempt that could be made to open it between sunset and sunrise.

As to the doggerel verses on the tomb, it is extremely improbable that Shakespeare wrote them; but, if he did, there can be little doubt, as Dr. Ingleby and others have urged, that they were simply a protest against the transfer of his

bones to the horrible old charnel-house which formerly disfigured the east end of the Stratford church, and with whose repulsive use and appearance he must have been familiar from his boyhood. However that may be, the spirit of the warning is to be regarded rather than the letter; and no one sooner than Shakespeare would laugh at the superstitious reverence shown to the letter of it in this nineteenth century — a superstition which, as we have seen, stupidly defeats its own end, and exposes the bones which it shrinks from "moving" to the perpetual danger of being removed by unscrupulous thieves.