

LATIN IN "TAPHOLOGY."

BY

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A CORRESPONDENT in *The Times* of July, 1927, whether in entire seriousness or no, has been rousing some indignation by a suggestion that the time-honoured "O rare Ben Jonson" on the poet's tomb is merely due to a stone-cutter's misunderstanding of a Latin inscription, "Orare Ben Jonson," and further that a Latin phrase so unprecedented would be quite "possible in taphology!" It is unlikely that he will make many converts, and he has certainly raised up a host of critics, one of whom suggests "the language of the taphouse" as a suitable equivalent for "taphology." The same critic pours scorn upon the "amazing assumption that the educated authorities of Westminster Abbey lightly accepted a gravestone carved with two bad blunders and allowed it to remain there, undetected and uncorrected, throughout two centuries and a half—and actually had the alleged blunders repeated in the second slab."

The present writer, while cordially agreeing with those who reject the emendation of the *Times* Correspondent, is not prepared to do so on the ground cited above; for she was instantly reminded of an equally astounding case in which undoubted and unmistakable blunders stand to this day for all to see upon the tomb of a famous bishop of London, in a churchyard almost under the shadow of the palace of his successors. Dr. John Robinson, who died in 1723, had by his *acre judicium et rerum peritia* won such golden opinions as a diplomat in Sweden during the anxious years which preceded the treaty of Utrecht that, after being a prebendary of Canterbury, dean of Windsor, and bishop of Bristol, he

was in 1714 translated to the see of London. When he died he was buried close by his predecessor Compton, just outside the east window of Fulham parish church, and upon his tomb may be read a long Latin epitaph intended to record his merits and doings. Unfortunately the Latin, which began by being "taphological" in the correspondent's sense, became by some means unknown taphological in the derisory sense of the critic. The impression conveyed to any casual observer is exactly that which seemed so unbelievable in the case of Jonson—that an ignorant stone-cutter was left to do as he liked without supervision and that the result passed unnoticed both by contemporaries and posterity. Only those who, like Lewis Carroll's White Queen, have practised believing six impossible things before breakfast, will find it easy to credit such a tale, especially as the distortion in Robinson's case is on quite a magnificent scale. The manuscript followed was probably in an elegant handwriting, with flourishes and the long 's' rising above the line, and its difficulties were faced with courage and without scruple. The only alternative suggestion which might be made is that the epitaph was correctly carved in the first instance but at some date unknown became defaced and was entrusted to fresh hands for restoration, with sad results. Some support is lent to this view by the fact that Lysons, writing his *Environs of London* in 1795, printed the epitaph in full and intelligible form without hint of any difficulty.¹ At any rate the inscription stands today in the form reproduced below. The spelling, division of words, and punctuation, are exactly as here set forth.

Hic Situxell JOHANNES ROBINSON, S.T.P. Natus apud Clealby in ogro Eboracensi, A.D. 1650 7.º Nov^{br}. ubi Seliolani CXIIIXII oi Doiaxit; Collegij Orielenfis Oxon Socius, Cujus edificia ampliavit et Scholarium numcrum auxit; Legari Regij Vices obiit Stocholmiæ ab anno 1683, usq 1708, anno 1692 Causam PROTESTANTIUM firenue afferuit,

¹ II, 386-7.

labamem Regis Sueciei animu confirmavit etme confilijs Gallicis de nono Electoram immergerei, effecit anno 1700, Regem Suecicu in itinero periculoso Comitaius Conjunctionem Claffmm poretratum Eccleraiarum feliciter expedivit Navigationem Maris Borealis liberam suis et Europæais confervavit. 1711 Privati Sigilli Culrodiam ei Commissu ANNA PEY MEMORIÆ nuper REGINA, a qua Legatus ei Plenipoten- tarius Regius continutus, Ultraject PACEM inter Europæos omnes diu optatam, ipsam quæ HODIE FRUIMUR ei de qua ETIAMNEM GEORIAMUR Stabilivit.

The reader will probably not wish to be deprived of the amusement of restoring the original text for himself. On the whole it is not difficult, for there is a certain method in the stone-cutter's madness. He usually turns long 's' into 'f' or 'l,' 't' into 'i' or 'r' (*ei* for *et*, *legari* for *legati*, *culrodiam* for *custodiam*), and omits nearly all signs of abbreviation (*animu* is not extended to *animum* or *usq* to *usque*). Here and there, however, he was completely baffled, and made utter havoc. His *Seliolani CXIIIIXII oi doiaxit* represents an original *scholam extruxit et dotavit*, in reference to Robinson's foundation of a school for six poor boys at his native place, Cleasby, near Darlington. The portion relating to Robinson's services in Sweden, another hard nut to crack, should run as follows: *Labantem regis Suecici animum confirmavit, et ne consiliis Gallicis de nono electoratu immergeret effecit; anno 1700 regem Suecicum in itinere periculoso comitatus, conjunctionem classium potestatum federatorum feliciter expedivit.* Robinson had gone with the young King Charles XII of Sweden upon that famous expedition to Narva in 1700 which was his answer to the united attack of Russia, Poland, and Denmark, and the herald of a wonderful series of victories. The *conjunctio classium* refers to the junction of the fleets of England, Holland, and Sweden in the Sound, to warn Frederick IV of Denmark that they intended to uphold the treaty of Altona of 1689, in which the maritime powers had guaranteed the independence of Holstein, now invaded by the Danes.

In conclusion, attention should be drawn to the extraordinary distribution of capitals. In *Anna piae memoriae* the stone-cutter must have failed to recognise his late queen, since he has immortalised her as ANNA PEY. His capitalising of PACEM may suggest that he appreciated some of the benefits of the treaty of Utrecht, but the meaning of *gloriamur* escaped him altogether, and it may have been through some dim association with the reigning Georges that he raised it to the dignity of capitals in the form of GEORIAMUR.
