

"The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's. Rome. 15- (1845)

[Robert Browning](#)



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Credits

The text of this poem comes from Dick Adicks's Project Gutenberg version [eBook #17393; release date: December 26, 2005] of Robert Browning, *Men and Women*. Introduction and Notes: Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, from the edition of Browning's poems published by Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, New York, in 1898. [George P. Landow](#) formatted it for the *Victorian Web* on 30 January 2008. Unless otherwise noted, the following notes are by Peters and Clarke.

Introduction by Collins

"The Bishop orders his Tomb" This half-delirious pleading of the dying prelate for a tomb which shall gratify his luxurious artistic tastes and personal rivalries, presents dramatically not merely the special scene of the worldly old bishop's petulant struggle against his failing power, and his collapse, finally, beneath the will of his so-called nephews, it also illustrates a characteristic gross form of the Renaissance spirit encumbered with Pagan survivals, fleshly appetites, and selfish monopolizings which hampered its development. — "It is nearly all that I said of the Central Renaissance — its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin — in thirty pages of the 'Stones of Venice,' put into as many lines, Browning's being also the antecedent work" (Ruskin). The Church of St. Praxed is notable for the beauty of its stone-work and mosaics, one of its chapels being so extraordinarily rich that it was called , or the Garden of Paradise; and so, although the bishop and his tomb there are imaginary, it supplies an appropriate setting for the poetic scene.

1. Vanity, saith the preacher: Ecclesiastes 1.2.

Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!
Draw round my bed: is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews — sons mine . . . ah God, I know not! Well —
She, men would have to be your mother once,
Old Gandolf envied me, so fair she was!
What's done is done, and she is dead beside,
Dead long ago, and I am Bishop since,
And as she died so must we die ourselves,
And thence ye may perceive the world's a dream.
Life, how and what is it? As here I lie 10
In this state-chamber, dying by degrees,
Hours and long hours in the dead night, I ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" Peace, peace seems all.
Saint Praxed's ever was the church for peace;
And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
— Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South
He graced his carrion with. God curse the same!
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence 20
One sees the pulpit o' the epistle-side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the aery dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk;
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest,
With those nine columns round me, two and two,
The odd one at my feet where Anselm stands:
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe
As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse. 30
— Old Gandolf with his paltry onion-stone,
Put me where I may look at him! True peach,
Rosy and flawless: how I earned the prize!
Draw close: that conflagration of my church
— What then? So much was saved if aught were missed!
My sons, ye would not be my death? Go dig
The white-grape vineyard where the oil-press stood,
Drop water gently till the surface sink,
And if ye find . . . Ah God, I know not, ! . . .
Bedded in store of rotten fig-leaves soft, 40
And corded up in a tight olive-frail,
Some lump, ah God, of ,
Big as a Jew's head cut off at the nape,
Blue as a vein o'er the Madonna's breast . . .
Sons, all have I bequeathed you, villas, all,
That brave Frascati villa with its bath,
So, let the blue lump poise between my knees,
Like God the Father's globe on both his hands
Ye worship in the Jesu Church so gay,
For Gandolf shall not choose but see and burst! 50
Swift as a weaver's shuttle fleet our years:
Man goeth to the grave, and where is he?
Did I say basalt for my slab, sons? Black —
'T was ever antique-black I meant! How else
Shall ye contrast my frieze to come beneath?
The bas-relief in bronze ye promised me,

21. Epistle-side: the right-hand side facing the altar, where the epistle is read by the priest acting as celebrant, the gospel being read from the other side by the priest acting as assistant.

25. Basalt: trap-rock, leaden or black in color.

31. Onion stone: for the Italian , a kind of greenish-white marble splitting into coats like an onion,; hence so called.

41. Olive-frail: a basket made of rushes, used for packing olives.

42. Lapis lazuli: a bright blue stone.

46. Frascati: near Rome, on the Alban hills.

48. God the Father's globe: in the group of the Trinity adorning the altar of Saint Ignatius at the church of Il Gesu in Rome.

51. Weaver's shuttle: Job 7.6.

54. Antique-black: Nero antico. Browning gives the English equivalent for the name of this stone.

58. Tripod: the seat with three feet on which the priestess of Apollo sat to prophesy, an emblem of the Delphic oracle.

Thyrsus: the ivy-coiled staffer spear stuck in a pine-cone, symbol of Bacchic orgy. These, with the other Pagan tokens and pictures, mingle oddly but significantly with the references to the Saviour, Saint Praxed, and Moses. See also line 92, where Saint Praxed is confused with the Saviour, in the mind of the dying priest. Saint Praxed, the virgin daughter of a Roman Senator and friend of Saint Paul, in whose honor the Bishop's Church is named, is again brought forward in lines 73-75 in a queer capacity which pointedly illustrates the speaker and his time.

66. Travertine: see note "Pictor Ignotus," 67.

68. jasper: a dark green stone with blood-red spots, susceptible of high polish.

77. Tully's: Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-46 B. C.).

79. Ulpian: a Roman jurist (170-228 A. D.), belonging to the degenerate age of Roman literature.

99. *Elucescebat*: he was illustrious; formed from *elucesco*, an inceptive verb from *eluceo*: in post classic Latin.

102. Else I give the Pope my villas: perhaps a threat founded on the custom

Those Pans and Nymphs ye wot of, and perchance
Some tripod, thyrsus, with a vase or so,
The Saviour at his sermon on the mount,
Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan 60
Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off,
And Moses with the tables . . . but I know
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm? Ah, ye hope
To revel down my villas while I gasp
Bricked o'er with beggar's mouldy travertine
Which Gandolf from his tomb-top chuckles at!
Nay, boys, ye love me — all of jasper, then!
'T is jasper ye stand pledged to, lest I grieve.
My bath must needs be left behind, alas! 70
One block, pure green as a pistachio-nut,
There's plenty jasper somewhere in the world —
And have I not Saint Praxed's ear to pray
Horses for ye, and brown Greek manuscripts,
And mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs?
— That's if ye carve my epitaph aright,
Choice Latin, picked phrase, Tully's every word,
No gaudy ware like Gandolf's second line —
Tully, my masters? Ulpian serves his need!
And then how I shall lie through centuries, 80
And hear the blessed mutter of the mass,
And see God made and eaten all day long,
And feel the steady candle-flame, and taste
Good strong thick stupefying incense-smoke!
For as I lie here, hours of the dead night,
Dying in state and by such slow degrees,
I fold my arms as if they clasped a crook,
And stretch my feet forth straight as stone can point,
And let the bedclothes, for a mortcloth, drop
Into great laps and folds of sculptor's-work: 90
And as yon tapers dwindle, and strange thoughts
Grow, with a certain humming in my ears,
About the life before I lived this life,
And this life too, popes, cardinals and priests,
Saint Praxed at his sermon on the mount,
Your tall pale mother with her talking eyes,
And new-found agate urns as fresh as day,
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
— Aha, ELUCESCEBAT quoth our friend?
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best! 100
Evil and brief hath been my pilgrimage.
All lapis, all, sons! Else I give the Pope
My villas! Will ye ever eat my heart?
Ever your eyes were as a lizard's quick,
They glitter like your mother's for my soul,
Or ye would heighten my impoverished frieze,
Piece out its starved design, and fill my vase
With grapes, and add a vizer and a Term,
And to the tripod ye would tie a lynx
That in his struggle throws the thyrsus down, 110
To comfort me on my entablature
Whereon I am to lie till I must ask
"Do I live, am I dead?" There, leave me, there!
For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
To death — ye wish it — God, ye wish it! Stone —
Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat
As if the corpse they keep were oozing through —
And no more lapis to delight the world!
Well go! I bless ye. Fewer tapers there,
But in a row: and, going, turn your backs 120
— Ay, like departing altar-ministrants,
And leave me in my church, the church for peace,
That I may watch at leisure if he leers —
Old Gandolf, at me, from his onion-stone,
As still he envied me, so fair she was!

of Julius II and other popes, according to Burckhardt, of enlarging their power "by making themselves heirs of the cardinals and clergy . . . Hence the splendor of tile tombs of the prelates . . . a part of the plunder being in this way saved from the hands of the Pope."

108. A vizor and a Term: a mask, and a bust springing from a square pillar, representing the Roman god Terminus, who presided over boundaries.

Materials in the *Victorian Web*

- A Strangely Literal Afterlife in "The Bishop Orders his Tomb"
- The Bishop's Deathbed Vision: Pan, Praxed and Preaching
- Robert Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church: Rome, 15 — " (1845): The Sensual, The Profane, and the Sacerdotal [The Historical Context]
- The Use of Irony in "The Bishop Orders his Tomb"
- The Question of Salvation
- Eliding Information in "The Bishop Orders his Tomb"
- Robert Browning's Use of Biblical Typology in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb"

References

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