

PREFACE.



THE very ample discussion which the extremely popular subject of the Dance of Death has already undergone might seem to preclude the necessity of attempting to bestow on it any further elucidation ; nor would the present Essay have ever made its appearance,

but for certain reasons which are necessary to be stated.

The beautiful designs which have been, perhaps too implicitly, regarded as the invention of the justly celebrated painter, Hans Holbein, are chiefly known in this country by the inaccurate etchings of most of them by Wenceslaus Hollar, the copper-plates of which having formerly become the property of Mr. Edwards, of Pall Mall, were published by him, accompanied by a very hasty and imperfect dissertation ; which, with fewer faults, and considerable enlargement, is here again submitted to public attention. It is appended to a set of fac-similes of the above-mentioned elegant designs, and which, at a very liberal expense that has been incurred by the proprietor and publisher of this volume, have been executed with consummate skill and fidelity by Messrs. Bonner and Byfield

two of our best artists in the line of wood engraving. They may very justly be regarded as scarcely distinguishable from their fine originals.

The remarks in the course of this Essay on a supposed German poet, under the name of Macaber, and the discussion relating to Holbein's connexion with the Dance of Death, may perhaps be found interesting to the critical reader only ; but every admirer of ancient art will not fail to be gratified by an intimate acquaintance with one of its finest specimens in the copy which is here so faithfully exhibited.

In the latest and best edition of some new designs for a Dance of Death, by Salomon Van Rusting, published by John George Meintel at Nuremberg, 1736, 8vo. there is an elaborate preface by him, with a greater portion of verbosity than information. He has placed undue confidence in his predecessor, Paul Christian Hilscher, whose work, printed at Dresden in 1705, had probably misled the truly learned Fabricius in what he has said concerning Macaber in his valuable work, the "*Bibliotheca mediæ et infimæ ætatis.*" Meintel confesses his inability to point out the origin or the inventor of the subject. The last and completest work on the Dance, or Dances of Death, is that of the ingenious M. Peignot, so well and deservedly known by his numerous and useful books on bibliography. To this gentleman the present Essay has been occasionally indebted. He will, probably, at some future opportunity, remove the whimsical misnomer in his engraving of Death and the Idiot.

The usual title, "The Dance of Death," which accompanies most of the printed works, is not altogether appropriate. It may indeed belong to the old Macaber painting and other similar works where Death is represented in a sort of dancing and grotesque attitude in the

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act of leading a single character ; but where the subject consists of several figures, yet still with occasional exception, they are rather to be regarded as elegant emblems of human mortality in the premature intrusion of an unwelcome and inexorable visitor.

It must not be supposed that the republication of this singular work is intended to excite the lugubrious sensations of sanctified devotees, or of terrified sinners ; for, awful and impressive as must ever be the contemplation of our mortality in the mind of the philosopher and practiser of true religion, the mere sight of a skeleton cannot, as to them, excite any alarming sensation whatever. It is chiefly addressed to the ardent admirers of ancient art and pictorial invention ; but nevertheless with a hope that it may excite a portion of that general attention to the labours of past ages, which reflects so much credit on the times in which we live.

The widely scattered materials relating to the subject of the Dance of Death, and the difficulty of reconciling much discordant information, must apologize for a few repetitions in the course of this Essay, the regular progress of which has been too often interrupted by the manner in which matter of importance is so obscurely and defectively recorded ; instances of which are, the omission of the name of the painter in the otherwise important dedication to the first edition of the engravings on wood of the Dance of Death that was published at Lyons ; the uncertainty as to locality in some complimentary lines to Holbein by his friend Borbonius, and the want of more particulars in the account by Nieuhoff of Holbein's painting at Whitehall.

The designs for the Dance of Death, published at Lyons in 1538, and hitherto regarded as the invention of Holbein, are, in the course of this Dissertation, referred

to under the appellation of *the Lyons wood-cuts*; and with respect to the term *Macaber*, which has been so mistakenly used as the name of a real author, it has been nevertheless preserved on the same principle that the word *Gothic* has been so generally adopted for the purpose of designating the pointed style of architecture in the Middle Ages.

FRANCIS DOUCE.

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