

THE

DANCE OF DEATH.

THE celebrity of a subject which has been distinguished by the labours of such artists as Holbein and Hollar, seems necessarily to demand some investigation of its origin*.

In the dark ages of monkish bigotry and superstition, the deluded people, terrified into a belief that the fear of death was acceptable to the great Author of their existence, had placed

* It would be a piece of injustice not to mention, that this has already been done in a very able manner, by a respected friend of the compiler of the present essay, in a little work, intitled "Emblems of Mortality," ornamented with copies in wood, of the Dance of Death, by J. Bewick, the brother of the admirable artist who executed the cuts to a history of quadrupeds, lately published. The work was printed for T. Hodgson, Clerkenwell, in 1789, 12mo. The editor of it will immediately perceive that no rivalry is here intended; that in the pursuit of a subject of this nature many of the same authorities must have naturally presented themselves, and in order to connect it properly, must again be of course adopted. Independently of these, the rest of this slight performance is only designed as supplemental.

one of their principal gratifications in contemplating it amidst ideas the most horrid and disgusting: hence the frequent descriptions of mortality in all its shapes amongst their writers, and the representations of this kind, in their books of religious offices, and the paintings and sculptures of their ecclesiastic buildings. They had altogether lost sight of the consolatory doctrines of the Gospel, which regard death in no terrific point of view whatever; a discovery reserved for the discernment of modern and enlightened Christians, who contemplate scenes which excited gloom and melancholy in the minds of their forefathers, with the gratification of philosophic curiosity. Some exceptions, however, to this remark are not wanting, for we may yet trace the imbecility of former ages in the decorations of many of our monuments, tricked out in all the silly ornaments of deaths' heads and marrow-bones.

The most favourite subject of the kind, however, was what is usually denominated the Dance of Death, or a representation of Death in the act of leading all ranks and conditions of men to the grave; with gesticulations not a little bordering upon the grotesque, though probably without any view to provoke the mirth of the spectator in those times. One of the most ancient still existing, is that at Basil in Switzer-

land, in the church-yard formerly belonging to the convent of Dominicans, which is said to have been painted at the instance of the fathers and prelates assisting at the grand council at Basil, in 1431, in memory of a plague which happened soon afterwards, and during its continuance. The name of the painter is unknown, and will probably ever remain so, for no dependence can be had upon vague conjectures of those who, without any authority, or even the smallest probability, have attempted to ascertain it. To refute, or even to mention the blunders which have been committed by most of the travellers who have described the town of Basil, when they discuss this subject, would fill a volume: it will be sufficient to notice an assertion of Keysler, that the painting was executed by Hans Bok, a celebrated painter of this place, who, however, from the testimony of Scheutzer, in his Itinerary, was not born till 1584. From some inscriptions on the spot it appears to have been retouched, or perhaps renewed, in 1566 and 1616; the first time probably by Hans Klauber, whose name occurs in the lines addressed by Death to the Painter.

It has been frequently supposed that the Basil painting was the first of the kind; but this is extremely doubtful, from the knowledge we have of many others of apparently equal antiquity.

Many of the bridges in Germany and Switzerland were ornamented in this manner, a specimen of which is still to be seen at Lucerne; and it is probable that almost every church of eminence was decorated with a Dance of Death. In the cloisters of St. Innocent's church at Paris, in those belonging to the old cathedral of St. Paul at London*, and in St. Mary's church at Berlin, these paintings were to be seen. At Klingenthal, a convent in the Little Basil, are the remains of a Dance of Death, differently designed from that at the Dominicans, and thought to be more ancient. The figures remaining till very lately in Hungerford's chapel, in the cathedral at Salisbury, and known by the title of Death and the Young Man, were undoubtedly part of a Death's Dance, as might be further insisted on from the fragment of another compartment which was close to them. In the church at Hexham, in Northumberland, are the remains of a Death's Dance; and at Feschamps, in Normandy, it is carved in stone, between the pillars of a church; the figures are about eighteen inches high. Even fragments of painted glass,

* On the walls of a cloister on the north side of St. Paul's, called *Pardon-church-haugh*, was painted the *Machabre*, or Dance of Death, a common subject on the walls of cloisters or religious places. This was a single piece, a long train of all orders of men, from the Pope to the lowest of human beings; each figure has as his partner, Death; the first shaking his

whereon this subject has been depicted, with old English verses over the figures, may contribute to shew how very common it has been in our own country. P. C. Hilcher, in a tract printed at Dresden in 1705, has taken notice of other Dances of Death at Dresden, Annaberg, Leipzig, and Berne. Dr. Nugent has described one in St. Mary's church at Lubeck, which he states to have been painted in 1463.

The origin of all these is perhaps to be sought for in an ancient pageant, or religious farce, invented by the clergy, for the purpose of at once amusing and keeping the people in ignorance. In this all ranks and conditions of life were personated and mixed together in a general dance, in the course of which every one in his turn vanishes from the scene, to shew that none were exempted from the stroke of death. This dance was performed in the churches, and can be traced back

remembering hour-glass. Our old poet Lydgate, who flourished in the year 1430, translated a poem on the subject, from the French verses which attended a painting of the same kind about St. Innocent's cloister, at Paris. The original verses were made by Macaber, a German, in his own language. This shews the antiquity of the subject, and the origin of the hint from which Holbein composed his famous painting at Basil.

This cloister, the dance, and innumerable fine monuments (for here were crowded by far the most superb) fell victims to the sacrilege of the Protector Somerset, who demolished the whole, and carried the materials to his palace then erecting in the Strand.—*Pennant's London*, vol. ii. p. 135.

as far as the year 1424*; it was called the Dance of Macaber, from a German poet of that name, who first composed some verses under the same title. Of this person very little is known, but Fabricius thinks the poem more ancient than the paintings†. His work has been translated into Latin and French, in the last of which languages there are some very ancient and very modern editions.

The earliest allusion to the subject, but whether to the above-mentioned farce or to the paintings seems uncertain, is in the following lines, from the Visions of Pierce the Plowman, who wrote about 1350.

Death came drivynge after, and all to dust pashed,
 Kynges and kaysers, knightes and popes
 Learned and lewde, he ne let no man stande
 That he hitte even, he never stode after.
 Many a lovely ladie, and lemman of knights
 Swonned and sweltd, for sorrow of death dyntes.

When the arts of printing and engraving became established, various copies of the Dance of Macaber made their appearance, particularly in the Hours, Breviaries, Missals, and other service books of the church, few of which were unaccompanied with a Dance of Death; and in these the designs sometimes varied. Many of our own service books for the use of Salisbury were thus

* Glossar. Carpentier, tom. ii, 1103.

† Bibl. med. & infim, Ætat.

decorated, and the fashion at length terminated in a book of Christian prayers, printed more than once during the reign of Elizabeth, since which time nothing of the kind has appeared. In all these are to be found the same dull and uniform representation of Death leading a single figure, without much attempt at character or execution, until at length there appeared, in 1538, a book, entitled "Les simulachres & historiees faces de la Mort, autant elegamment pourtraictes, que artificiellement imaginees." It was printed at Lyons by Melchior and Gasper Trechsel, and is accompanied with forty-one of the most beautiful groups of figures that can be well conceived, both for their composition and execution, being most delicately cut on wood, and surpassing in this branch of art almost every thing of the kind that has appeared before or since. This work was often republished, as well in the French, as in the Latin and Italian languages*, and has been

* The following is presumed to be a tolerably correct list of the various editions of this book :

" Simulachres & Historiees faces de la Mort, &c." Lugd. 1538, 4to.

" Images de Morte." Lugd. 1542, 12mo.

" Images Mortis." Lugd. 1545, 12mo.

" Images Mortis." Lugd. 1547, 12mo.

" Les Images de la Morte." Lyon, 1547, 12mo.

" Simulachri, Historie, e Figure de la Morte." Lyone, 1549, 12mo. with an address from the printer, in which he complains of some attempts having been made in other countries to imitate the cuts to his book, and informs the reader that he

usually denominated by most of the writers upon the arts of painting and engraving, as well as by many travellers, *Holbein's Dance of Death*. It is extremely clear, however, that Holbein did not *invent* these subjects, for it appears in a dedication, which is only to be found in the first edition of this work, that the painter was then dead, and that he had not lived to finish some of the designs, which, however, afterwards appeared in a subsequent edition. The painter must therefore have died before 1538, and it is well known that Holbein was at this time living, and continued so until 1555. Unluckily no evidence whatever, nor even tradition, has been preserved relating to this great artist, and it is feared that he will ever remain undiscovered.

had caused many more cuts to be added to this edition than had appeared in any other; a declaration not a little extraordinary, for both the editions of 1547, which were also published by this person, have the same number of cuts, and contain twelve more than the three first editions. These additional cuts were probably executed from the unfinished designs spoken of in the dedication to the first edition. Four of them, being groups of children playing, are rather foreign to the subject, but are evidently done by the same artist who executed the others.

"*Icones Mortis*." Basil, 1554, 12mo.

"*Les Images de la Mort, auxquelles sont adjoustees dix sept figures*." Lyon, 1562, 12mo. There are but five additional figures to this edition, the other twelve being what had already appeared, making in the whole seventeen more than in the first edition. Of these five cuts, which have all the delicacy of the others, three are groups of boys.

"*De Doodt vermaskert*," &c. Antwerp, 1654, 12mo.

After what has been said, it becomes necessary to attempt at least to give some reason for the almost universal opinion, that these designs were the offspring of Holbein's pencil. Most of those writers who have described the town of Basil, as well as the compilers of the lives of the painters, speak of a Dance of Death by Holbein, some referring to the old Dance of Macaber, and others to the more modern one; but it is not difficult to see, that they have but transcribed from each other, without taking any pains to examine the subject. Certain it is, however, that Holbein did paint a Death's Dance in its improved state, and likewise more than once. Bishop Burnet, in his travels in Switzerland, speaks of a Dance of Death, painted by Holbein, "on the walls of a house where he used to drink," which was then so worn out, that very little was to be seen except shapes and postures. He then mentions the old Death's Dance at the Dominicans' convent*, which, he says, was "so worn out some time ago, that they ordered the best painter they had to lay new colours on it; but this is so ill done, that one had rather see the dead shadows of Holbein's pencil, (*i. e.* on the walls of the house), than this coarse work."

This account is corroborated by Keysler, who adds, that the painting on the house was then *entirely* obliterated. Patin, in his travels, also

* By mistake called the convent of the Augustinians.

speaks of a house at Basil, curiously painted by Holbein, but does not mention the subject; it was probably the same as Burnet saw. These are the only travellers who have spoken upon this subject with any degree of accuracy, and fortunately their testimony throws much light upon it.

To the book already mentioned to have been published by the Trechsels, at Lyons, they sometimes annexed another, which was in some degree connected with it, and appears to have been printed by them the following year. This was entitled, "*Historiarum veteris testamenti icones*," the cuts of which are in some instances much inferior to the others, and apparently by a different artist. The designs of these are indisputably by Holbein, as appears from some verses before the book, composed by Nicolas Bourbon, a cotemporary poet, who also wrote some lines upon a Dance of Death painted by Holbein*. To these cuts to the Bible, are prefixed the first four which occur in the Dance of Death, as they likewise belong to the subject, and represent the creation and fall of man; but they are different in size, and were added, not only from the analogy of the subjects, but from the circumstance of their being already in the hands of the printer; and thus, from an odd coincidence of things, as well as a palpable confusion of the respective verses of Bourbon, seems to have originated an

* Borbonii Nugarum libri octo. Basil 1540, 12mo. p. 445.

opinion, that Holbein *invented* the Dance of Death.

But it has not only been asserted that Holbein designed, but that he *engraved*, or rather *cut* this Dance of Death on wood. That he practised this art, nay, that he excelled in it, there is reason to believe, from some specimens that have been preserved, and which bear on them the unequivocal marks of H. H. & HANS. HOLBEN*. A set of cuts with the latter mark occurs in Archbishop Cranmer's Catechism, printed by Walter Lyne in 1548; and although the composition of these is extremely good, their execution is not only inferior to the Dance of Death, but entirely different in its manner: and the mark of HB which is to be seen upon one of the cuts in this latter work, has been ascribed without any authority to Holbein, upon the strength of the vague opinions concerning his interference with the Dance of Death †.

The great popularity and success of these cuts very soon excited many imitations of them both in copper and on blocks. In 1541, Aldegrever engraved eight of them, but with very material alterations. Other editions of the *Imagines Mor-*

* It is not however impossible that Holbein, in putting his mark upon these cuts, might only intend to shew that he designed them, or drew the subject upon the blocks.

† This mark is also given by Professor Christ, in his *Dictionnaire des Monogrammes*, to Hans Lautensack, and Hans Lederer, persons of whom absolutely nothing is known.

tis, which had been first published under that title in 1545, appeared in 1555, 1566, 1573, and probably at many other times; these were also accompanied with cuts in wood by a very eminent but unknown artist, whose mark is *A*. This mark is also to be found in some of the Emblems of Sambucus and Lejeune, in some initial letters to Grafton's Chronicle, and in other cuts executed during the sixteenth century*. It is not a little remarkable, that so late as the year 1654, there appeared a Dutch book, printed

* The inaccurate Papillon, who in matters of historical discussion is hardly ever to be trusted, has asserted in his "Traité de la gravure en bois," that this is the mark of Silvius Antonianus, or Antoniano. Having found it upon some cuts, in an edition of Faerno's fables, printed at Antwerp in 1567, with a dedication to Cardinal Borromeo, by Silvius Antoniano, he instantly conceived that he had discovered the name of the artist in that of the author of the dedication. The fact is, that Antoniano was no engraver, but a professor of belles lettres at Rome, afterwards secretary to Pope Pius V. and at length a Cardinal. His dedication had already appeared in the first edition of these fables in 1564, which has a different set of cuts engraved on copper. Another of Papillon's blunders is equally curious. He had seen an edition of the Emblems of Sambucus with cuts, on which the same mark occurs. In this book is a fine portrait of the author, with his dog, under whom is the word BOMBO, which Papillon gravely informs us is the name of the engraver, and again refers to it on another cut of one of the Emblems under a dog also. Had he read the verses belonging to this particular Emblem, he would have immediately seen that it was nothing more than the *dog's* name, as Sambucus himself declares, whilst he pays a laudable tribute to the attachment of the faithful companion of his travels.

at Antwerp, where this artist worked, entitled, "Doodt vermaskert, or Death masked," accompanied with eighteen cuts of the Dance of Death, which in the title page are ascribed to Holbein. They are all, except three, impressions from the identical blocks of the beautiful and original cuts of this subject; but the above-mentioned artist has had the effrontery to put his mark, together with the figure of a graving tool or knife, upon several of them. It is, however, possible that he might have repaired them, as some of the smaller lines, which in former impressions seem to have been injured, are here much stronger.

It might be tedious to describe *all the imitations* of the Dance of Death which have appeared at different times, as they are exceedingly numerous; but it would be unpardonable not to notice an alphabet of initial letters with this subject, which for humour, and excellence of design, are even superior to the celebrated one; and with respect to execution, especially when their minuteness is considered, being less than an inch square, absolutely wonderful. Their composition is entirely different from that of any of the others, and one of them is extremely indecent. They appear to have been done at Basil; for in the public library there is preserved a *sheet*, whereon are printed three alphabets, viz. the one above-mentioned, another of boys at play, and the third, a dance of peasants, &c. The designs of some of the last are the same as those in a similar Dance

by Holbein, formerly painted on a house at Basil, and of which some drawings are still preserved; and it is therefore not improbable that he also designed the Dance of Death for these initials. They have apparently been struck off as proofs or patterns for some bookseller*, and at the bottom of the sheet is the mark HL with the words "Hans Lützelburger Formschneider, (*i. e.* block-cutter), in Basel." In this manner has been preserved the name of a most exquisite artist, whom, from the similarity of style and subject, there is every reason to suppose the person who executed the fine cuts of the first Dance of Death. As he worked after the designs of Holbein, it is also probable that the painter might have invented *some* of the seventeen subjects which appeared in continuation of the original work, and that Lützelburger also cut them for the subsequent editions. From the extreme delicacy with which the initials with the Dance of Death are executed, there is reason to suppose that they were not cut upon blocks of wood, but of metal, as was probably the larger work of the same subject; and in support of this conjecture it may be observed, that blocks of this kind are still preserved in the cabinets of the curious.

* They were actually used by Cratander, a printer at Basil; and other initial letters, with Dances of Death, are to be seen in books printed at Zurich, Strasburg, and Vienna, in the sixteenth century. All the alphabets are in the possession of the compiler of this essay, but they have not the monogram.

In 1780, Chretien de Mechel, a well-known artist and printseller at Basil, published forty-five engravings of a Death's Dance, as part of the works of Holbein, of which he intends to give a series. Mr. Coxe, in his travels, has given some account of this work, and informs us that they are done after some small drawings by Holbein, sketched with a pen, and slightly shaded with Indian ink; that these drawings were purchased by Mr. Fleischman, of Strasburg, at Crozat's sale at Paris, and are now in the collection of Prince Gallitzin, Minister from the Empress of Russia to the court of Vienna, at which last place he had frequent opportunities of seeing and admiring them. He further adds, that Hollar copied these drawings, an opinion which will admit of some doubt. Mons. De Mechel's remark, that from the dresses and character of several of the figures, it is probable the drawings were sketched in England, as well as Mr. Coxe's conjecture that they were in the Arundelian collection, will appear but slightly founded to any one conversant in the dresses of the French and German nations at that period, to which they bear at least an equal resemblance: again, one of the cuts represents a King sitting at table under a canopy, powdered with Fleurs de lis, whose figure has a remarkable affinity to the portraits of Francis I. If these drawings were copied from the celebrated wooden cuts, they must have

been done after the year 1547, as eight of them did not appear till that time.

But it has entirely escaped the knowledge of all the biographers of Holbein, that he painted a Dance of Death in fresco, upon the walls of the palace of Whitehall, which was consumed by fire in 1697. This curious fact is ascertained from two sets of nineteen very indifferent etchings from the wooden cuts, by one Nieuhoff; they were never published, but copies of them presented to the artist's friends, with manuscript dedications in the Dutch language, in which he speaks of the above-mentioned paintings at Whitehall. The book has the following title engraved in a border: "Imagines Mortis, or the Dead Dance of Hans Holbeyn, Painter of King Henry the VIIIth." The author, in one of these dedications, addressed to the Right Honourable William Benting, informs him, that "he had met with the scarce little work of H. Holbeyn in wood, which he had himself painted as large as life in fresco, on the walls of Whitehall; that he had followed the original as nearly as possible, and had presumed to lay his copy before him as being born in the same palace; that he considered the partiality which every one has for the place of his nativity, and that therefore an account of what was curious and remarkable therein, and of what was then no more, as being destroyed by a fatal fire, must of course prove acceptable, particularly as there were hardly any more re-

mains of the palace left than his own dwelling." He then states, that the design of the painter resembled that of the founder of the Greek monarchy, who ordered these words to be written, to remind him of his mortality: "Remember, Philip, that thou art a man!" and proceeds to describe in a very quaint manner the different subjects of his work. The dedication to the other copy is nearly in similar words, and addressed to Mynheer Heymans, who appears, in consideration of his singular merits, to have had a dwelling assigned him in the palace at Whitehall. From the hand-writing and Dutch names in this work, it is evidently of the time of William III. but of the artist no memorial is preserved; however, the importance of the fact which he has recorded, will render him a valuable personage in the opinion of the lovers of the arts.

After what has been said then, it is to be hoped that no additional evidence will be requisite to shew that Holbein did not invent the subjects, nor execute the cuts belonging to the Dance of Death, which is usually ascribed to him; that he painted it, however, and most assuredly more than once, seems to be beyond the possibility of doubt.

It only remains to give some account of the prints which are the immediate object of this publication, and to which it is hoped the preceding introduction will not have appeared uninteresting. It has been commonly supposed that Hollar copied these prints from the original cuts; but Mr.

Coxe* thinks he followed the drawings engraved by De Mechel, which he imagines to have been in the Arundelian collection. Both these opinions seem erroneous; for many of Hollar's prints are materially different, as well from the cuts as the drawings; and are, with two or three exceptions, very close copies of the cuts already mentioned to have been first published in 1555, with the mark of *A* †. He must therefore have either had before him both the sets of wooden cuts, or have copied the paintings at Whitehall; for his acknowledged fidelity would have hardly suffered him to depart from his originals, whatever they were, and as they now remain, they are not correct copies of any single existing model.

Hollar's prints were first published in 1651 ‡, with borders designed by Abraham à Diepenbeke, and afterwards without the borders. In this latter impression the letters *AB. i.* occur upon every print, and are intended for "Holbein invenit," as ap-

* Travels in Swisserland.

† It is not a little remarkable, that almost the same variations from the original cuts, are to be found in those of the edition of 1555, in De Mechel's prints, and in Hollar's etchings; a circumstance which renders it probable that these last were all copied from the same originals, which might have been the work of Holbein, to whom the variations may be likewise attributed.

‡ In 1682 there appeared engraved copies of the Dance of Death, in a work entitled "Theatrum mortis humanæ," by J. Weichard. These engravings are within borders of fruit, flowers, and animals, which are executed with an uncommon degree of elegance.

appears from some other of Hollar's prints, which have upon them these words at length. No panegyric is here wanting upon the works of this admirable artist; they are sufficiently known and esteemed by every collector of taste, and particularly his Dance of Death. The plates, which appear to have been but little used, have been till lately preserved in a noble family, and impressions from them are once more presented to the public, without the least alteration*.

Vertue, in his description of Hollar's works, mentions that he engraved a reverse of the first print, an additional one without a border, representing the rich man disregarding the prayers of the poor; and three others from the *set after Holbein*, with four Latin verses at bottom. He also engraved the six first letters of the alphabet, adorned with small figures of a Death's Dance, and one large plate of the same subject for Dugdale's St. Paul's, and the Monasticon; but this last plate is only a copy from an old wooden cut prefixed to Lydgate's Dance of Macaber, at the end of his *Fall of Princes*, printed by Tottell in 1554, and was not intended to represent the Dance of Death at St. Paul's, as Mr. Warton has supposed†, but only as an emblematical frontispiece to the verses.

* In the present edition, however, it was found requisite that the plates should be retouched, and it has been done with the utmost attention to the preservation of their original spirit and character.

† *Observ. on Spencer*, vol. ii. 117.

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† Observ. on Spencer, vol. ii. 117.