



DANCE OF MACABER.

THE

Dance of Macaber.

THE

DANCE OF THE SHEPHERDS.

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THE
DANCE OF MACABER.

JOHN LYDGATE, a monk of the Benedictine Abbey of Bury in Suffolk, flourished in the reign of Henry VI. He was an uncommon ornament of his profession, his genius being so lively, and his accomplishments so numerous, that it is hardly probable the holy father St. Benedict would have acknowledged him for a genuine disciple. After a short education at Oxford, he travelled into France and Italy, and returned a complete master of the language and the literature of both countries. He chiefly studied the Italian and French poets, particularly Dante, Boccaccio, and Alain Chartier; and became so distinguished a proficient in polite learning, that he opened a school in his monastery for teaching the sons of the nobility the arts of versification, and the elegancies of composition. Yet although philology was his object, he was not unfamiliar with the fashionable philosophy; he was not only a poet and a rhetorician, but a geometrician, an astronomer, a theologian, and a disputant. He made considerable addition to those amplifications

of our language, in which Chaucer, Gower, and Occleve led the way, and is the first of our writers whose style is clothed with that perspicuity in which the English phraseology appears at this day to an English reader. His muse was of universal access, and he was not only the poet of his monastery, but of the world in general. If a disguising was intended by the Company of Goldsmiths, a mask before his Majesty at Eltham, a Maygame for the Sheriffs and Aldermen of London, a mumming before the Lord Mayor, a procession of pageants from the creation, for the festival of Corpus Christi, or a carrol for the coronation, Lydgate was consulted, and gave the poetry.

Mr. Warton, from whose elegant History of English Poetry the above account of Lydgate is extracted, further informs us, that he translated Macaber's Dance of Death from the French, *at the request of the Chapter of St. Paul's*, to be inscribed under the painting of that subject in their cloister; but it appears from the verses themselves, that he undertook the translation at the instance of a French clerk. Lydgate's poem is neither a literal or complete translation of the French version from Macaber*: and this he himself confesses,

“ Out of the French I drough it of intent

“ Not word by word, but following in substance.”

* This French translation has been erroneously given to Michael Marot, who was not born at the time when it was first

Again, the number of the characters in Lydgate is much less than in the French, being only thirty-five, whilst the other contains seventy-six, and he has not only omitted several, but supplied their places with others; so that if these lines were inscribed under the painting at Saint Paul's, it must have differed materially from that at Saint Innocent's at Paris. Stowe, upon whose sole authority all the information concerning this painting depends, says, that on the north side of Saint Paul's church was a great cloister, environing a plot of ground, of old time called Pardon Church-yard, whereof Thomas More, Dean of Saint Paul's, was either the first builder, or a great benefactor, and was buried there. About this cloister was artificially and richly painted the Dance of Machabray, a Dance of Death commonly called the Dance of Paul's; *the like whereof was painted about St. Innocent's cloister at Paris.* The metres or poetry of this Dance were translated out of the French into English, by John Lydgate, Monk of Bury. He adds, that this was done at the expence of Jenken Carpenter*, in the reign of Henry the VIth, so that the poem and the painting appear to have been finished about the same time.

printed. See De Bure Bibliog. Instruct. No. 3109, and Warton's Correct. and Add. to Vol. II. of Hist. of Engl. Poetry.

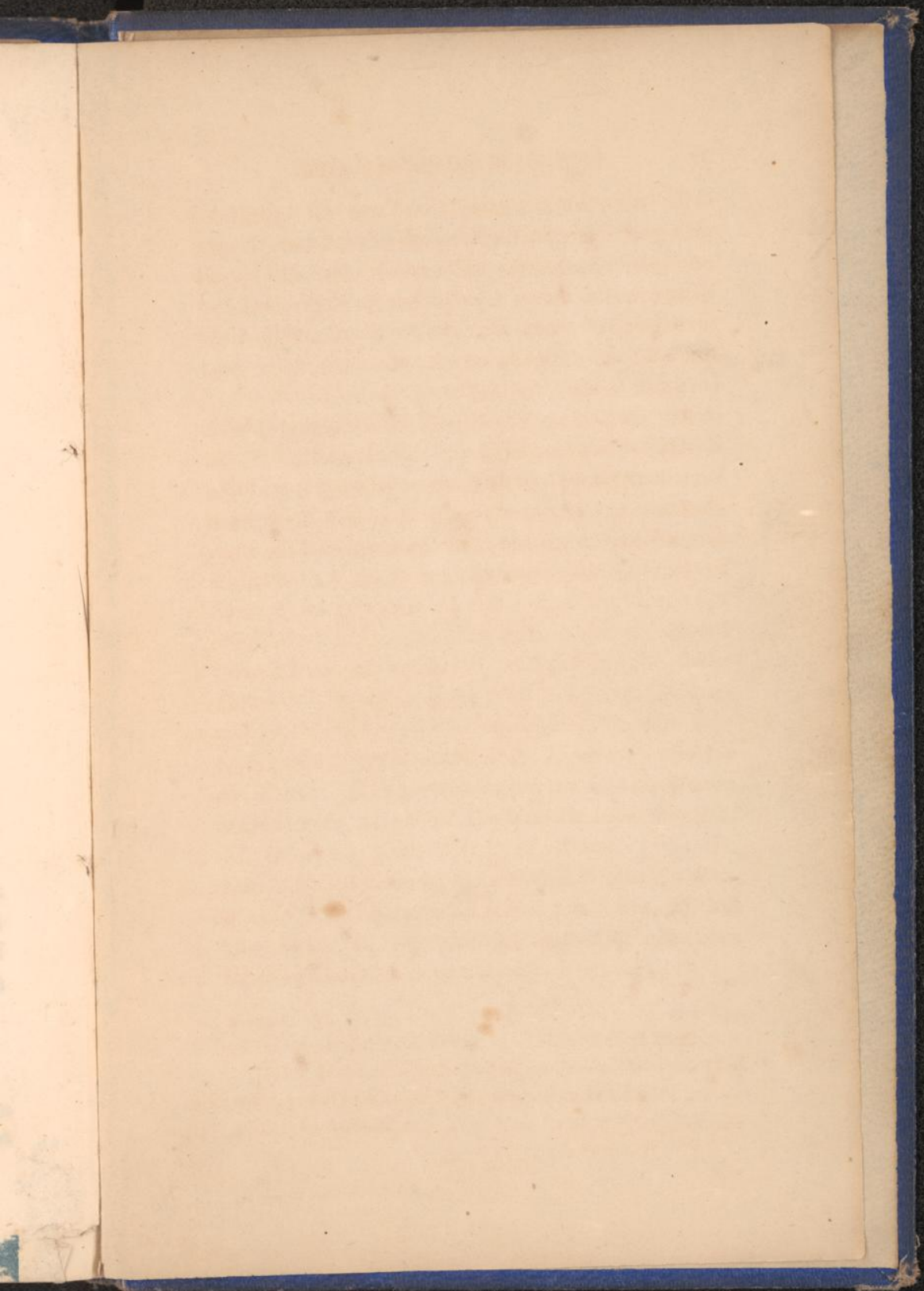
* This Jenken Carpenter was town-clerk of London, 1430, and executor of Richard Whittington. Weever's Funeral Monum. p. 379, fo. edition.

In the year 1549, on the tenth of April, the whole of this cloister, together with the Dance of Death, the tombs, and monuments, was begun to be pulled down by command of the Duke of Somerset, so that nothing thereof was left but the bare plot of ground, which was afterwards converted into a garden for the petty Canons*.

All the ancient Dances of Death, though evidently to be deduced from one original, differed very materially in the number and design of the characters. They uniformly appear to have been accompanied with Macaber's verses, or more probably with imitations of them.

* Stowe's Survey.

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In the year 1843, on the tenth of April, the whole of the circles, together with the Dept. of Death, the touths, and individuals, was begun to be pulled down by command of the Duke of Somerset, so that in the afternoon the whole of the ground, which was afterwards converted into a garden for the year 1844.

All the scenes described in the preceding evidently to be deduced from our original, differed very materially in the number and design of the characters. They certainly appear to have been accompanied with Macabre events, or more probably with instances of them.

THE END