




THE

Dance of Death.

CHAPTER I.

Personification of Death, and other modes of representing it among the Ancients.—Same subject during the Middle Ages.—Erroneous notions respecting Death.—Monumental absurdities.—Allegorical pageant of the Dance of Death represented in early times by living persons in churches and cemeteries.—Some of these dances described.—Not unknown to the Ancients.—Introduction of the infernal, or dance of Macaber.

HE manner in which the poets and artists of antiquity have symbolized or personified Death, has excited considerable discussion; and the various opinions of Lessing, Herder, Klotz, and other controversialists have only tended to demonstrate that the ancients adopted many different modes to accomplish this purpose. Some writers have maintained that they exclusively represented Death as a mere skeleton; whilst others have contended that this figure, so frequently to be found upon gems and sepulchral monuments, was never intended to

personify the extinction of human life, but only as a simple and abstract representation. They insist that the ancients adopted a more elegant and allegorical method for this purpose; that they represented human mortality by various symbols of destruction, as birds devouring lizards and serpents, or pecking fruits and flowers; by goats browsing on vines; cocks fighting, or even by a Medusa's or Gorgon's head. The Romans seem to have adopted Homer's¹ definition of Death as the eldest brother of Sleep; and, accordingly, on several of their monumental and other sculptures we find two winged genii as the representatives of the above personages, and sometimes a genius bearing a sepulchral vase on his shoulder, and with a torch reversed in one of his hands. It is very well known that the ancients often symbolized the human soul by the figure of a butterfly, an idea that is extremely obvious and appropriate, as well as elegant. In a very interesting sepulchral monument, engraved in p. 7 of Spon's *Miscellanea Eruditæ Antiquitatis*, a prostrate corpse is seen, and over it a butterfly that has just escaped from the *mouth* of the deceased, or as Homer expresses it, "from the teeth's inclosure."² The above excellent antiquary has added the following very curious sepulchral inscription that was found in Spain, HÆREDIBVS MEIS MANDO ETIAM CINERE VTMEO VOLITET EBRIVS PAPILIO OSSA IPSA TEGANT MEA, &c. Rejecting this heathen symbol altogether, the painters and engravers of the middle ages have substituted a small human figure escaping from the mouths of dying persons, as it were, breathing out their souls.

We have, however, the authority of Herodotus, that in the banquets of the Egyptians a person was intro-

¹ *Iliad*, and after him Virgil, *Æn.* vi. 278.

² *Iliad* IX. On an ancient gem likewise in Ficoroni's *Gemmæ Antiquæ Litteratæ*, Tab. viii. No. 1, a human skull typifies mortality, and a butterfly immortality.

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duced who carried round the table at which the guests were seated the figure of a dead body, placed on a coffin, exclaiming at the same time, "Behold this image of what yourselves will be; eat and drink therefore, and be happy."³ Montfaucon has referred to an ancient manuscript to prove that this sentiment was conveyed in a Lacedæmonian proverb,⁴ and it occurs also in the beautiful poem of Coppa, ascribed to Virgil, in which he is supposed to invite Mæcenas to a rural banquet. It concludes with these lines:—

Pone merum et talos; pereat qui crastina curat,
Mors aurem vellens, vivite ait, venio.

The phrase of pulling the ear is admonitory, that organ being regarded by the ancients as the seat of memory. It was customary also, and for the same reason, to take an oath by laying hold of the ear. It is impossible on this occasion to forget the passage in Isaiah xxii. 13, afterwards used by Saint Paul, on the beautiful parable in Luke xii. Plutarch also, in his banquet of the wise men, has remarked that the Egyptians exhibited a skeleton at their feasts to remind the parties of the brevity of human life; the same custom, as adopted by the Romans, is exemplified in Petronius's description of the feast of Trimalchio, where a jointed puppet, as a skeleton, is brought in by a boy, and this practice is also noticed by Silius Italicus:

. Egyptia tellus
Claudit odorato post funus stantia Saxo
Corpora, et a mensis exsanguem haud separat umbram.⁵

Some have imagined that these skeletons were intended to represent the larvæ and lemures, the good and evil shadows of the dead, that occasionally made their appearance on earth. The larvæ, or lares, were of a bene-

³ Lib. ii. 78.

⁴ Diarium, p. 212.

⁵ Lib. xiii. l. 474.

ficent nature, friendly to man; in other words, the good demon of Socrates. The lemures, spirits of mischief and wickedness. The larva in Petronius was designed to admonish only, not to terrify; and this is proved from Seneca: "Nemo tam puer est ut Cerberum timeat et tenebras, et larvarum habitum nudis ossibus cohærentium."⁶ There is, however, some confusion even among the ancients themselves, as to the respective qualities of the larvæ and lemures. Apuleius, in his noble and interesting defence against those who accused him of practising magic, tells them, "Tertium mendacium vestrum fuit, macilentam vel omnino evisceratam formam diri cadaveris fabricatam prorsus horribilem et larvalem;" and afterwards, when producing the image of his peculiar Deity, which he usually carried about him, he exclaims, "En vobis quem scelestus ille sceletum nominabat! Hiccine est sceletus? Hæccine est larva? Hoccine est quod appellitabatis Dæmonium."⁷ It is among Christian writers and artists that the personification of Death as a skeleton is intended to convey terrific ideas, conformably to the system that Death is the punishment for original sin.

The circumstances that lead to Death, and not our actual dissolution, are alone of a terrific nature; for Death is, in fact, the end and cure of all the previous sufferings and horrors with which it is so frequently accompanied. In the dark ages of monkish bigotry and superstition, the deluded people, seduced into a belief that the fear of Death was acceptable, appear to have derived one of their principal gratifications in contemplating this necessary termination of humanity, yet amidst ideas and impressions of the most horrible and disgusting nature: hence the frequent allusions to it, in all possible ways, among their preachers, and the

⁶ Epist. xxiv.

⁷ Apolog. p. 506, 507. edit. Delph. 4to.

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personification of it in their books of religious offices, as well as in the paintings and sculptures of their ecclesiastical and other edifices. They seemed to have entirely banished from their recollection the consolatory doctrines of the Gospel, which contribute so essentially to dissipate the terrors of Death, and which enable the more enlightened Christian to abide that event with the most perfect tranquillity of mind. There are, indeed, some exceptions to this remark, for we may still trace the imbecility of former ages on too many of our sepulchral monuments, which are occasionally tricked out with the silly appendages of Death's heads, bones, and other useless remains of mortality, equally repulsive to the imagination and to the elegance of art.

If it be necessary on any occasion to personify Death, this were surely better accomplished by means of some graceful and impressive figure of the Angel of Death, for whom we have the authority of Scripture; and such might become an established representative. The skulls and bones of modern, and the entire skeletons of former times, especially during the middle ages, had, probably, derived their origin from the vast quantities of sanctified human relics that were continually before the eyes, or otherwise in the recollection of the early Christians. But the favourite and principal emblem of mortality among our ancestors appears to have been the moral and allegorical pageant familiarly known by the appellation of the *Dance of Death*, which it has, in part, derived from the grotesque, and often ludicrous attitudes of the figures that composed it, and especially from the active and sarcastical mockery of the ruthless tyrant upon its victims, which may be, in a great measure, attributed to the whims and notions of the artists who were employed to represent the subject.

It is very well known to have been the practice in very early times to profane the temples of the Deity with indecorous dancing, and ludicrous processions,

either within or near them, in imitation, probably, of similar proceedings in Pagan times. Strabo mentions a custom of this nature among the Celtiberians,⁸ and it obtained also among several of the northern nations before their conversion to Christianity. A Roman council, under Pope Eugenius II. in the 9th century, has thus noticed it: "Ut sacerdotes admoneant viros ac mulieres, qui festis diebus ad ecclesiam occurrunt, ne *ballando* et turpia verba decantando choros teneant, ac ducunt, similitudinem Paganorum peragendo." Canciani mentions an ancient bequest of money for a dance in honour of the Virgin.⁹

These riotous and irreverent tripudists and caperers appear to have possessed themselves of the churchyards to exhibit their dancing fooleries, till this profanation of consecrated ground was punished, as monkish histories inform us, with divine vengeance. The well-known Nuremberg Chronicle¹⁰ has recorded, that in the time of the Emperor Henry the Second, whilst a priest was saying mass on Christmas Eve, in the church of Saint Magnus, in the diocese of Magdeburg, a company of eighteen men and ten women amused themselves with dancing and singing in the church-yard, to the hindrance of the priest in his duty. Notwithstanding his admonition, they refused to desist, and even derided the words he addressed to them. The priest being greatly provoked at their conduct, prayed to God and Saint Magnus that they might remain dancing and singing for a whole year without intermission, and so it happened; neither dew nor rain falling upon them. Hunger and fatigue were set at defiance, nor were their shoes or garments in the least worn away. At the end of the year they were released from their situation by Herebert, the archbishop of the diocese in which the event took place, and obtained forgiveness before the

⁸ Lib. iii.

⁹ Leg. Antiq. iii. 84

¹⁰ Folio clxxxvii.

altar of the church; but not before the daughter of a priest and two others had perished; the rest, after sleeping for the space of three whole nights, died soon afterwards. Ubert, one of the party, left this story behind him, which is elsewhere recorded, with some variation and additional matter. The dance is called St. Vitus's, and the girl is made the daughter of a churchwarden, who having taken her by the arm, it came off, but she continued dancing. By the continual motion of the dancers they buried themselves in the earth to their waists. Many princes and others went to behold this strange spectacle, till the bishops of Cologne and Hildesheim, and some other devout priests, by their prayers, obtained the deliverance of the culprits; four of the party, however, died immediately, some slept three days and three nights, some three years, and others had trembling in their limbs during the whole of their lives. The Nuremberg Chronicle, crowded as it is with wood-cut embellishments by the hand of Wolgemut, the master of Albert Durer, has not omitted to exhibit the representations of the above unhappy persons, equally correct, no doubt, as the story itself, though the same warranty cannot be offered for a similar representation, in Gottfried's Chronicle and that copious repertory of monstrosities, Boistuan and Belleforest's *Histoires Prodigieuses*. The Nuremberg Chronicle¹¹ has yet another relation on this subject of some persons who continued dancing and singing on a bridge whilst the eucharist was passing over it. The bridge gave way in the middle, and from one end of it 200 persons were precipitated into the river Moselle, the other end remaining so as to permit the priest and his host to pass uninjured.

In that extremely curious work, the *Manuel de Pêché*, usually ascribed to Bishop Grosthead, the pious author,

¹¹ Folio ccxvii.

after much declamation against the vices of the times,
has this passage:—

Karoles ne lutes ne deit nul fere,
En seint eglise ki me voil crere;
Kas en cimetre karoler,
Utrage est grant u lutter.¹²

He then relates the story in the Nuremberg Chronicle, for which he quotes the book of Saint Clement. Grosthead's work was translated about the year 1300 into English verse by Robert Mannyng, commonly called Robert de Brunne, a Gilbertine canon. His translation often differs from his original, with much amplification and occasional illustrations by himself. As the account of the Nuremberg story varies so materially, and as the scene is laid in England, it has been thought worth inserting.

Karolles wrastelynges or somour games,
Whosoever haunteth any swyche shames,
Yn cherche other yn cherche yerd,
Of sacrilage he may be aferd;
Or entyrludes or syngynge,
Or tabure bete or other ppyngge;
All swyche thyng forboden es,
Whyle the prest stondest at messe;
But for to leve in cherche for to daunce,
Y shall you telle a full grete chaunce,
And y trow the most that fel,
Ys sothe as y you telle.
And fyl thys chaunce yn thys londe,
Yn Ingland as y undyrstonde,
Yn a kynges tyme that hyght Edward,
Fyl this chaunce that was so hard.
Hyt was upon crystemesse nyzt
That twelve folys a karolle dyzt,
Yn Wodehed, as hyt were yn cuntok;¹³
They come to a toune men calle Cowek;¹⁴
The cherche of the toune that they to come,
Ys of Seynt Magne that suffred martyrdome,

¹² Bibl. Reg. 20 B. xiv. and Harl. MS. 4657.

¹³ Contest.

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Of Seynt Bukcestre hyt ys also,
 Seynt Magnes suster, that they come to;
 Here names of all thus fonde y wryte,
 And as y wote now shal ye wryte
 Here lodesman¹⁵ that made hem glew,¹⁶
 Thus ys wryte he hyzte¹⁷ Gerlew;
 Twey maydens were yn here coveyne,
 Mayden Merswynde¹⁸ and Wybessyne;
 All these came thedyr for that enchesone, } doghtyr
 Of the prestes of the toune.
 The prest hyzt Robert as y can ame,
 Azone hyzt hys sone by name,
 Hys doghter that there men wulde have,
 Thus ys wryte that she hyzt Ave.
 Echone consented to o wyl,
 Who shuld go Ave out to tyl,
 They graunted echone out to sende,
 Bothe Wybessyne and Merswynde:
 These women zede and tolled¹⁹ her oute,
 Wyth hem to karolle the cherche aboute,
 Benne ordeyned here karollyng,
 Gerlew endyted what they shuld syng.
 Thys ys the karolle that they sunge,
 As telleth the Latyn tunge,
 Equitabat Bevo per sylvam frondosam, }
 Ducebat secum Merwyndam formosam,
 Quid stamus cur non imus.
 By the levede²⁰ wode rode Bevolyne,
 Wyth hym he ledde feyre Merwyne,
 Why stonde we why go we noght:
 Thys ys the karolle that Grylsly wroght,
 Thys songe sung they yn chercheyerd,
 Of foly were they nothyng aferd.

The party continued dancing and carolling all the matins time, and till the mass began; when the priest, hearing the noise, came out to the church porch, and desired them to leave off dancing, and come into the church to hear the service; but they paid him no regard whatever, and continued their dance. The priest, now extremely

¹⁵ Leader.

¹⁶ Glee.

¹⁷ Called.

¹⁸ A name borrowed from Merwyn, Abbess of Ramsey, temp. Reg. Edgari.

¹⁹ Took.

²⁰ Leafy.

incensed, prayed to God in favour of St. Magnes, the patron of the church :

That swych a venjeauce were on hem sent,
Are they out of that stede²¹ were went,
That myzt ever ryzt so wende,
Unto that tyme twelvemonth ende.
Yn the Latyne that y fonde thore,
He seyth not twelvemonth but evermore.

The priest had no sooner finished his prayer, than the hands of the dancers were so locked together that none could separate them for a twelvemonth :

The preste yede²² yn whan thys was done,
And comaunded hys sone Azone,
That shuld go swythe after Ave,
Oute of that karolle algate to have;
But al to late that wurde was sayde,
For on hem alle was the venjeauce leyde.
Azonde wende weyl for to spede
Unto the karolle asswythe he yede;
Hys syster by the arme he hente,
And the arme fro the body wente;
Men wundred alle that there wore,
And merveyle nowe ye here more;
For seythen he had the arme yn hand,
The body yode furth karoland,
And nother body ne the arme
Bled never blode colde ne warme;
But was as drye with al the haunche,
As of a stok were ryve a braunche.

Azone carries his sister's arm to the priest his father, and tells him the consequences of his rash curse. The priest, after much lamentation, buries the arm. The next morning it rises out of the grave; he buries it again, and again it rises. He buries it a third time, when it is cast out of the grave with considerable violence. He then carries it into the church that all might behold it. In the meantime the party continued dancing

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and singing, without taking any food or sleeping, "only a lepy wynke;" nor were they in the least affected by the weather. Their hair and nails ceased to grow, and their garments were neither soiled nor discoloured; but

Sunge that songge that the wo wrozt,
" Why stond we, why go we nozt."

To see this curious and woful sight, the emperor travels from Rome, and orders his carpenters and other artificers to inclose them in a building; but this could not be done, for what was set up one day fell down on the next, and no covering could be made to protect the sinners till the time of mercy that Christ had appointed arrived; when, at the expiration of the twelvemonth, and in the very same hour in which the priest had pronounced his curse upon them, they were separated, and "in the twynklyng of an eye" ran into the church and fell down in a swoon on the pavement, where they lay three days before they were restored. On their recovery they tell the priest that he will not long survive:

For to thy long home sone shalt thou wende,
All they ryse that yche tyde,
But Ave she lay dede besyde.

Her father dies soon afterwards. The emperor causes Ave's arm to be put into a vessel and suspended in the church as an example to the spectators. The rest of the party, although separated, travelled about, but always dancing; and as they had been inseparable before, they were now not permitted to remain together. Four of them went hopping to Rome, their clothes undergoing no change, and their hair and nails not continuing to grow

Bruning the Bysshope of Seynt Tolous,
Wrote thys tale so mervyclous;
Sethe was hys name of more renoun,
Men called him the Pope Leon;
Thys at the courte of Rome they wyte,
And yn the kronykeles hyt ys write;

Yn many stedys²³ beyounde the see,
 More than ys yn thys cuntre:
 Tharfor men seye an weyl ys trowed,
 The nere the cherche the further fro God.
 So fare men here by thys tale,
 Some holde it but a trotevale,²⁴
 Yn other stedys hyt ys ful dere,
 And for grete merveyle they wyl hyt here.

In the French copies the story is said to have been taken from the itinerary of St. Clement. The name of the girl who lost her arm is Marcent, and her brother's John.²⁵

Previously to entering upon the immediate subject of this Essay, it may be permitted to observe, that a sort of Death's dance was not unknown to the ancients. It was the revelry of departed souls in Elysium, as may be collected from the end of the fourth ode of Anacreon. Among the Romans this practice is exemplified in the following lines of Tibullus.

Sed me, quod facilis tenero sum semper Amori,
 Ipsa Venus campos ducit in Elysios.
 Hic choreæ cantusque vigent. . .²⁶

And Virgil has likewise alluded to it:

Pars pedibus plaudunt choreas et carmina dicunt.²⁷

In the year 1810 several fragments of sculptured sar-

²³ Places.

²⁴ A falsehood.

²⁵ Whoever may be desirous of inspecting other authorities for the story, may consult Vincent of Beauvais Speculum Historiale, lib. xxv. cap. 10; Krantz Saxonia, lib. iv.; Trithemii Chron. Monast. Hirsau-gensis; Chronicon Engelhusii ap. Leibnitz. Script. Brunsvicens. II. 1082; Chronicon. S. Ægidii, ap. Leibnitz. iii. 582; Cantipranus de apibus; & Cæsarius Heisterbach. de Miraculis; in whose works several *veracious* and amusing stories of other instances of divine vengeance against dancing in general may be found. The most entertaining of all the dancing stories is that of the friar and the boy, as it occurs among the popular penny histories, of which, in one edition at least, it is, undoubtedly, the very best.

²⁶ Lib. i. Eleg. iii.

²⁷ Æn. lib. vi. l. 44.

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cophagi were accidentally discovered near Cuma, on one of which were represented three dancing skeletons,²⁸ indicating, as it is ingeniously supposed, that the passage from death to another state of existence has nothing in it that is sorrowful, or capable of exciting fear. They seem to throw some light on the above lines from Virgil and Tibullus.

At a meeting of the Archæological Society at Rome, in December, 1831, M. Kestner exhibited a Roman lamp on which were three dancing skeletons, and such are said to occur in one of the paintings at Pompeii.

In the Grand Duke of Tuscany's museum at Florence there is an ancient gem, that, from its singularity and connexion with the present subject, is well deserving of notice. It represents an old man, probably a shepherd, clothed in a hairy garment. He sits upon a stone, his right foot resting on a globe, and is piping on a double flute, whilst a skeleton dances grotesquely before him. It might be a matter of some difficulty to explain the recondite meaning of this singular subject.²⁹

Notwithstanding the interdiction in several councils against the practice of dancing in churches and churchyards, it was found impossible to abolish it altogether; and it therefore became necessary that something of a similar, but more decorous, nature should be substituted, which, whilst it afforded recreation and amusement, might, at the same time, convey with it a moral and religious sensation. It is, therefore, extremely probable, that, in furtherance of this intention, the clergy contrived and introduced the Dance or Pageant of Death, or, as it was sometimes called, the Dance of Macaber, for reasons that will hereafter appear. Mr. Warton states, "that in many churches of France there was an

²⁸ Millin. Magaz. Encycl. 1813, tom. i. p. 200.

²⁹ Gori Mus. Florentin. tom. i. pl. 91, No. 3.

ancient show, or mimickry, in which all ranks of life were personated by the ecclesiastics, who danced together, and disappeared one after another."³⁰ Again, speaking of Lydgate's poem on this subject, he says, "these verses, founded on a sort of spiritual masquerade antiently celebrated in churches, &c."³¹ M. Barante, in his History of the Dukes of Burgundy, adverting to the entertainments that took place at Paris when Philip le Bon visited that city in 1424, observes, "that these were not solely made for the nobility, the common people being likewise amused from the month of August to the following season of Lent with the Dance of Death in the church yard of the Innocents, the English being particularly gratified with this exhibition, which included all ranks and conditions of men, Death being, morally, the principal character."³² Another French historian, M. de Villeneuve Bargemont, informs us that the Duke of Bedford celebrated his victory at Verneuil by a festival in the centre of the French capital. The rest of what this writer has recorded on the subject before us will be best given in his own words, "Nous voulons parler de cette fameuse *procession* qu'on vit defiler dans les rues de Paris, sous le nom de *danse Macabree ou infernale*, epouvantable divertissement, auquel présidoit un squelette ceint du diadème royal, tenant un sceptre dans ses mains décharnées et assis sur un trône resplendissant d'or et de pierreries. Ce spectacle repoussant, mélange odieux de deuil et de joie, inconnu jusqu'alors, et qui ne s'est jamais renouvelé, n'eut guere pour témoins que des soldats étrangers, ou quelques malheureux échappés à tous les fléaux réunis, et qui avoient vu descendre tous leurs parens, tous leurs amis, dans ces

³⁰ Hist. Engl. Poetry, vol. ii. p. 43, edit. 8vo. and Carpentier. Suppl. ad Ducang. v. Machabæorum chorea.

³¹ Id. ii. 364.

³² Hist. des Ducs des Bourgogne, tom. v. p. 1821.

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³³ Hist.

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sepulchres qu'on dépouilloit alors de leurs ossemens."³³ A third French writer has also treated the Dance of Death as a spectacle exhibited in like manner to the people of Paris.³⁴ M. Peignot, to whom the reader is obliged for these historical notices in his ingenious researches on the present subject, very plausibly conceives that their authors have entirely mistaken the sense of an old chronicle or journal under Charles VI. and VII. which he quotes in the following words.—“Item. L’an 1424 fut faite la Danse Maratre (pour Macabre) aux Innocens, et fut comencée environ le moys d’Aoust et achevée au karesme suivant. En l’an 1429 le cordelier Richard preschant aux Innocens estoit monté sur ung hault eschaffaut qui estoit près de toise et demie de hault, le dos tourné vers les charniers encontre la charounerie, à l’endroit de la danse Macabre.” He observes, that the Dance of Death at the Innocents, having been commenced in August and finished at the ensuing Lent, could not possibly be represented by living persons, but was only a painting, the large dimensions of which required six months to complete it; and that a single Death must, in the other case, have danced with every individual belonging to the scene.³⁵ He might have added, that such a proceeding would have been totally at variance with the florid, but most inaccurate, description by M. Barge-mont. The reader will, therefore, most probably feel inclined to adopt the opinion of M. Peignot, that the Dance of Death was not performed by living persons between 1424 and 1429.

But although M. Peignot may have triumphantly demonstrated that this subject was not exhibited by living persons at the above place and period, it by no

³³ Hist. de René d’Anjou, tom. i. p. 54.

³⁴ Dulaure. Hist. Physique, &c. de Paris, 1821, tom. ii. p. 552.

³⁵ Recherches sur les Danses des Morts. Dijon et Paris, 1826, 8vo. p. xxxiv. et seq.

means follows that it was not so represented at some other time, and on some other spot. Accordingly, in the archives of the cathedral of Besançon, there is preserved an article respecting a delivery made to one of the officers of Saint John the Evangelist of four measures of wine, to be given to those persons who performed the Dance of Death after mass was concluded. This is the article itself, "Sexcallus [seneschallus] solvat D. Joanni Caleti matriculario S. Joannis quatuor simasias vini per dictum matricularium exhibitas illis qui choream Machabeorum fecerunt 10 Julii, 1453, nuper lapsa hora misse in ecclesia S. Joannis Evangeliste propter capitulum provinciale fratrum Minorum."³⁶ This document then will set the matter completely at rest.

At what time the personified exhibition of this pageant commenced, or when it was discontinued cannot now be correctly ascertained. If, from a moral spectacle, it became a licentious ceremony, as is by no means improbable, in imitation of electing a boy-bishop, of the feast of fools, or other similar absurdities, its termination may be looked for in the authority of some ecclesiastical council at present not easily to be traced.

³⁶ *Mercure de France*, Sept. 1742. Carpentier. *Suppl. ad Ducang. v. Machabæorum chorea.*

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