

## CHAPTER IX.

*Further examination of Holbein's title.—Borbonius.—  
Biographical notice of Holbein.—Painting of a  
Dance of Death at Whitehall by him.*

**I**T may be necessary in the next place to make some further enquiry respecting the connection that Holbein is supposed to have had *at any time* with the subject of the Dance of Death.

The numerous errors that have been fallen into in making Holbein a participator in any manner whatever with the old Basle Macaber Dance, have been already noticed, and are indeed not worth the trouble of refuting. It is wholly improbable that he would interfere with so rude a piece of art; nor has his name been recorded among the artists who are known to have retouched or repaired it. The Macaber Dance at Basle, or any where else, is, therefore, with respect to Holbein, to be altogether laid aside; and if the argument before deduced from the important dedication to the edition of the justly celebrated wood-cuts published at Lyons in 1538 be of any value, his claim to their invention, at least to those in the first edition, must also be rejected.<sup>24</sup> There is indeed but very slight evidence, and none contemporary, that he painted any Dance of Death at Basle. The indefinite statements of Bishop Burnet and M. Patin, together with those of the numerous and

<sup>24</sup> On the same dedication are founded the opinions of Zani, De Murr, Meintel, and some others.

careless travellers who have followed blind leaders, and too often copied each other without the means or inclination of obtaining correct information, are deserving of very little attention. The circumstance of Holbein's having painted a Dance of Peasants somewhere in the above city, in conjunction with the usual mistake of ascribing to him the old Macaber Dance, seems to have occasioned the above erroneous statements as to a Dance of Death by his pencil. It is hardly possible that Zuinger, almost a contemporary, when describing the Dance of Peasants and other paintings by Holbein at Basle would have omitted the mention of any Dance of Death:<sup>25</sup> but even admitting the former existence of such a painting, it would not constitute him the inventor of the designs in the Lyons work. He might have imitated or copied those designs, or the wood-cuts themselves, or perhaps have painted subjects that were different from either.

We are now to take into consideration some very clear and important evidence that Holbein actually *did paint a Dance of Death*. This is to be found in the *Nuge* of Borbonius in the following verses:

*De morte picta à Hanso pictore nobili.*

Dum mortis Hansus pictor imaginum exprimit,  
Tanta arte mortem retulit, ut mors vivere  
Videatur ipsa: et ipse se immortalibus  
Parem Diis fecerit, operis hujus gloria.<sup>26</sup>

It has been already demonstrated that these lines could not refer to the old painting of the Macaber Dance at the Dominican convent, whilst, from the important dedication to the edition of the wood-cuts first published at Lyons in 1538, it is next to impossible that that work could then have been in Borbonius's

<sup>25</sup> Zuinger methodus apodemica. Basil, 1557. 4to. p. 199.

<sup>26</sup> P. 427, edit. Lugd. apud Gryphium, and p. 445, edit. Basil.

contemplation. It appears from several places in his *Nugæ* that he was in England in 1535, at which time Holbein drew his portrait in such a manner as to excite his gratitude and admiration in another copy of verses.<sup>27</sup> This was probably the chalk drawing still preserved in the fine collection of portraits of the eminent persons in the court of Henry VIII. formerly at Kensington, and thence removed to Buckingham House, and which has been copied in an elegant wood-cut, that first appeared in the edition of the *Paidagogeion* of Borbonius, Lyons, 1536, and afterward in two editions of his *Nugæ*. It is inscribed NIC. BORBONIUS VANDOP. ANNO ÆTATIS XXXII. 1535. He returned to Lyons in 1536, and it is known that he was there in 1538, when he probably wrote the complimentary lines in Holbein's Biblical designs a short time before their publication, either out of friendship to the painter, or at the instance of the Lyons publisher with whom he was certainly connected.

Now if Borbonius, during his residence at Lyons, had been assured that the designs in the wood-cuts of the Dance of Death were the production of Holbein, would not his before-mentioned lines on that subject have been likewise introduced into the Lyons edition of it, or at least into some subsequent editions, in none of which is any mention whatever made of Holbein, although the work was continued even after the death of that artist? The application, therefore, of Borbonius's lines must be sought for elsewhere; but it is greatly to be regretted that he has not adverted to the place where the painting, as he seems to call it, was made.

Very soon after the calamitous fire at Whitehall in 1697, which consumed nearly the whole of that palace, a person calling himself T. Nieuhoff Piccard, probably belonging to the household of William the Third, and a

<sup>27</sup> *Nugæ*, lib. vi. carm. 12.

man who appears to have been an amateur artist, made the etchings in the article IX. already described in p. 130. Copies of them were presented to some of his friends, with manuscript dedications to them. Three of these copies have been seen by the author of this Dissertation, and as the dedications differ from each other, and are of very considerable importance on the present occasion, the following extracts from them are here translated and transcribed :

“ TO MYNHEER HEYMANS.

“ Sir,—The costly palace of Whitehall, erected by Cardinal Wolsey, and the residence of King Henry VIII. contains, among other performances of art, a *Dance of Death*, painted by Holbein in its galleries, which, through an unfortunate conflagration, has been reduced to ashes ; and even the little work which he has engraved with his own hand, and which I have copied as near as possible, is so scarce, that it is known only to a few lovers of art. And since the court has thought proper, in consideration of your singular deserts, to cause a dwelling to be built for you at Whitehall, I imagined it would not be disagreeable to you to be made acquainted with the former decorations of that palace. It will not appear strange that the artist should have chosen the above subject for ornamenting the *royal* walls, if we consider that the founder of the Greek monarchy directed that he should be daily reminded of the admonition, ‘Remember, Philip, that thou art a man.’ In like manner did Holbein with his pencil give tongues to these walls to impress not only the king and his court, but every one who viewed them with the same reflection.”

He then proceeds to describe each of the subjects, and concludes with some moral observations.

In another copy of these etchings the dedication is to

“The high, noble, and wellborn Lord William Benting, Lord of Rhoon, Pendrecht, &c.”

“Sir,—In the course of my constant love and pursuit of works of art, it has been my good fortune to meet with that scarce little work of Hans Holbein neatly engraved on wood, and which he himself had painted as large as life in fresco on the walls of Whitehall. In the copy which I presume to lay before you, as being born in the same palace, I have followed the original as nearly as possible, and considering the partiality which every one has for the place of his birth, a description of what is remarkable and curious therein and now no longer existing on account of its destruction by a fatal fire, must needs prove acceptable, as no other remains whatever have been left of that once so famous court of King Henry VIII. built by Cardinal Wolsey, than your own dwelling.”

He then repeats the story of Philip of Macedon, and the account of the subjects of his etchings.

At the end of this dedication there is a fragment of another, the beginning of which is lost. The following passages only in it are worthy of notice. “The residence of King William.” “I flatter myself with a familiar acquaintance with Death, since I have already lived long enough to seem to be buried alive, &c.” In other respects, the same, in substance, as the preceding.

It is almost needless to advert to M. Nieuhoff Piccard’s mistake in asserting that Holbein made the engravings which he copied; but it would have been of some importance if, instead of his pious ejaculations, he had described all the subjects that Holbein painted on the walls of the galleries at Whitehall. He must have used some edition of the wood-cuts posterior to that of 1545, which did not contain the subjects of the German

soldier, the fool, and the blind man, all of which he has introduced. It is possible, however, that he has given us all the subjects that were then remaining, the rest having become decayed or obliterated from dampness and neglect, and even those which then existed would soon afterwards perish when the remains of the old palace were removed. His copies are by no means faithful, and seem to be rather the production of an amateur than of a regular artist. For his greater convenience, he appears to have preferred using the wood engravings instead of the paintings; and it is greatly to be regretted that we have no better or further account of them, especially of the time at which they were executed. The lives of Holbein that we possess are uniformly defective in chronological arrangement. There seems to be a doubt whether the Earl of Arundel recommended him to visit England; but certain it is that in the year 1526 he came to London with a letter of that date addressed by Erasmus to Sir Thomas More, accompanied with his portrait, with which More was so well satisfied that he retained him at his house at Chelsea upwards of two years, until Henry VIII. from admiration of his works, appointed him his painter, with apartments at Whitehall. In 1529 he visited Basle, but returned to England in 1530. In 1535 he drew the portrait of his friend Nicholas Bourbon or Borbonius at London, probably the before-mentioned crayon drawing at Buckingham House, or some duplicate of it. In 1538 he painted the portrait of Sir Richard Southwell, a privy counsellor to Henry VIII. which was afterwards in the gallery of the Grand Duke of Tuscany.<sup>28</sup> About this time the magistrates of the city of Basle settled an annuity on him, but conditionally that he should return in two years to his native place and

<sup>28</sup> Baldinucci notizie d' é professori del disegno, tom. iii. p. 317, 4to. edit. where the inscription on it is given.

family, with which terms he certainly did not comply, preferring to remain in England. In the last-mentioned year he was sent by the king into Burgundy to paint the portrait of the Duchess of Milan, and in 1539 to Germany to paint that of Anne of Cleves. In some household accounts of Henry VIII. there are payments to him in 1538, 1539, 1540, and 1541, on account of his salary, which appears to have been thirty pounds per annum.<sup>29</sup> From this time little more is recorded of him till 1553, when he painted Queen Mary's portrait, and shortly afterwards died of the plague in London in 1554.

In the absence of positive evidence it may surely be allowed to substitute probable conjecture; and as it cannot be clearly proved that Holbein painted a Dance of Death at Basle, may not the before-mentioned verses of Borbonius refer to his painting at Whitehall, and which the poet must himself have seen? It is no objection that Borbonius remained a year only in England, when his portrait was painted by his friend Holbein in 1535, or that the verses did not make their appearance till 1538, for they seem rather to fix the date of the painting, if really belonging to it, between those years; and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Borbonius would hold some intercourse with the painter, even after leaving England, as is indeed apparent from other compliments bestowed on him in his *Nugæ*, the contents of which are by no means chronologically arranged, and many of the poems known to have been written long before their publication. The lines in question might have been written any where, and at any time, and this may be very safely stated until the real time in which the Whitehall painting was made shall be ascertained.

In one of Vanderdort's manuscript catalogues of the pictures and rarities transported from St. James's to

<sup>29</sup> Norfolk MS. 97, now in the Brit. Museum.

Whitehall, and placed there in the newly erected cabinet room of Charles I. and in which several works by Holbein are mentioned, there is the following article: "A little piece where Death with a green garland about his head, stretching both his arms to apprehend a Pilate in the habit of one of the spiritual Prince Electors of Germany. Copied by Isaac Oliver from Holbein."<sup>30</sup> There cannot be a doubt that this refers to the subject of the Elector, as painted by Holbein in the Dance of Death at Whitehall, proving at the same time the identity of the painting with the wood-cuts, whatever may be the inference.

Sandart, after noticing a remarkable portrait of Henry VIII. at Whitehall, states, that "there yet remains in that palace *another work* by Holbein that constitutes him the Apelles of the time."<sup>31</sup> This is certainly very like an allusion to a Dance of Death.

It is by no means improbable that Mathew Prior may have alluded to Holbein's painting at Whitehall, as it is not likely that he would be acquainted with any other.

Our term of life depends not on our deed,  
 Before our birth our funeral was decreed,  
 Nor aw'd by foresight, nor misled by chance,  
 Imperious death directs the ebon lance,  
 Peoples great Henry's tombs, and leads up Holbein's Dance.  
*Ode to the Memory of George Villiers.*

<sup>30</sup> Harl. MS. 4718.

<sup>31</sup> Acad. Pictur. 239.