

## CHAPTER XV.

*Initial or capital Letters with the Dance of Death.*

It is very well known that the use of initial or capital letters, especially with figures of any kind, is not coeval with the invention of printing. It was some time before they were introduced at all, a blank being left, or else a small letter printed for the illuminators to cover or fill up, as they had been accustomed to do in manuscripts; for, although the art of printing nearly put an end to the occupation of that ingenious class of artists, they continued to be employed by the early printers to decorate their books with elegant initials, and particularly to illuminate the first pages of them with beautiful borders of foliage or animals, for the purpose of giving them the appearance of manuscripts.

It has more than once been most erroneously asserted by bibliographers and writers on typography, that Erhard Ratdolt, a printer at Venice, was the first person who made use of initial letters about the year 1477; for instances are not wanting of their introduction into some of the earliest printed books. Among the latter the most beautiful specimen of an ornamented capital letter is the B in the Psalter of 1457, of which Dr. Dibdin has given a very faithful copy in vol. I. p. 107, of the *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*. This truly elegant letter seems to have been regarded as the only one of its kind; but, in a fragment of an undescribed missal in folio, printed in the same type as the above-mentioned Psalter, there is an equally beautiful initial T, prefixed

to the "Te igitur" canon of the mass. It is ornamented with flowers and foliage, and in both these precious volumes there are many other smaller capitals, but whether printed with the other type, or afterwards stamped, may admit of some doubt. This unique and valuable fragment is in the collection of the present writer.

As the art of printing advanced, the initial letters assumed every possible variety of form, with respect to the subjects with which they were ornamented. Incidents from scripture and profane history, animals of every kind, and the most ludicrous grotesques, constitute the general materials; nor has the Dance of Death been forgotten. It was first introduced into the books printed at Basle by Bebelius and Cratander about the year 1530, and for one or the other of these celebrated printers an alphabet of initial letters was constructed, which, in elegance of design and delicacy of engraving, have scarcely ever been equalled, and certainly never exceeded. Whether they were engraved in relief on blocks of type or printer's metal, in the manner of wood-cutting, or executed in wood in the usual manner, is a matter of doubt, and likely to remain so. They may, in every point of view be regarded as the chef d'œuvre of ancient block engraving, and to copy them successfully at this time might require the utmost efforts of such artists as Harvey, Jackson, and Byfield.<sup>34</sup>

A proof set of this alphabet, in the possession of the present writer, was shown to M. De Mechel when he was in London, on which occasion he stated that he had seen in the public library of Basle another proof set on a single sheet, with the inscription "Hans Lutzelburger," who is elsewhere called *formschneider*, or

<sup>34</sup> These initial letters have already been mentioned in p. 101—102. The elegant initials in Dr. Henderson's excellent work on modern wines, and those in Dr. Nott's Bristol edition of Decker's Gull's hom-book, should not pass unnoticed on this occasion.

block-cutter, of which he has written a memorandum on the leaf containing the first abovementioned set of proofs. M. de Mechel, with great probability, inferred that this person was either the designer or engraver of the alphabet as well as of the cuts to the "Historiées faces de la mort," on one of which, as already stated, the mark **H** is placed;<sup>35</sup> but to whomsoever this mark may turn out to belong, certain it is that Holbein never made use of it.<sup>36</sup> These letters measure precisely 1 inch by  $\frac{7}{8}$  of an inch, and the subjects are as follow:

A. A group of Deaths passing through a cemetery covered with skulls. One of them blows a trumpet, and another plays on a tabor and pipe.

B. Two Deaths seize upon a pope, on whom a demon fastens, to prevent their dragging him along.

C. An emperor in the clutches of two Deaths, one of whom he resists, whilst the other pulls off his crown.

D. A king thrown to the ground and forcibly dragged away by two Deaths.

E. Death and the cardinal.

F. An empress sitting in a chair is attacked by two Deaths, one of whom lifts up her petticoat.

G. A queen seized by two Deaths, one of whom plays on a fife.

H. A bishop led away by Death.

I. A duke with his hands clasped in despair is seized behind by Death in the grotesque figure of an old woman.

K. Death with a furred cap and mantle, and a flail in his right hand, seizes a nobleman.

L. Death in the habit of a priest with a vessel of holy water takes possession of the canon.

<sup>35</sup> See before in p. 97.

<sup>36</sup> Zani saw this alphabet at Dresden, and ascribes it likewise to Lutzenberger. See his *Enciclop. Metodica*, Par. I. vol. x. p. 467.

M. Death behind a physician in his study lays his hand on a urinal which he is inspecting.

N. One Death lays hold on a miser, whilst another carries off his money from a table.

O. Death carries off a terrified monk.

P. Combat between Death and the soldier.

Q. Death very quietly leads away a nun.

R. Death and the fool who strikes at him with his bauble.

S. Exhibits two Deaths, one of whom is in a very licentious action with a female, whilst the other runs off with an hour-glass on his back.

T. A minstrel with his pipe, lying prostrate on the ground, is dragged away by one Death, whilst another pours something from a vessel into his mouth.

V. A man on horseback endeavouring to escape from Death is seized by him behind.

W. Death and the hermit.

X. Death and the Devil among the gamblers.

Y. Death, the nurse, and the infant.

Z. The last Judgment.

But they were not only used at Basle by Bebelius Isingrin and Cratander, but also at Strasburg by Wolfgang Cephaleus, and probably by other printers; because in an edition of Huttichius's "Romanorum principum effigies," printed by Cephaleus at Strasburg in 1552, they appear in a very worn and much used condition. In his Greek Bible of 1526, near half the alphabet were used, some of them by different hands.

They were separately published in a very small volume without date, each letter being accompanied with appropriate scriptural allusions taken from the Vulgate Bible.

They were badly copied, and with occasional variations, for books printed at Strasburg by J. Schott about 1540. Same size as the originals. The same initials were used by Henry Stainer of Augsburg in 1530.

Schott also used two other sets of a larger size, the same subjects with variations, and which occur likewise in books printed at Frankfort about 1550 by Cyriacus Jacob.

Christopher Froschover, of Zurich, used two alphabets with the Dance of Death. In Gesner's "*Bibliotheca Universalis*," printed by him in 1545, folio, he used the letters A. B. C. in indifferent copies of the originals with some variation. In a Vulgate Bible, printed by him in 1544, he uses the A and C of the same alphabet, and also the following letters, with different subjects, viz. F. Death blowing a trumpet in his left hand, with the right seizes a friar holding his beads and endeavouring to escape. O. Death and the Swiss soldier with his battle-axe; and, S. a queen between two Deaths, one of whom leads her, the other holds up her train. The Gesner has also a Q from the same alphabet of Death and the nun. This second alphabet is coarsely engraved on wood, and both are of the same size as the originals.

In Francolin's "*Rerum præclare gestarum, intra et extra mœnia civitatis Viennensis, pedestri et equestri prælijo, terra et aqua, elapso Mense Junio Anni Domini MDLX. elegantissimis iconibus ad vivum illustratarum, in laudem et gloriam sere. poten. invictissimique principis et Domini, Domini Ferdinandi electi Roma: imperatoris, &c. Vienna excudebat Raphael Hofhalter*," at fo. xxii. b. the letter D is closely copied in wood from the original, and appears to have been much used. This very rare work is extremely interesting for its large and spirited etchings of the various ceremonies on the above occasion, but more particularly for the tournaments. It is also valuable for the marks of the artists, some of which are quite unknown.

Other copies of them on wood occur in English books, but whether the whole alphabet was copied would be difficult to ascertain. In a Coverdale's Bible, printed

by James Nicolson in Southwark, the letters A. I. and T. occur. The subject of the A. is that of the fool and Death, from the R. of the originals, with the addition of the fool's bauble on the ground: the two other letters are like the originals. The size 2 inches by  $1\frac{1}{2}$ . The same letters, and no others, occur in a folio English Bible, the date of which has not been ascertained, it being only a fragment. The A is found as late as 1618 in an edition of Stowe's "Survey of London." In all these letters large white spots are on the back-ground, which might be taken for worm-holes, but are not so. The I occurs in J. Waley's "table of yeres of kings," 1567, 12mo.

An X and a T, an inch and  $\frac{1}{2}$  square, with the same subjects as in the originals, and not only closely copied, but nearly as well engraved on wood, are in the author's collection. Their locality has not been traced.

Hollar etched the first six letters of the alphabet from the initials described in p. 214. They are rather larger than the originals, but greatly inferior to them in spirit and effect.

Two other alphabets, the one of peasants dancing, the other of boys playing, by the same artists, have been already described in p. 101, and were also used by the Basle and other printers.

In Braunii *Civitates Orbis terrarum*, Par. I. No. 37, edit. 1576, there is an H, inch and  $\frac{1}{2}$  square. The subject, Death leading a Pope on horseback. It is engraved on wood with much spirit.

In "Prodicion y destierro de los Moriscos de Castilla, por F. Marcos de Guadalajara y Xavier." Pamplona, 1614, 4to. there is an initial E cut in wood with the subject of the cardinal, varied from that in Lutzenberger's alphabet.

A Greek  $\Pi$  on wood, with Death leading away the pope, was used by Cephalæus in a Testament.

In "Fulwell's Flower of Fame," printed by W. Hos-

kins, 1575, 4to. is an initial of Death leading a king, probably belonging to some alphabet.

An S rudely cut on wood with Death seizing two children was used by the English printers, J. Herford and T. Marshe.

An A well cut on wood, representing Death striking a miser, who is counting his money at a table. It occurs at fo. 5 of Quad's "fasciculus geographicus." Cologne, 1608, small folio, printed by John Buxemacher.

An R indifferently cut on wood, two inches square. The subject, Death in a grave pulls an old man towards him. A boy making his escape. From some unknown book.

An S indifferently cut on wood, two inches square. Death shovelling two skulls, one crowned, into a grave. On the shovel the word IDEM, and below, the initials of the engraver or designer, I. F. From some unknown book.

An H, an inch and half square, very beautifully cut on wood. The letter is surrounded by a group of people, over whom Death below is drawing a net. It is from some Dutch book of emblems, about 1640.

An M cut on wood in p. 353 of a Suetonius, edited by Charles Patin, and printed 1675, 4to. "Basle typis Genathianis." The subject is, Death seizing Cupid. Size,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  square.

A W,  $2\frac{1}{8}$  square, engraved on copper, with the initials of Michael Burghers. A large palm tree in the middle, Death with his scythe approaches a shepherd sitting on a bank and tending his flock.

In the second volume of Braun and Hogenberg Civitates orbis terrarum, and prefixed to a complimentary letter from Remaglus Lymburgus, a physician and canon of Liege, there is an initial letter about an inch and a half square, representing a pope and an emperor playing at cards. They are interrupted by Death, who

offers them a cup which he holds in his left hand whilst he points to them with his right. Other figures are introduced. This letter is very finely engraved on wood.

In Vol. II. p. 118 (misprinted 208) of Steinwiche's "*Bibliothecæ Ecclesiasticæ.*" Colon. Agrip. 1599, folio. There is a single initial letter V only, which may have been part of an alphabet with a Dance of Death. The subject is Death and the queen. The size nearly an inch square.

At fo. 1. of "F. Marco de Guadalajara y Xavier, Memorable expulsion y justissimo destierro de los Moriscos de Espana, Pamplona, 1613, 4to." there is an initial E, finely drawn and well engraved in wood. The subject has been taken from two cuts in the Lyons Dance of Death, viz. the cardinal and the emperor. From the first, the figures of the cardinal and Death seizing his hat; and from the other, the figures of the kneeling man, and of Death seizing the emperor's crown, are introduced as a complete group in the above initial letter. Size,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch square.

In p. 66 of the same work there is another letter that has probably belonged to a set of initials with a Dance of Death. It is an H, and copied from the subject of the bishop taken by Death from his flock, in the Lyons series. It is engraved in a different and inferior style from that last mentioned, yet with considerable spirit. Size,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inch.