

## ASPECTS OF DEATH IN ENGLISH ART AND POETRY—I BY WILLY F. STORCK\*

**T**HERE is no subject in the whole range of mediæval art of greater interest, no one the origin of which is involved in greater obscurity, notwithstanding the vast amount of antiquarian learning which has been expended on its investigation than the so-called "Dance of Death".

These words were written by an English author in the year 1846, and still retain their significance. For, although scientific inquiry has brought fresh material to light and produced new and improved works during the half century which has since elapsed, many puzzles in this interesting field of iconographical research still await solution. In the English section of the subject, the many-sided scholar, Francis Douce, deserves especial mention. He brought within the sphere of observation much material unnoticed before, derived mainly from his own admirable library, and he discovered bases for many problems in the question of the Dance of Death, which according to my view of the inquiry have not been sufficiently considered. In his remarkable book on the subject<sup>1</sup> he discussed Holbein's *Dance of Death* exhaustively and for the first time fixed its place in the great cycle which unites it with the poetry and art of the middle ages. And it is only from this, the most comprehensive point of view, which embraces literature and the more material arts in one panorama, that we shall obtain knowledge founded on a scientific basis. It seems to me that there is still much to be done in this direction. It is not enough to connect the Dance loosely with the rest of the literature of Death; we ought now to treat each example singly, circumstantially and fundamentally. Until we have done this we shall not grasp the fact that the Dance of Death is the last and fullest developed link in a chain of ideas which had its actual origin at the very outset of the middle ages.

Let us first consider a peculiar and highly interesting element in the mediæval literature of Death, the legend of the Three Living and the Three Dead, "*Le dit des trois morts et des trois vifs*". It was thought for a long time that we ought to regard this legend as the source and origin of the Dance of Death itself; and this hypothesis has become almost universally admitted, though it was advanced on insufficient evidence. But the hypothesis is itself proof of inadequate consideration of the cycle of ideas in its entirety, for though the legend occupies a perfectly definite position in the cycle, it is precisely not one closely connected with the Dance of Death.

The legend in which the three Living (Kings) encounter the three Dead (Kings), who warn

them of the transience of the world, first took literary form in France during the thirteenth century in poems by Baudouin de Condé, Nichole de Margival and two other poets still anonymous. Four German versions followed, partly imitated from the French, and partly also developed in an original manner. One Italian version also derives from France; a second, in Latin verse, is very difficult to date since its metrical forms present many analogies with the poems attributed to S. Bernard of Clairvaux; it runs as follows:

Cum apertam sepulturam  
viri tres aspicerent  
ac orribilem figuram  
intus ibi cernerent.

It, also, must belong to the thirteenth century, and as one text specifically states, is a commentary on a pictorial representation. These poems treat the subject in a more or less poetical and original manner, generally, so that certain leading phrases explain the drift of the poems—God's admonition to three nobles, generally kings or princes, by a sign, to amend their lives. The Living pronounce the phrase and the Dead reply. In a French and also in a German version, the arrangement of dialogues between one of the Living and one of the Dead in dramatic form mark very plainly the character of a Morality, evidently intended for declamation on the stage. Accompaniments of the chase, a special characteristic of the fourteenth and fifteenth century pictorial representations of the legend, appear distinctly in three only of the extant literary versions. The homiletic character and a moralizing objective are generally prominent; and it is evident that the impressive narrative is often freely used in order to depict to the faithful in the strongest possible colours the vanity of all earthly things, and to urge them to amendment. The wide diffusion of the legend in little country parish churches everywhere can only be accounted for in this way. The story is in fact pure folk-lore, a fact which has hitherto been overlooked. In a certain German version even democratic sentiments are plainly expressed, while the spiritual import is kept in the background.

So early as the fourteenth century the legend appeared as the vision of a saint whom Vasari's Italian tradition calls Macarius. He occurs first indeed in Italy, where he may be found in all the indigenous representations. In France we meet with him in fifteenth-century manuscripts, and particularly in Pierre Desrey's "*Visio Heremitæ*" ("*Chorea ab eximio Macabro*", Paris, 1490), which certainly imitates older models.

In English art and literature also the legend attained a wide diffusion which has scarcely yet been made the subject of inquiry. In England too it is a link in a great cycle of the literature and pictorial presentment of Death undiscussed

\* Translated for the author from the German.

<sup>1</sup> *The Dance of Death*. London, 1833.