

**THE CELEBRATED
HANS HOLBEIN'S
ALPHABET OF DEATH**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649013982

The celebrated Hans Holbein's alphabet of death by Anatole de Montaiglon

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

ANATOLE DE MONTAIGLON

**THE CELEBRATED
HANS HOLBEIN'S
ALPHABET OF DEATH**

THE CELEBRATED
HANS HOLBEIN'S
ALPHABET OF DEATH

ILLUSTRATED WITH OLD WORDERS ENGRAVED ON WOOD
WITH LATIN SENTENCES AND ENGLISH QUATRAINS

selected by

ANATOLE DE MONTAIGLON



PARIS

PRINTED FOR EDWIN TROSS

28, Rue des Bons-Enfants

M DCCC LXI

TO
THOMAS WRIGHT, ESQ., M.A., F.S.A.,

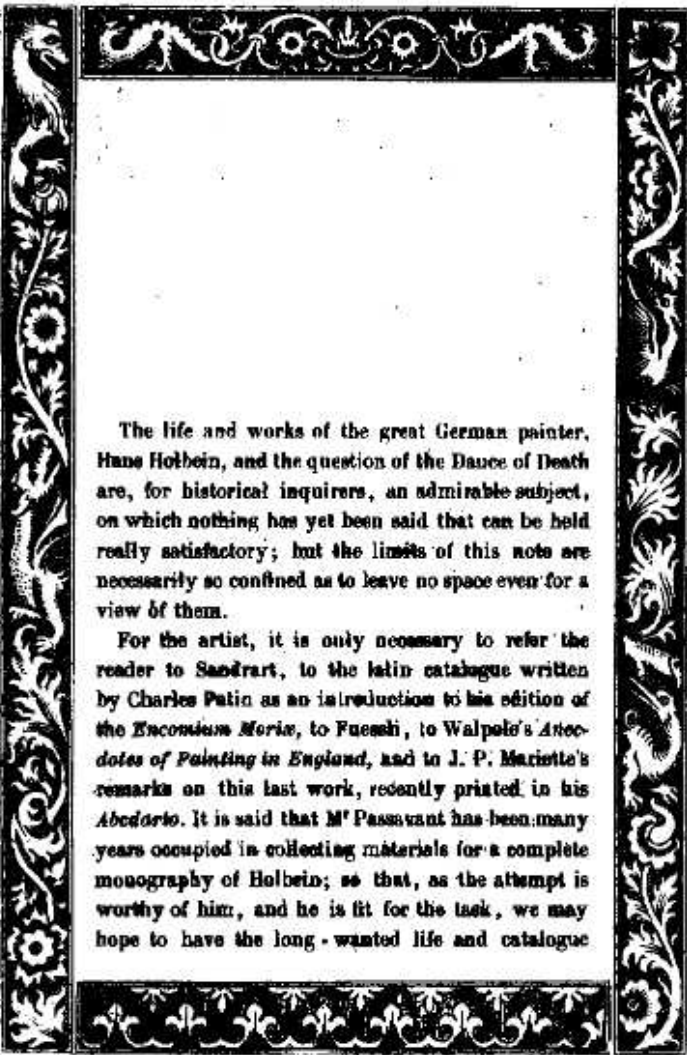
this edition of the Alphabet of Death

is respectfully dedicated

by

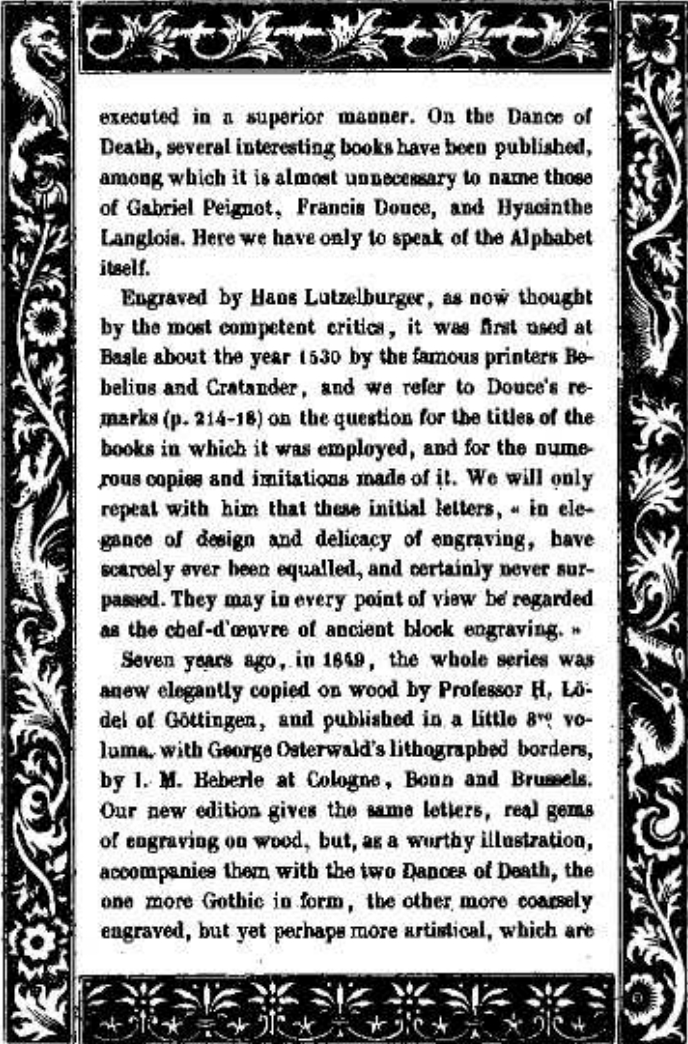
the Editor.





The life and works of the great German painter, Hans Holbein, and the question of the Dance of Death are, for historical inquirers, an admirable subject, on which nothing has yet been said that can be held really satisfactory; but the limits of this note are necessarily so confined as to leave no space even for a view of them.

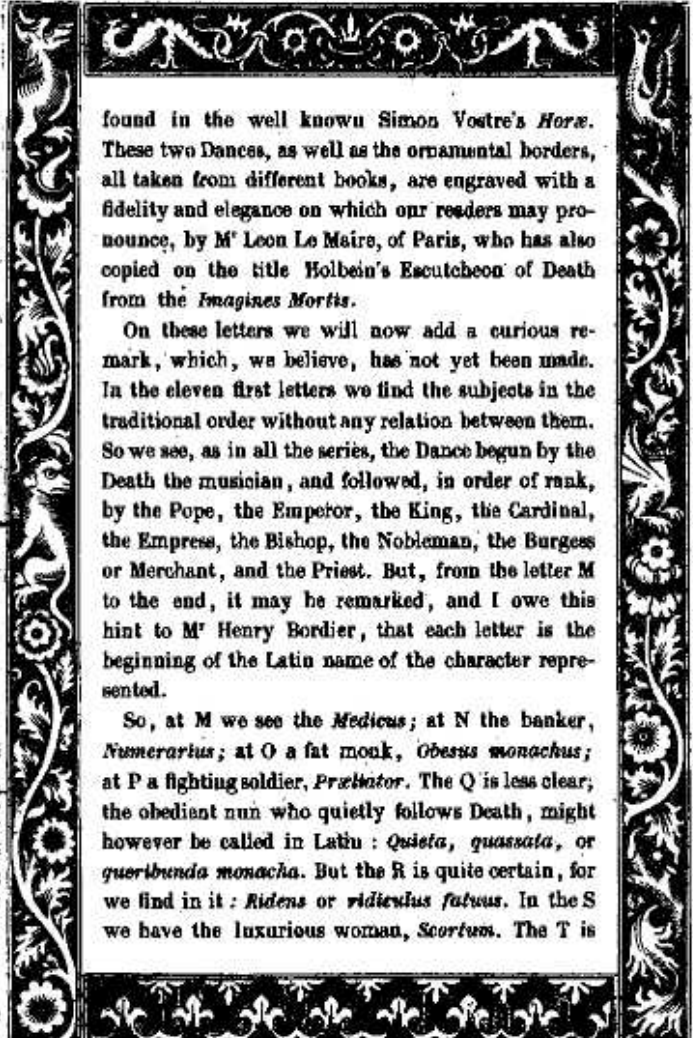
For the artist, it is only necessary to refer the reader to Sandart, to the latin catalogue written by Charles Patin as an introduction to his edition of the *Encomium Meriti*, to Fuesli, to Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, and to J. P. Mariette's remarks on this last work, recently printed in his *Abecedario*. It is said that M^r Passavant has been many years occupied in collecting materials for a complete monography of Holbein; so that, as the attempt is worthy of him, and he is fit for the task, we may hope to have the long-wanted life and catalogue



executed in a superior manner. On the Dance of Death, several interesting books have been published, among which it is almost unnecessary to name those of Gabriel Peignot, Francis Douce, and Hyacinthe Langlois. Here we have only to speak of the Alphabet itself.

Engraved by Hans Lutzelburger, as now thought by the most competent critics, it was first used at Basle about the year 1530 by the famous printers Babelius and Cratander, and we refer to Douce's remarks (p. 214-18) on the question for the titles of the books in which it was employed, and for the numerous copies and imitations made of it. We will only repeat with him that these initial letters, « in elegance of design and delicacy of engraving, have scarcely ever been equalled, and certainly never surpassed. They may in every point of view be regarded as the chef-d'œuvre of ancient block engraving. »

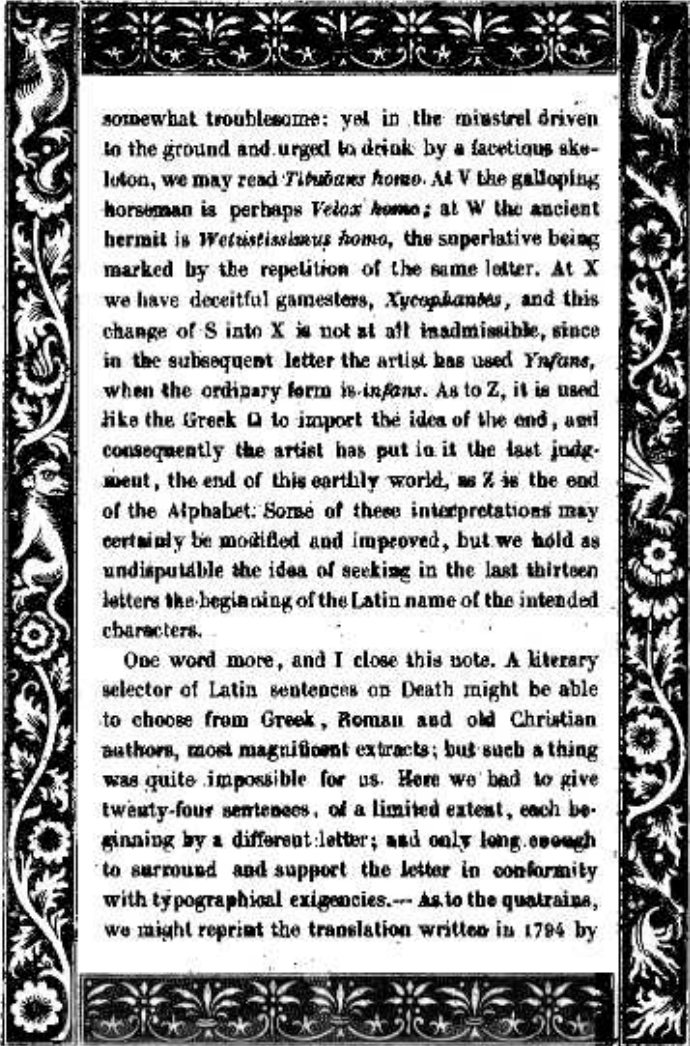
Seven years ago, in 1849, the whole series was anew elegantly copied on wood by Professor H. Lödel of Göttingen, and published in a little 8^{vo} volume, with George Osterwald's lithographed borders, by I. M. Heberle at Cologne, Bonn and Brussels. Our new edition gives the same letters, real gems of engraving on wood, but, as a worthy illustration, accompanies them with the two Dances of Death, the one more Gothic in form, the other more coarsely engraved, but yet perhaps more artistical, which are



found in the well known Simon Vostre's *Horæ*. These two Dances, as well as the ornamental borders, all taken from different books, are engraved with a fidelity and elegance on which our readers may pronounce, by M' Leon Le Maire, of Paris, who has also copied on the title Holbein's Escutcheon of Death from the *Imagines Mortis*.

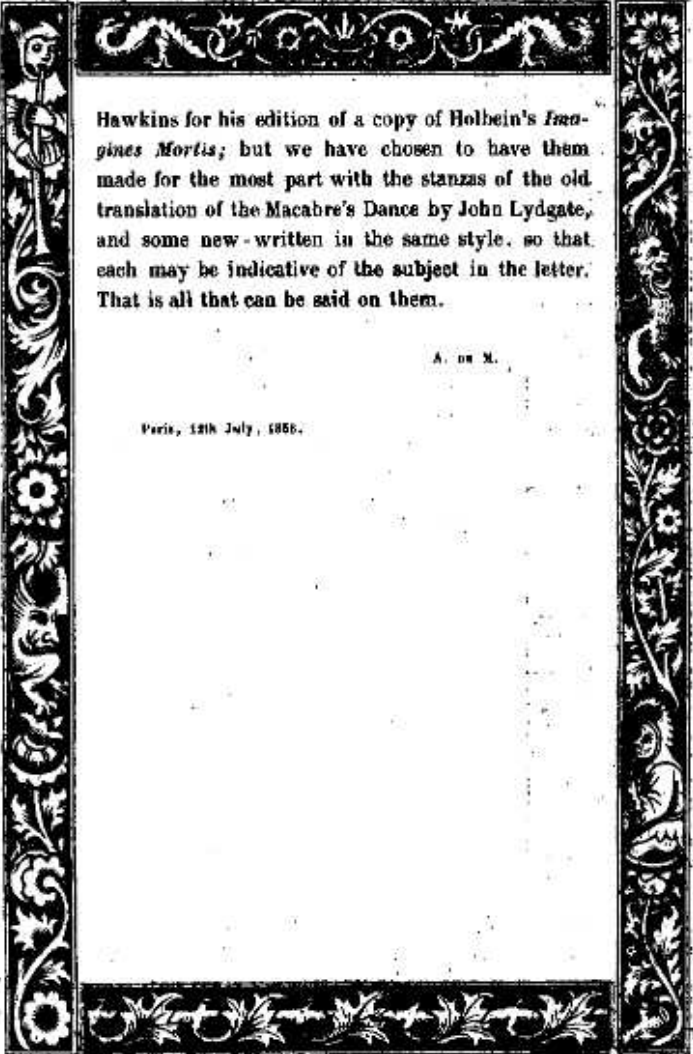
On these letters we will now add a curious remark, which, we believe, has not yet been made. In the eleven first letters we find the subjects in the traditional order without any relation between them. So we see, as in all the series, the Dance begun by the Death the musician, and followed, in order of rank, by the Pope, the Emperor, the King, the Cardinal, the Empress, the Bishop, the Nobleman, the Burgess or Merchant, and the Priest. But, from the letter M to the end, it may be remarked, and I owe this hint to M' Henry Bordier, that each letter is the beginning of the Latin name of the character represented.

So, at M we see the *Medicus*; at N the banker, *Numerarius*; at O a fat monk, *Obesus monachus*; at P a fighting soldier, *Prætor*. The Q is less clear, the obedient nun who quietly follows Death, might however be called in Latin: *Quieta, quassata, or quorbunda monacha*. But the R is quite certain, for we find in it: *Ridens or ridendus fatuus*. In the S we have the luxurious woman, *Scortum*. The T is



somewhat troublesome: yet in the mistrel driven to the ground and urged to drink by a facetious skeleton, we may read *Tibullus homo*. At V the galloping horseman is perhaps *Velox homo*; at W the ancient hermit is *Wetustissimus homo*, the superlative being marked by the repetition of the same letter. At X we have deceitful gamblers, *Xycephantes*, and this change of S into X is not at all inadmissible, since in the subsequent letter the artist has used *Ynfans*, when the ordinary form is *infans*. As to Z, it is used like the Greek Ω to import the idea of the end, and consequently the artist has put in it the last judgment, the end of this earthly world, as Z is the end of the Alphabet: Some of these interpretations may certainly be modified and improved, but we hold as undisputable the idea of seeking in the last thirteen letters the beginning of the Latin name of the intended characters.

One word more, and I close this note. A literary selector of Latin sentences on Death might be able to choose from Greek, Roman and old Christian authors, most magnificent extracts; but such a thing was quite impossible for us. Here we had to give twenty-four sentences, of a limited extent, each beginning by a different letter; and only long enough to surround and support the letter in conformity with typographical exigencies.-- As to the quatrains, we might reprint the translation written in 1794 by



Hawkins for his edition of a copy of Holbein's *Imagines Mortis*; but we have chosen to have them made for the most part with the stanzas of the old translation of the Macabre's Dance by John Lydgate, and some new-written in the same style, so that each may be indicative of the subject in the letter. That is all that can be said on them.

A. de X.

Paris, 12th July, 1866.