

"LES TROIS VIFS ET LES TROIS MORTS."

AMONG the mural decorations brought to light in 1858 by Mr. Burningham in the south aisle of Charlwood Church, and described by Mr. Burges in the foregoing memoir, the curious subject intended to convey a salutary admonition of the uncertainty of Life is not the least remarkable. It was doubtless taken from a popular mediæval *moralité*, composed, according to Mr. Douce, in France, in the thirteenth century, and entitled, "*Li trois mors et li trois vifs.*"¹ Three coeval MSS. of this metrical work were in the library of the Duke de la Vallière, differing, however, from each other, and furnishing names of two authors, to whom they are attributed respectively. These poems relate that three noble youths, hunting in a forest, were intercepted by three hideous spectres, images of Death, from whom they received a terrific lecture on the vanity of human happiness and grandeur. A very early, perhaps the earliest, allusion to such a monitory vision, seems to occur in the painting by Andrea di Orgagna at Pisa, to which allusion has been made by Mr. Burges; although varied in some respects from the description in the French poems, the story is evidently the same. In the grand composition by Orgagna, which has been designated the Triumph of Death, the three princes are seen attended by a brilliant company, and approaching open tombs, in which are seen the ghastly corpses of three princes; close by stands the aged St. Macarius, who points to that fearful *memento mori*.² A similar vision, first noticed by Mr. Douce, occurs at the end of the Latin verses ascribed to Macaber, and of which there are translations both in French and English.³ In the MS. collection of poems by John Audelay the blind bard of Haghmon, Shropshire, 1426, now in the Bodleian, there is one, a composition strikingly expressed, on the *trois vifs et trois morts*.

Examples have been noticed among numerous mural

¹ Douce's Dissertation on the Dance of Death, Lond. 1833, p. 31; his curious remarks have been copied by Langlois, *Essai sur les Danses des Morts*, vol. i. p. 107: Rouen, 1851.

² Handbook of Painting, translated from Kugler, edited by Sir C. Eastlake, vol. i. p. 146; a representation of this

grand composition is there given. See also Lasinio, *Pittura a fresco del Campo Santo*, and Rosini's Description of these paintings. Orgagna flourished in the second half of the fourteenth century; he died in 1389.

³ Douce, *Dance of Death*, p. 32.



"Les Trois Vifs et les Trois Morts." Mural Painting in Charlwood Church, Surrey.

paintings brought to light in churches in this country, for the most part in the course of works of "restoration," which have led to the removal of encrustations of whitewash. An illustrated synopsis of these valuable materials for the history of the arts in England were much to be desired. It is probable that few churches exist, even in remote rural parishes, in which some evidence regarding Iconography or the peculiar styles of mediæval ornamentation might not be obtained. It is scarcely needful to point out that the selection of the subject derived from the "Dit des trois vifs," associated with scenes from Scripture History or, as at Charlwood, from legends of Saints and Martyrs, must be attributed to the same solemn feeling which produced innumerable representations of the Dance of Death and other like relics of early art. We read the great moral admonition—Let no man slight his mortality—in the ghastly effigy of an emaciated corpse, the frequent accompaniment of some stately memorial in our cathedrals; the like solemn monition appears also constantly on our sepulchral brasses:

"Loke, suche as we ar, suche schall ye be,
And such as we were, suche be ye!"

A remarkable representation of the *Trois vifs et trois morts* was communicated to the Institute in 1848 by the Rev. W. E. Scudamore, Rector of Ditchingham, Norfolk. The subject, painted on the north wall in the church at that place, was found associated with the Last Judgment, as it is likewise seen in illuminated MSS. and service books. The painting at Ditchingham has been figured in this Journal, vol. v. p. 69; it portrays three aged regal personages standing in a forest; they are not, as at Charlwood, mounted on horseback; one of them holds an axe; the ghastly spectres are likewise crowned. This painting, which we regret to learn has been concealed by whitewash, may be assigned to the close of the fourteenth century.⁴ In the accompanying notice Mr. Hudson Turner pointed out a well-executed delineation of the like subject in a MS. in the British

⁴ Drawings of the Ditchingham paintings were brought before the Norfolk Archæological Society in 1848, and are noticed in their Transactions, vol. ii. p.

405. This example is cited by Langlois, *Essai sur les Danses des Morts*, vol. i. p. 234.

Museum ; two kings and a queen are there represented, they meet three skeletons, over the former is inscribed,—

“ Ich am afert,
Lo whet ich se !
Me thinketh hit beth develes thre.”

Over the skeletons is a triplet expressive of the admonition frequently found, as above noticed, in sepulchral inscriptions, here commencing thus—“ Ich wes wel fair, such scheltou be ! ” This illumination precedes a remarkable dialogue, in French verse, on the vanity of earthly things.⁵

About the same time when the discovery was made known to us, in 1848, by Mr. Scudamore, another painting of *Les trois vifs et trois morts* was revealed to view in Belton Church, Suffolk. A drawing of this painting, on the north wall of the nave, was sent by Mr. Harrod to a meeting of the Institute, Dec. 1, 1848. The colors were decayed, and the inscription illegible ; the three regal figures on horseback were designed with much spirit. On adjoining spaces had been painted St. Christopher and St. James the Less. Mr. Woodward, in a memoir on discoveries at Wymondham Abbey in 1834, notices fresco paintings in the conventual church, of which one represented three skeletons ; above, in a cloud, were seen three figures, “ fat and well liking.” This was doubtless an illustration of the popular allegory to which the present notice relates.⁶

In the parish church at Battle, Sussex, the whitewash was removed from a remarkable series of mural paintings, about 1847 ; they have been described by Mr. J. G. Waller in a valuable Memoir on this class of early examples of Art.⁷ The subjects are chiefly from the Passion of Our Lord, with figures of saints ; over the chancel arch are portrayed a king and queen with traces of a third figure apparently seated ; in an adjoining compartment stand two ghastly skeletons with indications of a third seated. Above is the moral apothegm of Lucan, “ Mors sceptrā ligonibus equat.” This painting seems to be of the fourteenth century. We

⁵ Arundel MS. 83, f. 128. This MS. appears to have been executed in England, and it contains a contemporary note that it was given in 1339 by John de Lyle to his daughter, an interesting proof that the *moralite* here noticed was in vogue in England at that early period,

prior even to the execution of the painting at Pisa by Orgagna.

⁶ Norfolk Archæology, vol. ii., p. 405 ; Archæologia, vol. xxvi. p. 290.

⁷ Journal of the Brit. Arch. Assoc., vol. ii. p. 146.

are indebted to the constant courtesy of the author of the "Emblems of Saints," the Very Rev. Mons. Husenbeth, for information that traces of a similar painting were formerly noticed by him in the church of Limpenhoe, Norfolk, but it had been nearly concealed by a series of subjects from the martyrdom of St. Catherine.

Among mural decorations brought to light in Tettenhall church, Staffordshire, during repairs in 1841, portions of a subject were found in Lord Wrottesley's chancel which may probably have been of the same curious description; on removal of the whitewash three skeletons were to be seen in fair preservation; no traces of *Les trois vifs* were, however, noticed.

Other examples of this singular subject doubtless exist on the plastered walls of churches in England. On the continent they are likewise to be found; Langlois enumerates a painting at Zalt-Boemel in Holland, one also at the Abbey of Fontenay in Normandy, in which the three gallants appear mounted, as at Charlwood, and another, of later date, at St Riquier; of both these last he gives representations. At Fontenay there was a sculpture of the same subject; at Paris it was painted in the Cemetery of the Innocents, and also sculptured there over the portal of the church, by order of the Duke of Berry, in 1408.⁸ It was to be seen at Bricy near Metz, and on the exterior of the apse at Longpaon near Rouen. Another interesting fresco of this subject, at Ennezat in Auvergne, is described in the *Voyage dans le centre de la France*, by P. Castel.⁹

Mr. Douce has remarked that this popular allegory is found prefixed to the burial office in MS. Hours and other service books; many of the printed editions of the Macabre Dance contain it with some variations; it occurs also in printed service books, and in some of those of the use of Salisbury. He cites, as the earliest wood-cut engraving of a like subject, one in the Block Book of the "xv. signa Judicii," date about 1430, which has been copied in Dibdin's *Bibliotheca Spenceriana*.¹

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⁸ Langlois, *Essai, &c.*, tom. i. pp. 235, 239, tom. ii. p. 185, plates 46, 47.

⁹ *Bulletin of the Society of Sciences, Arts, &c.*, at Bayeux, 1831.

¹ Douce, *Dance of Death*, p. 34; see his enumeration of printed books in

which representations of *Les trois vifs et trois morts* occur, *ibid.* pp. 228, 230. A facsimile of the curious woodcut in a very early edition of the *Danse Macabre* printed at Troyes is given, pl. v., p. 250.