

## A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY DANCE OF DEATH

There is in the Turnbull Library a small octavo book *La Dance Machabre or Death's Duell* of which only five other copies are known to survive. On B of the Turnbull copy is written the name of a previous owner 'Frances Wolf-(?)eston her bouk'. No date is given on the title page and the author is merely styled W.C. A prose dedication to Queen Henrietta Maria, the Queen of Charles I, is signed Colman and a verse dedication W. Colman. The book itself offers no conclusive evidence that its author was the Franciscan friar Walter Colman. We know of Colman's authorship from two Franciscan historians Angelus Mason and Luke Wadding. Mason wrote in his *Certamen Seraphicum* (1649): 'Opus vtile, qui titulus Duellum Mortis metro Anglicano a se compositum, in lucem edidit, Sacraeque Majestati Angliae Regine(sic) dedicavit.' and Wadding in *Scriptores Ordinis Minorum* (1650): 'Christophorus Colmanus . . . edidit rhythmo Anglico Mortis duellum, Londini an 1628.'<sup>1</sup> No edition of 1628 is known. The book was entered in the Stationers' Register 13 June, 1631. Possibly some support for the existence of an earlier edition is Colman's statement in his verse dedication to the Queen that his 'rude composure' was '... the first piece ventur'd on the Stage/ Since you were ours,/ To craue your Patronage.'<sup>2</sup> Henrietta Maria, after the earlier ceremony in Notre Dame, married Charles at Canterbury in 1625.

The dedication to the Queen reminds us that with her accession there was some slackening of the rigid censorship which had previously severely restricted Catholic books. Caution was still necessary and the London publisher of Colman's book suppressed any reference to his author's religious status. It is interesting to note that under Henrietta Maria, between 1631 and 1636, there were six new editions of the work of the Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell who had been executed as a traitor in 1595.

Mason tells us of the genesis of *La Dance Machabre*. While a Franciscan novice Colman wrote a poetic meditation on death which at the command of the Master of Novices he burnt. After his profession he rewrote the poem in the form we now have it. Colman's theme, which is that of the medieval Dance of Death, was enormously popular both in England and on the Continent. Besides numerous literary treatments of the theme examples of 'Death leading off all estates' existed in many English Churches and other buildings in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The most famous example was the one painted around the cloister of Saint Paul's Cathedral, lamentably destroyed by the Duke of Somerset in 1549. As late as 1651 Wenceslaus Hollar, drawing master to the future Charles II, produced his admirable imitations of Hans Holbein the Younger's enormously popular *His*