

Images of Death — Les Simulachres et historiees faces de la mort (Lyons, 1538). The theme of the Dance of Death received popular literary currency in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through broadside ballads. Colman's poem is perhaps the last extended treatment of the subject in the seventeenth century.

Like Robert Southwell before him Colman regarded his poetry as part of his apostolic work on the English mission. He said in his fulsome dedication to the Queen that he wrote: 'pour ayder aux hommes peruertis de cèst sicle corrumpu, à retourner de l'insolence a la crainte du Ciel et de la debauche à la raison par le sentiment de ce quilz doiuent estre et par la pensée de ce quilz ne sont pas, la malice leur ayant fermé les yeux de l'ame pour ne veior et l'impieté bouché les oreilles pour n'entendre à bien faire, comme dit le Roy Prophete.'³ The reader is exhorted: 'Read note (sic) if not to profit', and the appropriate response is repentance:

'Twixt life and death the fatall warre I sing:
Which whil'st I but recite, me thinkes from all
At euery accent should a salt teare fall.'⁴

By two engravings, one of which is the title-page, Colman evokes the traditional atmosphere of the Dance of Death. On the title page Death sits enthroned. Besides his dart Death holds by two cords eight panels containing groups representing his subjects:

All ages, all conditions, all estates.
In the second engraving death holds a spade and leans on a coffin upturned beside an open grave. The Latin tag 'Sum quod eris Fui quod es' points the moral.

La Dance Machabre runs to some two hundred and sixty two verses nearly all of which are six line stanzas of Iambic Pentameter rhymed ababcc. The poem is constructed of a series of loosely connected meditations on the traditional commonplaces on death found in devotional manuals. It is the horrific aspects and the terror of God's judgement that fascinate Colman, a reflection of the medieval quality of his piety and the intense earnestness of the novice who first drafted the poem. Colman does not move easily in verse and is frequently awkward and flat. There is nothing in his poem to suggest vigour or distinction of mind. Occasionally the concluding couplet is well-turned and there are the lines which will perhaps appeal to those with a cyclic view of history:

'So impudent our female sex's are growne
That by their garb they scarce from men are known.'