

Twentieth-Century  
Literary Criticism

TCLC

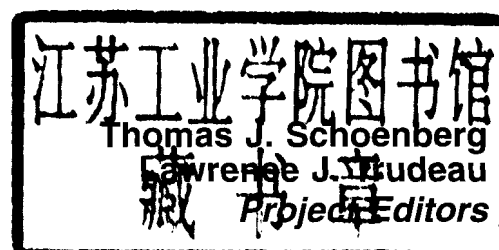
187



Volume 187

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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## Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 187

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# Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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# Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

<b>Michel de Ghelderode 1898-1962</b> .....	1
<i>Belgian playwright, poet, and short story writer</i>	
<b>Dashiell Hammett 1894-1961</b> .....	43
<i>American novelist, short story writer, and screenwriter</i>	
<b>Shirley Jackson 1919?-1965</b> .....	233
<i>American novelist, short story writer, children's writer, playwright, and nonfiction writer.</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 345

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 453

*TCLC* Cumulative Nationality Index 467

*TCLC-187* Title Index 473



# Michel de Ghelderode

## 1898-1962

(Born Adolphe-Adhémar Martens; also wrote under pseudonym Philostène Constable) Belgian playwright, poet, and short story writer.

The following entry provides an overview of Ghelderode's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC*, Volumes 6 and 11.

### INTRODUCTION

Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode is considered an innovative and important figure in twentieth-century European literature. His dark plays, written in French, feature grotesque imagery and surreal settings, and address various themes, such as death and aging, religion, human sexuality, and the relationship between art and reality. In addition to its sources in religious and medieval drama, Ghelderode's work borrows elements from Flemish folklore, the tradition of marionette theater, and the burlesque. In this respect, it has often been compared to the paintings of the Flemish artists Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Ghelderode deliberately wrote his plays to shock and confront viewers, and to challenge conventional thought. In fact, many of his works originally staged in France and Belgium scandalized audiences. Although Ghelderode's plays are performed less often than they were at the peak of his popularity after World War II, his work is still admired, particularly in academic communities throughout the world. In 1993 David B. Parsell observed that "Ghelderode's dramaturgy will continue to draw merited attention as long as actors, directors, and potential spectators return to the stage in search of stimuli and inspiration. The deliberately archaic themes and setting of Ghelderode's best plays, never timely, remain timeless in their portrayal of mankind's elemental struggle against the inevitability of death—as, to be sure, of life itself."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ghelderode was born Adolphe-Adhémar Martens on April 3, 1898, in Ixelles, Belgium. His parents, Henri-Adolphe Martens, a clerk in Brussels, and Jeanne-Marie Martens were Dutch speakers who educated their children in French. Ghelderode attended the Institut St-Louis in Belgium until 1914, when he was forced to

quit after contracting typhus. He was deeply affected by his illness, as well as his brother's death in World War I, and as a result of both suffered from hypochondria and suicidal tendencies during his youth. Ghelderode studied the viola briefly at the Conservatoire Royal de Bruxelles before he turned to literature and writing. His first play, *La mort regarde à la fenêtre* (*Death Looks in the Window*), was performed in April 1918 at the Théâtre de la Bonbonnière.

Ghelderode's writing career was briefly interrupted by military service from 1919 to 1921. Upon his return to civilian life, he resumed writing and took a job as a clerk in the city of Schaarbeek. During this time, Ghelderode mainly wrote fiction in French. He published all of his prose under the name Ghelderode, which he officially adopted in 1930 to emphasize his Flemish roots. In 1924 Ghelderode married Jeanne Gérard. He began to publish more of his writing, including poems under the pseudonym Philostène Constable, and restored and adapted medieval plays to be performed by marionettes. In 1925 Ghelderode published two dramatic works that foreshadowed some of his later themes: *Oude Piet*, which won a prize from La Renaissance d'Occident, and *Les vieillards* (*The Old Men*), a one-act play that Ghelderode described as a "mystical farce."

During the 1920s and 1930s Ghelderode wrote plays for the radio as well as the stage, many of which deal with issues of religion, death, and old age. Several of these early plays were produced and performed by the Vlaamsche Volkstooneel (VVT), an avant-garde Catholic theater troupe in Brussels. The group produced *La farce de la mort qui faillit trépasser* in 1925 and *Images de la vie de Saint François d'Assise* in 1927, each of which met with popular and critical success. Ghelderode also began receiving recognition in France when his play *La mort du Docteur Faust* (*The Death of Doctor Faust*) was published in 1926 and performed two years later at the Art et Action theater in Paris. In 1929 Art et Action also produced *Christophe Colomb* (*Christopher Columbus*), one of Ghelderode's best-known plays. That same year, a Dutch version of *Escorial*, a dark one-act play that explores the relationship between reality and fantasy, debuted in Brussels.

Ghelderode continued to write during World War II, and several of his plays were produced. Two of his dramas, *Hop Signor!* (1942) and *L'école des bouffons* (1953; *School for Buffoons*), marked his experiments

with the "theater of cruelty," in which grotesque imagery is used to shock and confront audiences in an effort to destroy the false reality that clouds perception. During the Nazi occupation of Belgium, Ghelderode contributed several short works to Radio-Bruxelles. Although the pieces revealed no political affiliation, Ghelderode was charged with being a Nazi collaborator and lost his civil service job. He received a full pardon in 1949. His popularity increased during the late 1940s, particularly in France, where several of his plays were staged, including *Fastes d'enfer* (1949; *Chronicles of Hell*) and *Mademoiselle Jaire* (1949; *Mademoiselle Jairus*), both of which won the Grand Prix des Jeunes Compagnies (Grand Prize for Young Companies) award in Paris.

By the 1950s Ghelderode had become a major literary figure in France, while his plays continued to be produced in his native Belgium. A number of his works were also staged for the first time in North and South America, as well as other parts of Europe. When Ghelderode died on April 1, 1962, he was considered one of the most influential and innovative playwrights writing in the French language.

## MAJOR WORKS

In his notable early plays, Ghelderode often explored abstract concepts and experimented with the formal constraints of the theater itself. In *The Death of Doctor Faust*, he reconsidered the relationship between fantasy and reality in his retelling of the classic story of Faust. The play uses several meta-theatrical devices, including character doubling, a play-within-a-play, and complex multiple sets. In Ghelderode's version of the story, the historical figure Faust meets an actor playing the role of Faust. The two confront each other and begin fighting, and while attempting to kill his actor-counterpart, the historical Faust accidentally kills himself. In this work Ghelderode used the stage to experiment with theatrical art and to explore the psychological boundaries between reality and fantasy that reside in the minds of both actors and the audience. In one of his most anthologized plays, *Christopher Columbus*, Ghelderode reinvented the persona of the legendary explorer. He is portrayed as a bubble-blowing dreamer, rather than a visionary man, who begins his quest because he has nothing better to do. His voyage consists of a series of fantastic, anachronistic occurrences. Finally, at the end of the play, which Ghelderode categorized as a "dramatic fairy tale," Columbus becomes a statue in the new world. The drama has a distinct Anti-American sentiment, partially revealed when Columbus is criticized for being an immigrant, and not an American citizen, by the play's close.

Many critics consider the play *Magie rouge* (1934; *Red Magic*) typical of the transitional period in Ghelderode's literary career. While he had previously borrowed

themes and characters from medieval literature and the Bible, during his transitional period he drew from myth and employed fantastic imagery. *Red Magic* relies on the character archetypes of the "miser" and the "alchemist" from folklore. The play explores the destructive power of greed and vengeance and portrays a morally corrupt world. The miser, Hyéronimus, is consumed by his desire to accumulate wealth. He hires Armador, a man claiming to be an alchemist, to produce gold. Concerned only with his wealth, however, the miser neglects his wife's needs and refuses to consummate their marriage. For revenge, she takes Armador as a lover, and they plot to destroy Hyéronimus. At the end of the play, the miser loses his fortune, his wife, and his freedom when he is accused of a crime that Armador committed. The conclusion of play illustrates the extent of the miser's perversion and self-delusion. Hyéronimus is so consumed by his own avarice that he falsely believes he is immortal and equal to God.

*Chronicles of Hell* is regarded as one of Ghelderode's most important and complex plays. The one-act drama takes place in Flanders during the burial services for Bishop Jan Eremo. The Bishop is described as a Christ-like figure who performs miracles and is drawn in sharp contrast to the sinful priest Simon Laquedeem and to the monks presiding over his funeral, whose names connote various vices. The connection between Jan Eremo and Christ is further reinforced when, toward the end of the play, the Bishop miraculously rises and accuses Laquedeem of poisoning the communion wafer that he has partially swallowed. During the confrontation, Jan Eremo threatens to kill the priest, but his mother, Vénérande, extracts the poisoned wafer from his throat and convinces him to forgive his enemies. The Bishop dies after he submits to her request. Although much of the action in *Chronicles of Hell* is tragic, Ghelderode includes farcical elements as well and ends the play with scatological humor. The struggle between the sacred and the profane is the main theme of the play, but the resolution of that struggle remains ambiguous at the end. While some critics argue that evil triumphs at the close of the play, when Laquedeem defecates next to the Bishop's dead body, others have interpreted Jan Eremo's death as a moral victory, in which his faith remains intact.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critical study of Ghelderode's work has followed a pattern of neglect and rediscovery throughout the playwright's career and, especially, since his death in 1962. In Belgium, and somewhat later in France, early audiences and critics of Ghelderode's plays were often shocked by their uncompromising portrait of human depravity and sin, their treatment of religious hypocrisy,

and their scatological wit. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, long after Ghelderode composed his major works, the Parisian theater establishment came to embrace him as an innovative and important writer. As Parsell has noted, during this period in French drama "Ghelderode's exploration of scenic and dramatic possibilities, together with his graphic contrasts of illusion and reality, helped to point new directions for antirational, 'visceral' theater, such as that proposed by Antonin Artaud." But just as suddenly as Ghelderode's fame rose on the French stage, it dissipated, as audiences and the theater establishment moved on to new writers such as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. By the time of Ghelderode's death, his immense popularity in France had waned. Even so, his stature as a playwright of international importance began to spread outside of France and Belgium, to the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Eastern Europe, and even Latin America.

Since the 1960s Ghelderode's reputation has continued to increase. In North America Ghelderode has been regarded as an influential precursor of the Theater of the Absurd, a craftsman of theatrical form, and either a deeply religious writer or a nihilist strongly concerned with humankind's struggle to find meaning in the face of death. Scholars also have praised the playwright for his ability to deftly blend elements of folklore, religion, and medieval literature, along with a pronounced sense of romanticism. While many critics have noted the barriers to staging Ghelderode's plays, as well as the flawed and uneven quality of his total output as a playwright, most also have attested to the psychological power and dramatic precision of his writing. As Parsell asserted, "Ghelderode's plays continue to suggest possibilities for the stage, a truly open-ended performance in which text, sound, and spectacle combine to bring actors and audience into confrontation with themselves. When well-executed, the best of Ghelderode's have few peers in the domain of 'total theater,' surpassing even the wildest dreams of Artaud."

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*La mort regarde à la fenêtre* [*Death Looks in the Window*] (play) 1918  
*Le repas des fauves* (play) 1919  
*La halte catholique* (prose) 1922  
*L'homme sous l'uniforme* (short stories) 1923  
*La farce de la mort qui faillit trépasser* (play) 1925  
*Oude Piet* (play) 1925  
*Les vieillards: Farce mystique en 1 acte* [*The Old Men*] (play) 1925  
*La mort du Docteur Faust* [*The Death of Doctor Faust*] (play) 1926

*Images de la vie de Saint François d'Assise* (play) 1927  
*Ixelles, mes amours* [as Philostène Constable] (poetry) 1928  
*Le miracle dans le faubourg* (play) 1928  
*Barabbas* (play) 1929  
*Christophe Colomb* [*Christopher Columbus*] (play) 1929  
*Escorial* (play) 1929  
*Pantagleize* (play) 1930  
*Trois acteurs* [*Three Actors*] (play) 1931  
*Le cavalier bizarre* (radio play) 1932  
*Le coeur révélateur* (radio play) 1932  
*Le voleur d'étoiles* (play) 1932  
*Annibal, speaker futur* (radio play) 1933  
*Bureau ouvert de neuf à midi* (radio play) 1933  
*Plaisir d'amour* (radio play) 1933  
*La ronde des prisonniers* (radio play) 1933  
*Cinq mai 1835* (radio play) 1934  
*Magie rouge* [*Red Magic*] (play) 1934  
*Le mystère de la Passion de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (play) 1934  
*Payül au paradis* (radio play) 1934  
*Payül champion* (radio play) 1934  
*Payül dans le beffroi* (radio play) 1934  
*Payül lauréat* (radio play) 1934  
*Payül reporter* (radio play) 1934  
*Le ménage de Caroline* (play) 1935  
*L'Oiseau chocolat* (radio play) 1937  
*Sire Halewyn* [*Lord Halewyn*] (play) 1938  
*Adrian et Jusemina* (play) 1939  
*Arc-en-ciel* (play) 1939  
*Comment l'empereur Charles devint voleur des chiens* (radio play) 1939  
*D'un fou qui se croyait empereur* (radio play) 1939  
*Scènes de la vie d'un bohème: Franz Schubert* (radio play) 1941  
*Sortilèges* (short stories) 1941  
*Hop Signor!* (play) 1942  
*Il fiammingo* (radio play) 1942  
*Fastes d'enfer* [*Chronicles of Hell*] (play) 1949  
*Mademoiselle Jaire* [*Mademoiselle Jairus*] (play) 1949  
*Théâtre. 6 vols.* (plays) 1950-82  
*La farce des ténébreux* (play) 1952  
*Marie la misérable* (play) 1952  
*La balade du Grand Macabre* (play) 1953  
*\*Le cavalier bizarre* [*The Strange Rider*] (play) 1953  
*L'école des bouffons* [*School for Buffoons*] (play) 1953  
*Les femmes au tombeau* [*The Women at the Tomb*] (play) 1953  
*†Les aveugles* [*The Blind Men: In the Country of the Blind, the One-Eyed Man Is King*] (play) 1956  
*Le club des menteurs* (play) 1957  
*‡La transfiguration dans le cirque* [*Transfiguration in the Circus*] (play) 1959  
*Ghelderode: Seven Plays, Volume 1* (plays) 1960  
*§Sortie de l'acteur* [*The Actor Makes His Exit*] (play) 1960  
*||Don Juan ou les amants chimériques* (play) 1962

*Ghelderode: Seven Plays, Volume 2* (plays) 1966

#*Un soir de pitié* [*A Night of Pity*] (play) 1970

\*\**Vénus* (play) 1970

*Correspondance de Michel de Ghelderode*. 5 vols. [edited by Roland Beyen] (letters) 1991-98

\*This work is a stage adaptation of the 1932 radio play of the same name.

†This work was originally published in 1936.

‡This work was originally published in 1928.

§This work was originally published in 1935.

||This work was originally published in 1928.

#This work was originally published in 1929.

\*This work was originally published in 1927.

## CRITICISM

### Micheline Herz (essay date 1962)

SOURCE: Herz, Micheline. "Tragedy, Poetry and the Burlesque in Ghelderode's Theatre." *Yale French Studies* 29 (1962): 92-101.

[In the following essay, Herz emphasizes the role of the burlesque in Ghelderode's plays, maintaining that the author uses it to underscore "man's physiological servitude" and "his wretchedness." Herz also comments on the poetic quality of Ghelderode's language.]

At every level, including the level of appearance, Michel de Ghelderode's theatre abounds in burlesque elements. There is nothing glorious about his men, nor about his women either. However upsetting some people may find this, it is clear that Ghelderode himself, as manifested in his plays, reveled in such an atmosphere. Monsters and misshapen beings accost us at every turn. Women, apart from a few saints and other privileged creatures, tend to be fiftyish, ample as to breast and buttock, with a gash by way of a mouth and peroxide hair: typical residents of a low-grade brothel. Their names are evocative: Salivaine, Visquosine, Crème, Chose, Boule, Olympia, Aurora, Venuska, and so forth. The more or less normal creatures in this feminine galaxy (Armande in *Sortie de l'acteur* or Emmanuèle in *La Farce des ténébreux*) remind one nevertheless of Baudelaire's "Woman is the opposite of the dandy." Even those very young girls, Purmelende d'Ostrelande in *Sire Halewyn* and the living corpse Mademoiselle Jaire, cannot entirely escape the grotesquerie of woman's condition. They are Woman, young or old as circumstances require, exemplars of their sex.

Men, though treated in less summary fashion, are etched in acidly. One recalls Hiéronymus in *Magie rouge*, Videbolle, Sire Goulave in *La Balade du grand macabre*, and a whole series, in *Hop Signor*, *Escorial*, *L'Ecole des bouffons* and elsewhere, of men blind or decrepit or otherwise infirm. In conjuring up all this ugliness and, at times, poking fun at it, Ghelderode is carrying out one of the missions of the theatre as he conceives it. His aim is to deflate a number of lying myths, and one of these is the delight man takes in his own beauty. So Ghelderode stresses man's physiological servitude and harps on his wretchedness. Like Sartre and like Céline, he dwells on the intestinal aspects of these miseries. His plays smell bad. Yet these odors—which, also, are man—engender comedy, however little it may appeal to the queasy. Are we not told that la Palatine, with the aid of her husband, a nincompoop in other domains of endeavor, used to organize crepitation contests—and this was France's great century! There is much talk of fecal matter in Ghelderode's plays, to underline the fact that man is not dust alone but also dung. He would prefer to see himself as a flower or a radiant body? So much the worse for him. Whereas, if he admits the restraints imposed by his bodily functions, he ceases to be civilly etiolated and enrolls matter in his service. And matter, even fecal, is an inexhaustible source of comedy for the robust individuality imagined by Ghelderode.

Like man's lot, the plot in which he is caught up is frequently a burlesque one. The deceived husband of *Hop Signor* dies during the hoodwinking process because he played the aristocrat, with a sword, and airs and graces that did not befit his station. The miserly Hiéronymus (*Magie rouge*) harbors the horseman Armador, who has promised to manufacture gold. But Armador steals instead of providing, and with the help of the housewife Sybilla places responsibility for a murder on Hiéronymus, who has already gone mad. This husband, who shuts up his wife with another man and marries off his doubloons so that they may multiply, is the central figure of a cruel farce in which avarice takes on hallucinatory dimensions.

Even in the more sober plays, the burlesque aspects are always present. While a father gives way to grotesque grief for his dying daughter (*Mademoiselle Jaire*), the coffinmaker comes along to vaunt his merchandise: "For your soon-to-be-lamented daughter, I'll make a little masterpiece of elegance, solidity and comfort." Or a bottle of Hollands gin consoles the three Mariekes, as they weep over the dead.

Death, in *Le Cavalier bizarre*, spares the terrified old men who await his coming and bears off a new-born child. The title character of *La Balade du grand macabre* himself dies and his victims outlive him. The author, in *Trois Acteurs, un drame*, commits suicide, and



not the actor who had intended to do so. Examples could easily be multiplied.

The burlesque atmosphere allows the spectator to put up with a degree of tension that might well evaporate, if the author tried to maintain it too long. A further merit of the burlesque, in Ghelderode's eyes, is that it gives direct expression to the voice of the people, which in Greek tragedy is embodied in the chorus. He roundly declares this to be so, and refers to the Mariekes mentioned above and to the buffoons in all the plays where they appear. Even in *Barrabas* and *Marie la misérable*, his religious plays, these procedures are used. In the same strain are the "plays within a play," the processions, the lines of mourners and the speeches, to which Ghelderode sometimes turns too readily.

It is less easy to speak of a burlesque character or of burlesque psychology, since Ghelderode rejects all psychology. The dramatist, he maintains, must draw upon the wellsprings of vision or of instinct. The writer who accepts a system will sooner or later trap himself in a problem play. Jean-Jacques, the author who serves as spokesman for Ghelderode himself in *Sortie de l'acteur*, proclaims that "I have never wanted to reveal or demonstrate anything and, as long as men have been mumming, the theatre has never been known to reveal anything whatever."

The few characters who turn out well, in Michel de Ghelderode's plays, become human via their dehumanization. Like Jarry's personages, they are so untrue that they achieve a truth of their own. Nekrozotar and Videballe, the former a divine executioner mounted on the drunkard Porprenaz, and the latter the philosopher of the kingdom and a henpecked husband, are related to Tyl Eulenspiegel. They act, like worthy representatives of legendary chronicles, in a totally unforeseeable fashion. And we accept the spectacle of Videballe overwhelmed with blows that would kill any mortal, just as we accept the unbelievable malevolence of Videballe's wife Salivaine, the kingdom's grey eminence. Ghelderode's more anthropomorphic heroes, among them Charles V and Barrabas, are not exempt from the hyperbole favored by this author. In that magnificent play *Le Soleil se couche* Charles V gives orders for his funeral mass, little suspecting that he is falling into the trap laid for him by his son Philip. The examination of conscience he makes, to the accompaniment of the oburgations of a talking parrot, shows him in turn as sincere and fraudulent, a believer and a skeptic, brave and cowardly, magnificent and pitifully deceived by Philip and the Holy Office.

The hero of *Barrabas* is a wild beast one cannot readily imagine associated with any kind of Christian communism. To say what Ghelderode's characters are, unavoidably one must relate what they are doing or have

done. They enjoy their liberty in the midst of the incredible and the extraordinary, and this liberty appears to be gratuitous, for it is grafted much more firmly on a poetics than on any association of the characters with a world, a struggle or a passion, in which they would feel responsible for anything beyond themselves. With the sole exception of the cloistered Marie, the liberty of Ghelderode's characters revolves in a vacuum and may, in this sense, be classified as burlesque.

Ghelderode, in his *Entretiens d'Ostende*, asserts that his plays are neither clerical nor anti-clerical. "Why," he goes on to say, "don't they make me out to be a Catholic author, while they're at it, since after all I've put saints on the stage!" However that may be, his education at the hands of the "clerical gentlemen" awakened within him a sense of metaphysical anguish. At first this was stilled by the teachings of the Church, but later, as he himself expressed it, his faith "drifted" and he found himself obliged to find an answer for the problems of our human condition.

Whatever his religious feelings may have been at the time of his death, there can be no doubt that Ghelderode's guidelines are Christian. Ghelderodian man has a sense of sin. He knows that he is guilty. He is punished because he is guilty. He is capable of every "truculence," in the Latin sense of the word, and of every extravagance of behavior because, no matter what he does, he is certain to lose. His horizon is bounded by death. Thus the sense of the tragic, in Ghelderode's case, comes from the omnipresence of death. There is a lot of dying in his plays, he declares, because there is a lot of dying in life. Yet on several occasions he has let his characters protest against this bloody game. "There are three of us, and if only three of us die, it's because there's no one else."

It is, indeed, more economical to list the plays in which death has no part. They are *D'un diable qui prêcha merveilles*, *Le Club des menteurs*, *Les Vieillards*, *Adrian et Jusemina*—a total of four plays out of the thirty printed in the five volumes of the Gallimard edition! Death is often a medieval figure, with an eroded snubnose, who sees fit to wander among the living. In *Le Cavalier bizarre* he is described as "very taken with himself, with protruding jaw, hand on hip, scythe over shoulder, wearing white boots and wrapped in a torn cloak strewn with small silver crosses." In *Le Grand Macabre*, he resembles the disguise a student might dream up for the Beaux Arts ball. In *Escorial* the king imagines him "as a skeleton sauntering about, in monk's clothing." Death in *Christophe Colomb*, appears as a "naval officer, ageless." He is featured in the train of the Ship of Fools, along with young men wearing shrouds and women similarly attired. In *Masques Ostendais*, Death is dressed in a dirty garment covered with crosses, with a battered top hat.