Names and Numbers in *The Adding Machine*

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The Adding Machine, by Elmer Rice, is one of the most original and enduring successes of the American theater. The initial production by the Theatre Guild of New York (1923) included Dudley Diggs of Dublin's Abbey Theatre as Mr. Zero and Edward G. Robinson as Shrdlu, with music by Deems Taylor; the 1969 movie featured Phyllis Diller as Mrs. Zero.

As the character names suggest, the play is also interesting from an onomastic point of view.[1] Written in seventeen days just after Theatre Guild Productions of Georg Kaiser's Expressionist *von morgens bis mitternachts* (From Morn to Midnight) (1912) and the Capeks' *R.U.R.* (1920), it shows the strong influence of European avant-garde drama.[2] The story of a petty department store clerk who kills his boss when twenty-five years of adding sales receipts are rewarded by his dismissal, the play continues long past Zero's trial and execution to test the quality of a common man in the Elysian Fields, freed from the twin yokes of unhappy marriage and vocational slavery. He fails to accept his post mortem chance for happiness and is eventually condemned to be reborn to a new career of adding numbers.

The protagonist's name, *Zero*, is the familiar denotative tag name which tells us the essence of the character, who is not simply a victim of capitalism, the institution of marriage with its sex roles and stereotyped behavior, and the mass media. For when these restraints are removed in the permissive utopian afterlife, he retreats to a heavenly adding machine rather than live out his earthly fantasies. Finally, Lt. Charles sends him back to earth for a new round of adding machine drudgery. Zero's name denotes his value. As Robert Hogan writes, "Zero's worthlessness is indicated in many ways – by his speech and actions, by overt statement of the other characters, and by the entire plot" (p. 31).

Zero's name is appropriately drawn from his own occupational sphere of numbers, which dominate his reveries and conversation as well as cover

the walls of his apartment in lieu of wallpaper. It is a family name and not a given name — Mr. Zero — which suggests his descent from a long line of slaves — and his wife's worthlessness is also established by her assuming her husband's name, Mrs. Zero.

To call the married couple featured in the play *Mr. and Mrs. Zero* is an amusing bit of denotative naming, justified by the hero's occupation, but it hardly transcends the conventional tagnames of Restoration Comedy. Rice goes beyond a one-shot *redende Name* to create a whole society of numbered characters, the social set of the Zeros. When the Zeros entertain at home (on the evening after Mr. Zero has murdered his boss), the couples who appear are named *Mr. and Mrs. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six.* These twelve characters later appear as Zero's jury, and find him guilty when he suggests in his defense that they could have acted as he did (p. 24).

In addition to couples One through Six, a monologue by Mrs. Zero records her views of movies and their stars with frequent references to the opinions of her married friends: "Mrs. Seven was tellin' me ... "; "Mrs. Eight was tellin' me ... "; "I was tellin' Mrs. Eleven only the other day ... " (p. 4). This second set of six friends (from which Mrs. Ten is omitted) consists only of conversational references to married ladies who never actually appear and who are mentioned — except for a rumor about the Sevens getting a divorce (p. 18) — only by Mrs. Zero.

Thus there are twelve numbered married couples who comprise the social world of the Zeros, petit-bourgeois families whose speech is stylized and indistinguishable. To have numbers instead of names denotes the lack of individuality, the anonymity of the number blotting out the personal and ethnic connotations of a family name; their given names are also never used. As Palmieri writes, "That the characters in the play have been given numbers instead of names signifies that they have been dehumanized by modern society, that they have lost their individuality, and that they are multitudinous in society as numbers themselves." (p. 63)

Zero's name, although a number as well, has the extra denotative meaning of worthlessness which the numbers one to twelve lack. Indeed, their numbers have no individual significance: Mrs. Seven is not "lucky," or less than Mrs. Nine in some way. The point is merely the series, interchangeable and depersonalized. Nor is there any meaning in the absence of Mrs. Ten. Furthermore, any of the numbered characters would be capable of murder for which one does not have to be a zero, as evidenced by the racist chorus of hate into which the party dissolves (p. 19), echoed by Zero's approval of a southern lynching in his speech to the jury (p. 24).

Although Zero's name has a special meaning, it is still part of the number series and he is no different from the others in character.

Numbered characters are by no means unheard of in drama, where Shakespeare for example may use them for members of a class consisting of individuals not important enough to have personal names – first soldier, second soldier, etc. They also occur in modern drama, in Expressionist plays like *From Morn to Midnight*, to denote the anonymity and uniformity of mass-man. But in *The Adding Machine* the numbering is raised to a new level, to a family name itself with the accompanying titles of Mr. and Mrs. and the suppression of given names. Aside from its comic effect, Rice's use of the device goes beyond simply not bothering to mention an unimportant but doubtless "existing" character name, to denying a natural name by supplanting it; Mr. and Mrs. One can no longer "really" be Mr. and Mrs. Smith.

The specific numbers are not actually denotative individually, but achieve their meaningfulness only as members of the group: a Mr. Eight would not be possible without the rest of the series. The series is infinitely extensible; Rice simply chose the symmetry of six plus six, with a possible allusion to the twelve apostles of Christ.

Rice has given some of the characters – Zero's office girlfriend, the prostitute he lusts after, his fellow murderer – conventional names. These are all unmarried persons. So a further principle or witticism of Rice is that marriage creates loss of individuality, and anonymity. Since Zero's office companion, Daisy, is by no means a superior person to his home companion, Mrs. Zero, and the murderer Zero himself is only a variant of the murderer Shrdlu, the stultifying regression of marriage alone creates the number quality. If Shrdlu had married he would have become Mr. Thirteen or Mr. Seventy-Four, but still could have murdered one of his tormentors.

Shrdlu has the strangest name in the onomasticon of *The Adding Machine*. The various scholarly critics of *The Adding Machine* never comment on the name *Shrdlu*, nor did Rice explain it in print. The name is used only in the list of characters and to identify the speaker during the play; it is never actually spoken out on the stage. Mr. Zero calls Shrdlu "buddy" or pretends not to remember his name, which he must have seen in newspaper accounts. For Shrdlu, like Zero, is a murderer, whose sensational crime trial and execution filled the tabloids. Whereas Zero has killed his boss, Shrdlu struck out at an oppressor in the domestic realm, his mother. When Zero pops up from his grave, he immediately begins a conversation with the previously executed Shrdlu, and they acknowledge

having read about each other's spectacular crime in the newspaper. Ignoring the chronological difficulties involved (Zero can have read about Shrdlu, but not Shrdlu about Zero, unless their crimes are also simultaneous), one notes the celebrity status achieved by criminal acts, part of Rice's depiction of the perversion of human values by the mass media, the movies and the newspapers.

Shrdlu, an alter ego to Zero, becomes his guide to the life after death, having preceded him to the cemetery and then to the Elysian Fields, their next stop. As Zero's flaw is his unfulfilled sexuality, so Shrdlu's is a religious fanaticism which prevents him from becoming mature and autonomous, locked in a Sunday-school, petit-bourgeois strict moral propriety. The two killers are variants of each other, revengeful fellow slaves in mass society.

But what of the name *Shrdlu*? The standard linotype machine (patented by Oscar Mergenthaler from New York in 1884) has those letters in a vertical row of its keyboard. Typesetters who made a mistake would in a single motion brush the letters SHRDLU, creating a meaningless word as a signal to the proofreader to delete the entire line. Naturally the lines were sometimes overlooked, so that the word often crops up in newspapers and magazines.

Thus this nonsense, mistake, to-be-removed word is the verbal equivalent of Zero in the numerical system. Both names mean nothing and are worthless. The appropriateness of this name for the mother-murderer is also established by the fact that Shrdlu's occupation for thirteen years was as a *proof-reader* (of shoe catalogues). So Zero's nothing name is taken from his occupation of recording and adding the numbers on department store receipts.

It was the solving of the riddle of Shrdlu's name which made a study of names in *The Adding Machine* possible. Not unlike a foreign name (Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for example) the decoding or translation of the name creates a denotative *redende Name*. Here the name not only characterizes its holder, but links him to another character nominally, in type (tag name) as well as meaning (nothingness), reinforcing the linkage of plot.

The full name of Zero's long-term office mate, who pursues him even after death, is Daisy Diana Dorothea Devore. The name is comic because of the initial alliteration and its excessive length. It seems to reflect her false gentility, her desire to be a respectable "lady." Durham writes, "The anti-heroine has the patently ridiculous but pathetically pretentious name

... " (p. 40). The critic was apparently himself carried away by the alliteration of the name he was commenting on! The use of a flower as a female given name is commented on by Mr. Zero himself: "Daisy! That's a pretty name. It's a flower, ain't it? Well – that's what you are – just a flower." (p. 52). Her first name is thus denotative. Although her complete name seems to have been devised by Rice to criticize the character, I was able to establish its origin in a film actress' name of the period: Dorothy Devore. Technically, then, Miss Devore's name is an allusive or embodied one.

The prostitute who wants to make love on Zero's new grave to get revenge for being turned in to the police is named Judy O'Grady. This is an Irish working class stereotype name, such as might be found in a sentimental ballad of the music halls. A popular song of the period, "The Sidewalks of New York," features a "Sweet Rosie O'Grady" and Noel Coward used the name in a song for a Broadway review, *Sigh No More*.[3] *Judy O'Grady* is a denotative, classifying name which fits the stereotypes of the play's social milieu, but allusive if we disregard the first-name change and think of the song(s).

Beatrice Elizabeth is the name of Mrs. Zero's niece, to whom she wants to leave the newspaper clippings of Zero's murder case. It seems simply another pretentious petit-bourgeois name like the given names of Miss Devore, to whom Zero wants to leave the scrapbook.

The minister and family friend of the Shrdlus who witnessed the matricide is named Dr. Amaranth. Etymologically, Amaranth(us) is the name of a genus of flowering plants. It means 'unfading' in Greek. But rather than this allusive explanation, Rice has apparently borrowed the minister's name from the area of machine reproduction of written language, in this case the typewriter. As Bruce Bleven, Jr., writes (p. 202):

> Aligners have a secret seven-word sentence for testing typewriters' typing. It's not, "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," nor "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their party," but the meaningless – and yet provocative – "Amaranath sasesusos Oronoco initiation secedes Uruguay Philadelphia."

Thus both Shrdlu (linotype machine) and his spiritual guardian Amaranth (typewriter) have names derived from the new technology of mechanical writing. Both names are "insider" words, used by technicians. Although Rice has removed the fourth "a," restoring the flower name, the printing origin of both names links the characters in an onomastic way,

reinforcing their connection in the story.

A supernatural figure who appears at the end to drive Zero back to an earthly reincarnation as an adding machine man is named Lt. Charles. He corresponds to The Fixer who gave the final clearance at Zero's execution. They agree that Zero is not worthy of rescuing from his next phase, and hustle him on against his will to death and rebirth, respectively. Again, Rice eschews the opportunity for symbolism or a meaningful name such as Gabriel, apparently content with his main onomastic exploits: Zero, the numbered couple system, and the inimitable Shrdlu.

Like The Fixer, Zero's victim is not awarded a personal name: he is simply The Boss. As in German Expressionist plays, the character is seen primarily in his social/economic role without the individualism of a personal name. In apparent violation of my analysis that all married persons have number-names, the boss is later revealed to have a wife and three children (p. 22). But that rule applies only to the common-man of Zero's social orbit.

In her monologue which comprises the text of Scene One, Mrs. Zero discusses current movies and actors/actresses, comparing her opinions with those of other numbered-lady acquaintances, establishing a canon of taste in the content of films and the private lives of the players, which she does not clearly distinguish. The film stars named are, in order, Chubby Delano, Grace Darling (originally named Elizabeth Dugan), and Pauline Frederick.

For the two female names, Rice employed real-life film actresses, familiar enough to be recognized by most in his audience. Pauline Frederick (1881/3-1938) made her screen debut in 1915, also playing in Madame X (1920), a title which may have interested the number-oriented Rice. Grace Darling (born 1896) acted in films between 1916 and 1922.[4]

Rice also used a real film actress as name source for a character in the play itself. Dorothy Devore (born 1901), who started appearing in films in 1918, must have inspired the name of Mr. Zero's office girlfriend, Daisy Diana Dorothea Devore. The first two cases merely represent a factual correctness in alluding to popular culture, while the latter case is an allusive name which lacks any apparent significance, or has a hidden reference (for example, to some role Dorothy Devore played in a film) which cannot be reconstructed today. The use of an actress' name for his character probably indicates little more than that Rice was involved in the theatre-film world, like his female characters who have been intellectually damaged by popular culture.

The name Chubby Delano may refer to a no longer recoverable actor name of the period, or quite possibly to the famous Fatty Arbuckle: Roscoe A. Arbuckle (1887-1933), whose film career dates from 1908.

In the guided tour which visits Zero just before his execution, a child character is identified as Little Lord Fauntleroy, although his mother calls him Eustace. Thus in the stage direction, if not in the dialogue, an allusive name is used. *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was a hit film of 1921, starring Freddy Bartholomew. The name was already a generic name referring to a spoiled child of genteel parents.

The film titles mentioned by Mrs. Zero in Scene One and by Daisy Devore in Scene Two, on the other hand, are not the names of actual films, as recorded in *Motion Pictures 1912-1939, Catalog of Copyright Entries.* The titles are *For Love's Sweet Sake, Sea-Sick, A Mother's Tears, The Price of Virtue,*, and *The Devil's Alibi.* They are stereotype sentimental titles of the period, however, the key words appearing in many films. For example, *The Price of Virtue* echoes *The Price of Betrayal* (1916), ... *Dishonor* (1916), ... *Fame* (1916), ... *Happiness* (1916), ... *Possession,* (1921), ... *Power* (1916), ... *Pride* (1917) and ... *Vanity* (1914), to mention only a fraction of "The Price of ..." titles. The other fictitious movie titles are also buttressed by related real titles.

So much for the references to the film world in the monologues of Zero's wife and girlfriend, which mix historically verifiable, "correct" names with invented but appropriate ones. The main concern of this study was to illuminate the onomasticon of the play's characters, plus Dr. Amaranth, who does not appear on stage. Beyond the Expressionist Zeros and their numbered-couple social milieu, Rice uses a variety of denotative and allusive names. The latter have been derived from the two spheres of printing and film. While the newspapers and movies are clearly the two main media forces to which he imputes the stupidity, prejudices, and conformity of the urban masses, Rice apparently intended little hidden statement in his selection of individual embodied names. At most Shrdlu and Amaranth share the quality of being temporary, meaningless words, not fit to be part of a publishable text, a linguistic equivalent to the arithmetical set Zero and numbered couples. But the intention of the author's onomastic choices seem ultimately more playful, as in the case of New Comedy's tag-names, than profound.

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Notes

[1]Kemp Malone included a paragraph on *The Adding Machine* in his article "Meaningful Fictional Names in English Fiction," most of which I quote here: "The leading character is Mr. Zero, whose name needs no explaining. His office mate, Daisy Diana Dorothea Devore, has a name indicative of the love stories and movie romances that she lives by. But Zero is too colorless and conventional to have a real love affair, even if the woman gives him every encouragement. His friends Mr. One, Mr. Two, Mr. Three, Mr. Four, Mr. Five, and Mr. Six, with their wives, are as empty-headed as he is. They are all no more than animated adding machines. The only characters in the play who have normal names are the prostitute Judy O'Grady and the cosmic policeman Charles with his assistant Joe." Obviously I differ with Malone on a number of points, as well as having found new explanations of character names, like Shrdlu.

[2]The Theatre Guild, a vital American link to European experimental theatre, performed Kaiser's play twenty-six times in 1922, beginning May 14. *R.U.R.* followed in early summer 1922, and Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) was performed in October 1922, only a year behind Italy. Rice may have known this last play as well, but in any case his own was created in an ambiance of radical new European plays produced by the Theatre Guild.

[3]This information was provided to me by an (anonymous) reader of the first version of Names.

[4]*Grace Darling* is an actual name and not a stage name, contrary to what the play states (p. 4). Darling is a common enough English surname and there were many in the theatre world of this time. Grace is a given name probably alluding to the famous English heroine Grace Darling (1815-1842), a lighthouse keeper's daughter who rescued a group of persons from a shipwreck in a bad storm.

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Additions to *row* and *alley*

[See *Names* 32 (14984), 347-9; 33 (1985), 209-10].

Tresser Boulevard, in Stamford, Connecticut, is informally known as *Corporate Row*, and six new town houses in downtown Princeton, New Jersey, are known as *Victoria Row* (both names reported in the *New York Times*, Mar. 2, 1986, sec. 8). Hayarkon St. in Tel-Aviv, Israel, has been called *Hotel Row* in English-language advertising. The theaters on the west end of 42nd Street in Manhattan are known as *Theater Row* (journalists' usage). *Diplomatic Row* has been used to refer to streets or sections in various cities, or abstractly, to diplomatic circles. A 1966 film was called *Murderer's Row.*

Two fictional placenames with *row* are found in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories: *Forest Row* in *The Adventure of Black Peter* (1904) and *Church Row* in *The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton* (1904). *Alley* appears as *the Yew Alley* in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901).

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