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Jesse Levitt
University of Bridgeport

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ONOMASTIC DEVICES IN IONESCO'S THEATER

Jesse Levitt

University of Bridgeport

The theater of Eugène Ionesco shows a variety of onomastic devices -- some obvious, others unusual, and still others obscure. His first play, or "anti-play," La Cantatrice chauve (The Bald Soprano) is a satire against the "universal petty-bourgeoisie...the personification of accepted ideas and slogans, the ubiquitous conformist."¹ In 1948 Ionesco decided to learn English with a primer in the Assimil series entitled "L'Anglais sans peine." Copying whole sentences, he was astonished that "Mrs. Smith informed her husband that they had several children, that they lived in the vicinity of London, that their name was Smith, that Mr. Smith was a clerk, that they had a servant, Mary--English like themselves..In the fifth lesson, the Smiths' friends, the Martins, arrive; the four of them begin to chat and, starting from basic axioms, they build more complex truths: 'The country is quieter than the big city.' "

In the author's mind, the clichés of the primer became "empty and fossilized," turning into a parody of the disintegration of language itself. Ionesco retains the Smiths, the Martins and Mary of his primer; the names are obviously ordinary and conventional, in keeping with the satire on triteness. After a long and inane conversation without any real communication, the couples start shouting proverbs, rhymes, syllables and finally letters of the alphabet. The stage is darkened momentarily, and when it is relit, the Martins have assumed the role of the Smiths at the beginning of the play.

As Ionesco explains it, the play is a tragicomic picture of life in an age when "we can no longer avoid asking ourselves what we are doing here on earth and how, having no deep sense of our destiny, we can endure the crushing weight of the material world..." "The Smiths, the Martins can no longer talk because they can no longer think; they can no longer think because they can no longer be moved, can no longer feel passions. They can no longer be; they can 'become' anybody, anything, for, having lost their identity, they assume the identity of others...they are interchangeable..."²

If the Martins assume the role of the Smiths at the end of the play, it is because the Smiths and the Martins are interchangeable nonentities. There are continual references to a

family, all of whose members, male and female, bear the common name of Bobby Watson--again illustrating the device of interchangeability. The Watsons have lost their individuality, and there is no need to differentiate among them. The maid, Mary, wanders through corridors, eavesdrops, and appropriately informs the audience that her real name is Sherlock Holmes.

The name of the play is the result of pure accident. Ionesco had intended to call it L'Heure anglaise (The English Hour) or Big Ben Follies. An actor at rehearsal mistakenly referred to la cantatrice chauve (the bald singer) instead of l'institutrice blonde (the blond teacher); Ionesco, who was present, considered this a better title and incorporated a reference to a bald singer.³

The theme of the interchangeability of nonentities with the same or nearly identical names also occurs in L'Impromptu de l'Alma (Improvisation), where Ionesco ridicules his critics in the form of three pedants named Bartholomeus I, II, and III, costumed in the scholarly gowns of Molière's doctors in Le Malade imaginaire (The Hypochondriac). The play is modeled after Molière's Impromptu de Versailles, and like Molière, Ionesco appears on stage in his own name to defend his conception of the theater.

Jacques ou la Soumission (Jack or Submission) and its

sequel, L'Avenir est dans les oeufs (The Future is in Eggs) offer us a sordid, petty, bourgeois family of questionable education and manners, nearly all of whose members--mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather--are named Jacques, since they are interchangeable; a sister is called Jacqueline. The family try to impose their will on young Jacques, making him marry the girl of their choice and eat pommes de terre au lard (hash brown potatoes). Jacques's fiancée is Roberte II, the sister of Roberte I. Her parents are Robert père and Robert mère. The plays are a "hilarious satire of the French marriage market, of the well endowed bride (she is richly endowed with three noses to make it more concrete)."⁴

In two plays, Victimes du devoir (Victims of Duty) and Amédée, the disloyal wife is called Madeleine--a name derived from the Biblical Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute. In the first play, a satire on the detective story, M. Choubert is forced by an aggressive policeman to search the depths of his subconscious to try to determine whether a former neighbor, Mallot or Mallod (whom Choubert did not know) spelled his name with a t or a d. The policeman, in order to "close up holes" in Choubert's memory, forces him to eat enormous quantities of bread. The disloyal wife, Madeleine, who finds it "very agreeable to obey the laws, be a good citizen, do one's duty, and possess a pure conscience,"⁵ changes successively into a

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seductress, an old woman, and finally the policeman's mistress. The policeman is then confronted by a new character, Nicolas D'Eu--who, Choubert says, is not Nicholas II, the late czar of Russia. Engaging the policeman in a discussion of the theater, Nicolas then turns on him and kills him as the policeman proclaims that he is only doing his duty and shouts: "Long live the white race." Madeleine then reminds Nicolas that the problem of Mallot or Mallod has not yet been solved; so Nicolas takes over the task of force feeding Choubert enormous pieces of bread. All the characters are victims of duty; "being characters in a play, they must find a solution at all costs" for the spelling of Mallot's name.⁶

Madeleine betrays her husband from the beginning to the end. From a political point of view, the policeman resembles Mussolini's thugs who fed castor oil to Italian anti-Fascists. His shouts of "Long live the white race" suggest Nazi racism, and his excuse that he is the victim of duty suggests the defense of the Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg trial.

In Amédée, Madeleine is again the disloyal wife who appears to have made love fifteen years previously with a young man whom her husband then killed. The corpse has remained unburied and has been growing in geometric proportions threatening to destroy the apartment. The corpse can also be regarded as a symbol of

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the couple's dead love. In a flashback scene, Amédée, whose name means "beloved," shows himself as a poetic and romantic young husband; but his affection is brutally rejected by Madeleine, who seems to regard his love as attempted rape. In the end, Amédée removes the corpse from the apartment; it becomes a parachute on which he flies to freedom, forever out of Madeleine's reach.

In a more recent play, La Faim et la Soif (Hunger and Thirst), whose title, according to Ionesco, is Biblical in origin,⁷ the author abandons his use of the name Madeleine for the bad wife, and names Jean's faithful and devoted wife Marie-Madeleine.

In four plays--Le Tueur sans gages (The Unpaid Killer), Rhinocéros, Le Roi se meurt (Exit the King), and Le Piéton de l'air (A Stroll in the Air), the hero, symbolizing everyman, or the human condition in an absurd and hostile world, is named Bérenger. The choice of this name does not lend itself to any ready analysis. Alphonse Bérenger was a distinguished nineteenth-century French lawyer, politician, and penologist; Pierre Jean de Beranger who spelled his name with an a, was a nineteenth-century song writer whose inspiration was largely popular and patriotic. Berengarius was an eleventh-century theologian. There were also two tenth-century Kings of Italy named Berengarius, which may have suggested the choice of this name for the King in

Le Roi se meurt.

In Le Tueur sans gages, Bérenger is an idealistic young man whose dreams of acquiring a home in the perfect city, la cité radieuse (Radiant City) are shattered by the crimes of a vicious killer. Bérenger sets out to find the criminal and inform the police, only to be caught and probably killed by his enemy on a deserted street at nightfall. His friend is named Édouard, etymologically "guardian," a name that seems ironic for this dubious friend who deliberately thwarts Bérenger's efforts to unmask the killer when he purposely fails to bring along with him the incriminating suitcase and the killer's correspondence. The killer himself, who remains nameless and speechless, enticing his victims by showing them a photograph of a colonel, seems to symbolize death, or perhaps war, since the colonel is a military man. There is also a domineering woman with political ambitions named Mère Pipe, described as the keeper of the geese of state, who preaches a totalitarian gibberish, half Fascist, half Communist, and wants everyone to do the goose step.

Rhinocéros is a satire of totalitarian oppression. The name seems to have originated in Ionesco's feeling of alienation in Fascist Rumania in the thirties before he left for France. In one of his journals he describes his situation, which is that of his hero Bérenger: "How can you communicate with a tiger, a

cobra? How can you convince a wolf or a rhinoceros to understand you, to spare you? What language can you speak to them? In fact, being the last man in this monstrous island, I no longer represent anything but an anomaly, a monstrosity."

Ionesco also confirms the anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi origins of the play in his preface to the American edition, when he refers to the feeling of total revulsion of his friend, Denis de Rougemont, at Nuremberg in 1938, as the crowd, in hysterics, welcomed Hitler. Bérenger, like Denis de Rougemont, he comments, is "allergic to mass movements" and experiences the same instinctive revulsion against mass hysteria.⁹

Several of the characters who turn into rhinoceroses have suggestive names, like Boeuf, "ox," suggesting stupidity, and Papillon, "butterfly," suggesting frivolity. Botard, the self-satisfied, aggressive elementary school teacher, the man of bad faith who speaks a Communist-sounding jargon, has a name suggesting botte, "boot," implying oppression, or bot, "club-footed," implying deformity. Botard also resembles bâtard (bastard, illegitimate, mongrel). Dudard, who casts continuous doubt on the bases of civilization and glorifies the state of brute nature, symbolizes the betrayal of the pseudo-intellectuals. His name is perhaps a deformation of douteur, "doubter." Daisy, Bérenger's sweetheart, on the other hand, has a name suggestive of gentleness or weakness, and it is mainly through weakness and

fear of isolation that she too joins the rhinoceroses.

In Le Roi se meurt (Exit the King), Bérenger is an all powerful King who must die after centuries of absolute control, a ruthless King, but also a creative genius who stole fire from the gods, like Prometheus, who wrote the Iliad and Shakespeare's plays, who built giant cities, invented the automobile and the airplane, and discovered atomic fission. Bérenger symbolizes society, the state, the entire human race, and even God. There is some ambiguity in this figure. If he symbolizes all humanity, does his death portray cosmic destruction?

Bérenger has two queens. His favorite, Marie, whose name suggests the Virgin Mary, loves him deeply and mothers him in his agony, refusing to concede that he is about to die. The second Queen, Marguerite, "daisy," represents dignity and duty, and gently but firmly leads the King to the threshold of death, as required by court etiquette.

Bérenger appears again in Le Piéton de l'air (A Stroll in the Air) as a French writer visiting England, who has become incapable of writing and who knows he is going to die. Nevertheless, in a state of euphoria symbolized by his ability to fly, he crosses a silver bridge to explore the world of death. He returns in deep depression, having seen a world of bottomless pits, ravaged plains, ice and fire.

In many of Ionesco's plays, the characters have no names at all, as in the case of le tueur (the killer), le vieux (the old man) and l'orateur (the orator) in Les Chaises (The Chairs), and le professeur and l'étudiante (the student) in La Leçon (The Lesson). Some of these characters may be regarded as typifying a whole class. The student, according to some interpretations, is always stultified and violated by the professor. The old man is too senile to give his message to the world, and his orator, who is mute, cannot deliver the old man's message. In La Leçon and L'Impromptu de l'Alma, the maid is named Marie, and like the maids in Molière's plays represents the voice of reason and the enemy of pedants and frauds. In La Leçon Marie warns the professor against trying to teach his student philology, since it leads to crime. After the professor has killed the student, Marie becomes the consoling mother who will help the professor out of his difficulties. In L'Impromptu de l'Alma, Ionesco is "rescued from complete stultification by the doctors through the arrival of the charwoman," Marie, who represents "common sense and demystification."¹⁰ When Ionesco starts pontificating on his own, she suddenly throws a doctor's gown over his shoulders as a warning against succumbing to pedantic temptations. While Ionesco shows little interest in religious themes, except perhaps in La Faim et la Soif, the

mothering role of the two maids named Marie, as well as that of Queen Marie, seems to suggest a possible reference to the role of the Virgin Mary, the great mother of Christianity.

Thus Ionesco's onomastic devices, which are often unusual and sometimes obscure, nevertheless contribute to the artistic and symbolic interpretation of his work.

Jesse Levitt

University of Bridgeport

NOTES

- ¹Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1961), p. 93.
- ²Esslin, p. 93.
- ³Essling, p. 89.
- ⁴Henri Peyre, Contemporary French Literature, a Critical Anthology (New York, Harper and Row, 1964), p. 339.
- ⁵Eugène Ionesco, Theatre, I (Paris, NRF Gallimard, 1954), p. 184.
- ⁶Essling, p. 103.
- ⁷Simone Benmussa, Ionesco (Théâtre de tous les temps) (Paris, Seghers, 1966), p. 8
- ⁸Eugène Ionesco, Présent passé, passé présent (Paris, Mercure de France, 1968), p. 164.
- ⁹Eugène Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes (Paris, NRF Gallimard, 1966), pp. 277-278.
- ¹⁰Esslin, pp. 115-116.