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"Dese Funny Folks. Glad I Ain't None of Them": An Onomastic Inquiry into Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

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IN *THE STUDY OF NAMES: A Guide to Principles and Topics*, Frank Nuessel writes, "an artist's naming of his or her characters frequently involves calculated and conscious choices in order to deliver a message through the onomastic medium. Creative writers give names to their characters to send messages to prospective readers" (39). A brief overview of literary methods and practices demonstrates the validity of Nuessel's statement. Authors do, in fact, attempt to control or at least influence readers' reactions to characters by employing a variety of nominal, or nominational, devices. Traditionally, the most common techniques used for this purpose include using character names to suggest a description, to make an allusion, and to create a sense of mimesis.

What these three approaches share is a tendency to refer to something outside the fictional work itself, either to other texts or to the world the text supposedly represents, to "send messages to prospective readers"; in this way, these techniques represent *open* nominal systems. However, in *The Sound and the Fury,* William Faulkner uses character names in a completely different and innovative way, juxtaposing, revising, iterating, and displacing them within the *closed* nominal system of the Compson family, while leaving the nominal system of the African-American family, the Gibsons, relatively *open* and traditional. This functioning creative concept, to adopt David Markson's phrase, seeks to expose the degeneration of the Old South and the redemption of the New South by destabilizing the signifying function of names in the Compson family and implicitly comparing this nominal confusion and dysfunction to the efficient, stable set of names used by the Gibsons, the African-American family long in servitude to them, but on the verge of true emancipation.

Authors frequently use names to describe or predicate certain properties of their characters, a tradition which flourished most pronouncedly in medieval and early modern morality plays and allegories. A greater example of this cannot be provided, perhaps, than "Christian" in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is not to imply that the practice has died out. More recent examples of this device, defined as a "characteronym" or "double entendre effect" in literary criticism, are *Bleak House*'s Esther Summerson, who radiates light and warmth in even the bleakest of situations, and the Rabbit Angstrom of Updike's eponymous tetralogy, in which the name suggests both his past as a lithe basketball player and his current anxiety, flightiness, and instability.[1] Faulkner uses this device

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[1] The success of this device is not, however, simple or transparent, for it presupposes certain important shared linguistic attitudes between reader and writer. In her majestic study, *Living by Fiction*, Annie Dillard explains, "in two cases, at least, a writer wishes a name to be a double entendre, but no one pronounces the name as he intended, so the effect vanishes. Barth originally pronounced the Giles of *Giles Goat-Boy* with a hard *g*, punning on "guile," but when the book became known as "*Jiles" Goat-Boy*, Barth gave up his own pronunciation and joined the crowd. Nabokov fancied, rather endearingly, that the name Ada as spoken would coincide with the proper pronunciation of the word "ardor"–as it indeed it may, somewhere. At any rate, guile and ardor are the respective subjects of the two novels" (38).

sparingly in *The Sound and the Fury*–only the ineffectual moralist Mrs. Bland of section II and the librarian Melissa Meek of the "Appendix" come to mind.

Joyce's Stephen Daedalus exemplifies a second category of character naming, allusion, which refers to extra-textual sources, personae, or events to situate the text in a specific tradition and condition the reader to appreciate or foreground certain themes or motifs. Other examples of this technique include Hal in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (in part a revision and re-envisioning of *Hamlet*) and the Nietzschean Adrian Leverkuhn (German: "Live dangerously!," as Nietzsche advised) in Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*. Certain black humorists like Nabokov, Vonnegut, and Pynchon have employed this device for ironic and subversive reasons. As an example, we have the character Oedipa Maas in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, whose quest for self-realization lampoons and ridicules the very idea of a quest for self-realization embodied in the Sophoclean tragedy.[2]

The most frequent authorial naming device, at least since the dominance of the realist novel in the 19th century, involves naming a character in the interests of verisimilitude or mimesis. An American author using this device will fill his or her novel with names like "Mr. Johnson," "Anne Tolbert," "Mrs. Norris," et al. in order to lure a credulous reader into the story, which theoretically "mirrors reality" or "operates as a window onto reality." Thus, one finds these books and these character names on best-seller lists and in the more ambitious works of realist and naturalistic fictions, such as those written by Steinbeck, Roth, Annie Proulx, and Richard Russo. In this case, as in the case of description and allusion described above, the author's practice of character naming relies on, or creates, an open system, relying on extra-textual or real-world referents. Although Faulkner does succeed remarkably in creating a closed nominational system throughout much of *The Sound and the Fury*, a system in which character names rub clash and clang against one another in a centripetal structure, producing a sort of bizarre energy or *frisson*, at other times he does utilize traditional methods of character, as discussed below.

Like fellow high modernists such as Proust and Joyce, allusions play a critical role throughout Faulkner's *oeuvre*, and *The Sound and the Fury* is no exception, although alleged allusions traced throughout the decades by scholars are in this case rather dubious. Joseph Backus argues, for example, that the nomination of "Candace" derives not from its linguistic relation to a golfer's "caddy" but rather to "Canace," a character in Ovid's *Heroides* (Epistle XI) involved in an incestuous relationship. Backus concludes "these similarities cannot leave much doubt that Ovid, rather than the golfer's cry, provides a likely source for Faulkner's " 'Candace.'"[3] The derivation of Benjamin likewise refers back to antiquity, in this case the Biblical book of Genesis, where the birth of Jacob and Rachel's son, initially named Benoni ("son of my sorrow"), is, after Rachel's resulting death, changed by Jacob to "son of my right hand". For Backus, focusing on the questionable Benoni etymology, this "suggests that Faulkner chose this particular name as a replacement for 'Maury' to emphasize Benjy's innocence and 'martyrdom'" (230).

However, not only classical philology but recent historical scholarship complicates this interpretation, at least in the case of Candace and Benjamin. According to Sally Wolff, Faulkner scoured over plantation diaries of the antebellum era for character names. One in particular, The

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[2] A metastatic version of this device is when a modern author literally appropriates a canonical character and re-writes him or her, as in the novel *What Happened to Anna K.: A Novel* (2008) by Irina Reyn.

[3] Backus explains the conflation of "Candace"/"Canace": "That Faulkner calls his heroine "Candace" instead of "Canace" need not refute this suggestion. In literature, the two names have been used interchangeably at least since the time of Chaucer; and Chaucer's annotators have not neglected to call this confusion to the attention of modern readers" (228).

Leak Diary, is remarkably reminiscent of the diary described in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. Further research by Wolff illuminated that other Faulkner texts were affected, among them *The Sound and the Fury*, about which Wolff notes, "Candis and Ben were both slaves on the Leak plantation" whose names Faulkner would have encountered in his studies (Wolff 18).[4]

Backus also makes a case for the reference of the character name Quentin (Section II, that is). I would like to consider this particular name in detail given its centrality to my argument that the destabilization of the signification process in *The Sound and the Fury* influences a reading of both linguistic and social instability of the Caucasian Rule in the New South. Backus locates the referent for Quentin in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," of which he writes:

> The most specific indication of [the connection with Marvell] is found in line 29 of the poem, where a paronomasia for "Quentin" is formed by the words "quaint honor." Once these words are associated with Quentin, the completed line becomes appropriate: "And your quaint honor turns to dust." Going beyond this line the poem's first pair of rhyming words–"time" and "crime"–can be read as channeling the two main courses of thought in Quentin's stream-of-consciousness." (230-231)

This interpretation strikes me as delicate and ineffable as a butterfly's wing. Aside from the quoted passage, Backus provides only one additional paragraph indexing connections between "To His Coy Mistress" and the character of Quentin, but the paragraph fails to succeed in further buttressing this provocative argument. Most importantly, however, I would like to bracket for future consideration Backus' final evaluation of how the name Quentin functions in the text, an assessment with which I am in complete agreement. As he writes, "it is interesting to note that, after its use for Quentin, the name itself deteriorates, thus further supporting the novel's theme. This occurs when the name is passed on to young Quentin, Caddy's wanton daughter" (231).

In general, Faulkner's names in most of his novels and stories are both regionally and historically appropriate, generating, along with his skillful use of dialect, an intimate sense of region and culture. *The Sound and the Fury*, for the most part, follows this tendency, although arguably, in the case of names like Herbert Head or Dalton Ames, it seems as though Faulkner mocks a particular character. In other cases, as in many of the characters in *As I Lay Dying*, or Joe Christmas, the protagonist of *Light in August*, Faulkner delights in creating absurd names for his characters. However, as I hope to show, in *The Sound and the Fury* Faulkner exploits onomastic possibilities in a different way, one which explores different conventions of naming in Caucasian and African-American families to reveal something more profound about southern culture and history.

The discipline of onomastics investigates such topics as "What is a name? Who names? What is named? Why does a person, place, or thing receive a name?" (Nuessel 1). Although there are numerous academic approaches subsumed under the broad term onomastics, the one most relevant to this paper is "anthroponyms," which directly concerns the practice of character naming. In addition to surveying this perspective, I will analyze the innovative way in which character names in *The Sound and the Fury* function by locating the numerous places in the novel in which names change, repeat, layer, multiply, becoming ambiguous and displaced. Ultimately, I will consider how these linguistic "slippages" relate to the famous Faulknerian theme of the decline of the South. At the

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[4] Woolf additionally remarks that the Ben in the Leak Diary is also described as "not sound," and speculates that Faulkner may have found in these diary lines a topic and theme" (18). I will be returning to Wolff's readings of the Leak Diary in a later section of this essay focusing on the Gibson family and Faulkner's purpose in endowing his Caucasian characters with the names of forgotten slaves.

same time, I will identify those places in the novel–most often, in the case of the Gibsons–where names function effectively, and consider what this might connote about the future of the South, which the novel famously "redeems" on Easter Sunday, 1928. I will focus on three character names and one linguistic-ethnographic set: Benjy, Quentin, Candace, and the Gibson family. In homage to Faulkner, I will separate this analysis into four sections.

Benjy

The character signified by "Benjy" in 1928 was baptized "Maury" in 1895, in honor of Caroline Bascomb's hapless brother. After citing that 38% of names are family-generated (in a 1992 poll), Nuessel observes, "because many parents live vicariously through their children, the names given to their offspring often reflect expectations for the next generation" (10). For Caroline, therefore, neurotic and concerned with social status, the decision to name her youngest son "Maury" would be to redeem, through her son, the failures of her brother. However, when young "Maury" begins to act out sexually and exhibit cognitive and developmental disabilities, she determines it necessary to change his name to dissociate him from the Compson and Banscomb legacies. "Names have a great significance for Caroline Compson," writes Deborah Clarke, "who insisted that Maury's name be changed to Benjamin when his mental disabilities became known […] by changing her son's name she denies his association with her brother and thus erases any equation of the Bascombs with idiocy" (182).

As he ages but fails to mature, the character referred to as "Maury"> "Benjy">"Ben" becomes increasingly referred to simply as the "idiot" or some kind of objectified "it." Considering the sociological implications of objectification and labeling, Nuessel writes, "A label may be defined as a means of identifying a person through some particular or distinctive (usually negative) characteristic. Labels are essentially generic names used to identify people who possess identifiable characteristics. In sociology these labels are used to specify deviance" (35). Jason, more so than any other character, refers to "Maury"> "Benjy">"Ben">"the Idiot" as "his idiot brother," and, arguably, it is because of the subsequent dehumanization engendered by this labeling that he is able finally to commit the "idiot brother" to the State Asylum in Jackson 1933, as Faulkner describes in the Appendix to the novel.

Also, please note here the first instance of the most important technique of Faulkner's in the novel, which is to rupture the direct connection between signifier and signified which we find in Adamic language and substitute for this a numerically confused relation. In this case, there is one signified – "the last Compson child" – referred to, at different times, by at least four or five signifiers: "Maury," "Benjy," "Ben," "the idiot brother," and "it." I will symbolize this phenomenon in the form (5:1).

Quentin

The name "Quentin" signifies two characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and four characters if one considers the two elder Quentins Faulkner chronicles in "The Appendix." The lexical slippage of the references for Quentin from 1790 to 1928 parallels the decline of the Compson family in particular and the Old South during the same period. The first Quentin, Quentin MacLachan, emigrates from Scotland at the age of 80 in 1790, thus establishing the genetic base for the entire Compson family; the second Quentin, also Quentin MacLachan, we learn in the "Appendix," becomes governor of Jackson in the late antebellum period, and is responsible for the house being known even as late as 1928 as "the Governor's House." This instantiation of the name Quentin one may interpret as the apogee, or highest developed point, of the Compson legacy, and perhaps of the South as well (his gubernatorial term precedes the Civil War), for, with the introduction of Quentin III (Section II), this prestige and success erodes, sliding towards the nadir represented by the events of 1928.

This realization or representation of Southern masculine ideals, such as starting over in the New World and becoming governor, disappears in the character of Quentin Compson, for whose northern education (in part) "Maury> "Benjy's" pasture was sold. After one year at school, forlorn by Caddy's wedding announcement and obsessed by the idea that he had an incestuous relationship with her, he commits suicide, drowning himself in Boston's Charles River in a state of virginity. The three defining effeminate predicates for Quentin thus become: suicide, virgin, and sister-love. Here one begins to perceive the fall from the apogee represented by Quentin II's governance. The signification of "Quentin" no longer functions as it did in former times of glory and social order, and things get worse when Caddy names her daughter–destined to promiscuity, orphanhood, lawlessness–"Quentin." The ultimate irony is that Quentin III is a male virgin and Quentin IV is a promiscuous girl who has run away from home. Compared to Quentin I and Quentin II, both of whom I have argued symbolize the general rise and consolidation of the South, Quentin III and Quentin IV represent failure and detrimental change, a vast and general decline Faulkner associates with the fall of the South.

As we observed in the Benjy section, the relationship between lexical signifiers and signifieds slips in the case of Quentin. However, in Quentin's case, Faulkner reverses the technique, increasing the number of signifieds while ensuring the signifier count remains stable. "Quentin," over the course of 150 years, signifies four different signifieds: the immigrant, the governor, the suicide, and the runaway orphan. In this case, the ratio would be symbolized as (4:1)

Candace

Faulkner's theme of disconnected signifiers and ambiguous anthroponyms commences on page one with the ambiguity of "caddy/Caddie," when Luster orders Benjy to "hush up that moanin" after Benjy hears "here caddy!". The character which "here caddy" signifies in 1928 is baptized "Candace" in 1892, marries in 1910 as "Caddy," and by 1928 is signified (for Benjy) by the golfer's cry ("caddy"! – and her slipper) and, for the general household, by the permanent silence prescribed by Caroline. As Deborah Clarke writes, "by refusing to allow her daughter's name to be spoken she denies Caddy's identity as both mother and daughter" (182).

In the case of this Candace, as in the Benjy section, we once again confront the phenomenon of more signifiers than signifieds (4:1), an inversion of the Quentin section, in which there are more signifieds than signifiers (1:4). One could also add another possible signifier for the character "Candace"> "Caddy"> "caddy!"> "domestic silence" – "mother," as demonstrated in the scene in which Quentin asks, knowing the answer already, "Did I get a letter from Mother?" (212). In fact, if one includes "mother" as yet another signifier, Caddie's ratio of the signifier to signified becomes equivalent to Benjy's (5:1). Dawn Trouard describes beautifully this ability of Caddy – as a character, or memory, not a name – to signify in multiple directions in her essay "Faulkner's Text which is Not One":

> The Caddy who leaves no message of her own, who has no voice of her own, still manages to signify. She leaves her "mark" though she is reduced to the sounds she precipitates and the signature on her check ritually burned. We do not how she signs her name, but we recognize her in Benjy's hammering bellow, in Quentin's deafening, misogynistic rant, and in the endorsement on the checks that her daughter may not view and that her mother destroys. (37)

As Trouard notes, Caddie "still manages to signify" in multiple, divergent ways despite lacking a voice in the novel. Conversely, the character naming in the final section of the novel suggests ways in which nomination can function in a more direct, univocal, manner. The reasons for this are myriad and, I hope to persuade, extremely important.

Gibson Family

Although the thrust of this section – and in part the essay as a whole – consists in documenting the differences between the Compson family and the Gibson family, and what these differences might suggest about the history of slavery and its traces in the post-bellum and post-Reconstruction South, there remain interesting equivalences between both families that are compelling to examine. Like the Compsons (at least in the novel proper, excluding The Appendix) the Gibson family consists of three generations: a long-widowed matriarch (Dilsey Gibson), her three children (Frony, T.P., and Versh), and Luster, Frony's child, the lone third-generation representative who, like Quentin IV, is born out of wedlock and thus left without a surname.

The names of the Gibson family in *The Sound and the Fury*, Backus suggests, are mostly corruptions of classical names: "Luster" stands for "Lester"; "Dilsey" for "Dulce"; "Versh" for "Virgil"; and "Roskus" for "Roscius" (233). However, as Sally Wolff speculates, the surname Gibson, like Ben and Candis, was available to Faulkner in the Leak Diary and in stories he heard in conversations he had with Leak's descendants. In her words, "Luella Gibson, who worked for the Stricklands, and who delivered notes back and forth between the neighboring houses, at least in part, may have provided Faulkner with a model for Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the* Fury" (62).

The fact that, as Backus claims, many of these names are corruption*s*, of course, might imply that Faulkner is ridiculing the Gibson characters who, of course would have no access to classical education. But an opposite, and more interesting interpretation, suggests that these are not corruptions of "noble" names, but rather names that, by divorcing themselves from the heritage of the south, restore their nobility. Woolf suggests this too, arguing that Faulkner's outrage about the injustice of slavery he beheld second-hand (she refers to anecdotes of him cursing at the plantation-keeper's diaries) may have influenced him to

> see in the diary the names of slaves and then weave not only their names but many of the situations of their lives into his novels and stories [suggesting] his deep empathy for their plight. Faulkner did not seem to use many of the names of the white people he found in the diary for his fictional characters [...] Perhaps by transforming their names and stories in his fiction, Faulkner intended to raise these souls from their resting place to tell their stories and thereby honor their lives. (31)

Finally, the central creative concept I have identified at the heart of the novel, the closed nominational system, is absent from the discourse and communication style of the Gibson family. In these cases names *mean* universally; the signifiers and the signified maintain the (1:1) Adamic relationship. Unlike the slippages we have encountered with Quentin (1:4), Benjy (5:1), and Caddy (5:1), the members of the Gibson family are always (1:1): T.P is T.P; Dilsey is Dilsey; Luster is Luster. Luster, especially, seems significant in the resolution of the novel, since he is the young man on Easter in charge of the Compson "idiot," and he lacks a surname. Possibly, Faulkner frees him of a surname in order to free him from the legacy of the South whereby slaves and post-bellum servants were shackled with the surnames of their masters. Luster expresses his distaste for the tradition embodied by the Compsons when asked by his grandmother about the broken window Quentin IV has escaped through:

> "Whut de matter wid Jason?" Dilsey said.
> "Saying me en Benjy broke dat winder in his room."
> "Is dey one broke?" Dilsey said.
> "Dat's whut he's sayin," Luster said. "Say I broke hit." …
> "I never done hit," Luster said. "Ask Benjy ef I did. I ain't stud' in dat winder."
> "Who could broke it, den?" Dilsey said. "He jes trying hisself, to wake Quentin up," she
> said, taking the pan of biscuits out of the stove.
> "Reckon so," Luster said. "*Dese funny folks. Glad I aint none of them.*" (my emphasis; 275-276)

The innovation at the heart of the closed system of *The Sound and the Fury* identifies character names and the process of signification as defunctive and destabilized in the Compson family, and suggests that this rupture of meaning and order exists in a more general social way in the lives of the formerly aristocratic white families in the New South. The novel's character names demonstrate various ways in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified is destabilized. In many cases, the names for a certain character out-number that character; in other cases, characters out-number the names which signify them; in other cases still, character names change until they have no name at all ("Caddy") or are absolutely objectified ("Benjy"). This is not the case the with the Gibson family. Faulkner's novel, therefore, represents the decline of meaning in the white community of the New South, as represented by the Compsons, and the preservation of community of the Gibson family, for whom signification works, and whose final emancipation is perhaps represented by the surname-less Luster's nominal freedom from the legacy of slavery, and the closing passages on Easter 1928 in which Luster takes Queenie's reins and "looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on" (321).

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