

William Faulkner and the Falkner Family Name

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Almost everything about William Faulkner has been a subject of controversy — the place of his birth, the place of his death, the year of his winning the Nobel Prize, the value of his fiction, and even the spelling of his name. Just as Nathaniel Hawthorne had done a century earlier, Faulkner changed the spelling of his surname early in his career. This seemingly inconsequential detail has drawn the attention of biographers and critics, as well as of family members who have felt called upon to discuss their distinguished kinsman. The number of varied and often conflicting explanations which have been offered to account for it indicates that the issue is more important than those who have commented upon it have been willing to admit or able to articulate. There were significant linguistic and psychological aspects to Faulkner's alteration in the spelling of his family name. An understanding of underlying phonological factors helps to clarify the change, which illustrates the complexities of the novelist's attitudes toward his family and region.

Faulkner once declared that his ancestors came from Inverness, Scotland — a region, he added, well known for producing woolen textiles and whiskey. However, evidence exists for origins of the Faulkner line in Ireland, France, and Wales as well, which led Joseph Blotner to conclude that "the Falkner lineage prior to the settling in America finally eludes research." In America, the novelist once said, *Falconer* had been "corrupted" to *Falkner*. Interestingly enough, one of his great-grandfathers also changed the spelling of his surname from Murray to Murry.¹

However, the most thorough discussion of the spelling of the novelist's name appears not in Blotner's voluminous biography, as one would expect, but in Carvel Collins' edition of Faulkner's early works. Collins discusses the March 17, 1920, issue of *The Mississippian*, which contained the novelist's response to a fellow student's parodies of two of his early poems. He signed this response "William Falkner," following the form of the family name which his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had also used. According to Collins:

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Discussions of who put the "u" in William Faulkner's name rival in number the renditions of that great musical question about the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder ... The customary — and wrong — explanation of the change in spelling is one of the small counterfeit coins which too many workers in the Faulkner industry have passed among themselves from the beginning to the present.²

The imagery of counterfeiting here is noteworthy, a figure of speech which curiously reflects its subject matter — Count No 'Count's reminding the linguistic currency of his very name. As his most recent example of such false currency circulating in the scholarly economy, Collins cites Frederick J. Hoffman's "Chronology" for 1924: "First book published: *The Marble Faun* ... Because of printer's error, a 'u' added to Faulkner's name, which he has retained." Collins contradicts this claim on the basis of his considerable biographical research:

The "u" in Faulkner's name began to appear intermittently some years before the publication of *The Marble Faun* in 1924 by printers to whose error the spelling is continually attributed. According to the staff of the armament company for which Faulkner worked in Connecticut from April into June of 1918, his name appears in their records of that year's employees as "William Faulkner."³

Collins lists several other early appearances of "Faulkner" as well, and concludes that "apparently, this is one puzzling spelling printers did not cause, and the answer to the question Who put the 'u' in William Faulkner's Name? is William Falkner."⁴

What is interesting about the "counterfeit" explanation, and the remarkable extent to which it has consistently been cited as authoritative, is the implicit notion that Faulkner himself could not have been responsible for making the change. Instead, he had to be cast as the reluctant accomplice of a supposed typesetter's error, rather than the originator of a change more often associated with European immigrants or Hollywood actors. The potentially disturbing nature of the issue of name changing cropped up most recently during the 1984 presidential primaries: many commentators think that the shortening of his name from "Hartpence" damaged Senator Gary Hart's chances for the presidency. Changed names seem somehow inauthentic to voters and political analysts as well as literary scholars. As we shall see, Faulkner himself had recourse to the explanation on the basis of spelling error, for reasons which are worth examining in detail. In his own role as commentator, he invokes arguments which resemble those of the many critics who sought to explain away the onomastic change. Although there were good phonological reasons

underlying it, Faulkner was of course the one responsible for changing the spelling of his name, as Collins has argued.

Two of the novelist's brothers have offered interesting explanations of the change. Murry Falkner tackles the problem in the preface to his book *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir*. He admits that for those who have grown accustomed to the name Faulkner, his spelling might cause some confusion:

The family story, coming down from the previous generation, has it that our great-grandfather, Colonel William C. Falkner, originally spelled the name with the "u," as it had been handed down to him. But after he grew to manhood he dropped that letter, saying that as often as a man had to sign his own name it was folly to keep an extra letter in it that changed neither the look nor the pronunciation. There-after he never used the "u," nor did our grandfather, nor our father. And my brothers and I were baptized with water but without the "u."⁵

The Colonel was clearly impressed by the gospel of efficiency, at least in this regard. The wasted letter, which his famous descendant would reclaim, seemed a "folly" to him. According to Murry, "Later Bill, and in turn Dean and John, changed the spelling to Faulkner. One story is that Bill first used the "u" when he published his first book ... in 1924. Another story is that he had occasionally spelled it Faulkner earlier."⁶ Murry complains that he was asked a thousand times ("a conservative estimate") how his brother came to add the "u", and says that his answer was always "I don't know." Murry did not "even remember when he began using it, except that it was certainly after he left school." In a rather striking revelation of their sibling relationship and of the potentially upsetting nature of the issue, Murry asserted that "the idea of asking him why he made the change never entered my head, as he was not the sort of man to whom one (at least, not I) would put such a personal question."⁷ Although continually asked the question — and annoyed by it — he did not dare ask his brother for the answer. Whether this reluctance demonstrated strained familial relations or the gentlemanly avoidance of an unpleasant conversational topic Murry never made clear. Perhaps it suited him not to know the answer, thereby asserting his own individuality as someone who seemed to take no interest in the details of his famous brother's life. Murry added that "John's change to the 'u' spelling is much easier to understand. In the early forties he had begun to succeed as a writer, and by that time there were many ready to read after a man named Faulkner."⁸

For Murry, William's change was a matter not to be broached in conversation; on the other hand, John's belated change was easily explainable in terms of the most basic economic motives. While appearing to be discussing only the inconsequential issue of the spelling change, he also manages to accuse John of riding on his more successful brother's coat-tails in order to advance the sales of his own book. Although his remarks are characterized by a sly good humor, they also indicate the importance which the issue held for him. Murry kept the name *Falkner* and used it in the title of his book. Doing so appears to have been a point of honor with him.

John Faulkner's version differs from Murry's and is somewhat fuller. About the economic motivation of his own adoption of the changed spelling there is no disagreement, although he shifts responsibility to the publisher. John said it was in New York, while he was negotiating the publication of his first novel, *Men Working*, that the question first came up. He recounts the relevant family traditions in a way that reveals his novelistic angle of vision:

Actually there used to be a *u* in it. We came from Tippah County in the northeast corner of the state and in that county, when my great-grandfather first came there, there was another family of Faulkners. He did not like them. People, on learning he was from Tippah, would ask him what kin he was to these other Faulkners. He would tell them, none, and he didn't like their even suggesting it. So he dropped the *u* so he could tell them we didn't even spell our names alike. When Bill started writing he said everybody thought you spelled Falkner with a *u* and it was easier for him to change than to try to get everybody else to. So he put the *u* back in.⁹

John notes that Harcourt suggested the change even though the novel had been sent to the firm under his full name, John W.T. Falkner, III. The publishers argued in rather contradictory fashion that being William Faulkner's brother would not help sell his books, but they would nevertheless like to have that advantage in advertising it:

I *was* Bill's brother, but if they said I was and then my book came out with my name spelled different, they would think Harcourt might be just trying to put something over on them. I told them I didn't care what name they used or how they spelled it as long as it helped sell my books. So we put in the *u*, dropped the middle initials and the *III*. And from then on I have been John Faulkner.¹⁰

While admitting that being William's brother did help sell his books, he claimed there were other advantages as well to the name change. Three John W.T. Falkners lived in Oxford: now he was no longer confused with the other two, particularly with an uncle who always opened his nephew's mail "by mistake." John concludes with a rather startling observation:

With the *u* in my name they brought my mail to me. I like it. Now I use the *u* for everything — books, papers, records, legal matters. Bill never used it except in connection with his writings. He was the only living W.C. Faulkner, so it didn't make any difference to him. All his papers and legal documents and his telephone were listed as W.C. Falkner.¹¹

Dean, the youngest brother, died in an airplane crash in 1935 and is buried at St. Peter's Cemetery in Oxford in the family plot. Although he did not write anything about the spelling of the name, he did add the "u" before his death. His daughter signs her books Dean Faulkner Wells.

What appears to be the most authoritative explanation of all is found in William Faulkner's letter to Malcolm Cowley in 1945. In it, he discusses his great-grandfather, "a considerable figure in his time and provincial milieu," who gave the family name to "a hamlet named Falkner just below [the] Tennessee line" on the railroad he built:

My first recollection of the name was, no outsider seemed able to pronounce it from reading it, and when he did pronounce it, he always wrote the 'u' into it. So it seemed to me that the whole outside world was trying to change it, and usually did. Maybe when I began to write, even though I thought then I was writing for fun, I secretly was ambitious and did not want to ride on [great-] grandfather's coat-tails, and so accepted the 'u', was glad of such an easy way to strike out for myself. I accept either spelling. In Oxford it usually has no 'u' except on a book. The above was always my mother's and father's version of why I put back into it the 'u' which my great-grandfather, himself always a little impatient of grammar and spelling both, was said to have removed. I myself really don't know the true reason. It just seemed to me that as soon as I got away from Mississippi, I found the 'u' in the word whether I wished it or not. I still think it is of no importance, and either one suits me.¹²

Here, Faulkner broaches the possibility of his secret ambition in desiring to strike out for himself and to make his own mark as a novelist, rather than trading on his great-grandfather's literary reputation. This explanation, which he claims was always given by his parents, demonstrates their concern with his motives for making the change. In 1881, Colonel William C. Falkner had published *The White Rose of Memphis*, a novel that

was a best seller for an entire generation. His great-grandson's desire to establish some distance from him is analogous to the case of the young Nathaniel Hawthorne, who adopted the spelling with "w" when his first works were published in order to distance himself from his famous (or infamous) ancestor John Hathorne.¹³ The final portion of the account given in the letter to Cowley agrees with the results of Collins' research into the spelling of the name when Faulkner worked for the armament company in Connecticut. But the novelist's notion that it was a matter of no importance is rather different from Murry's sense that the change constituted a question so personal that he refrained from asking his brother about it.

Both linguistic and psychological points can be made concerning the alteration in the spelling of the Falkner family name, an issue which, as we have seen, has attracted much comment (curiously enough, by writers who at the same time often state that they consider the issue insignificant). The psychological reasons for Faulkner's changed spelling are not as clear as the phonological reasons for his doing so. No matter how it is spelled, the Oxford pronunciation of the name is, of course [fɔknə(r)].¹⁴ In this pronunciation, the vowel has the value known as "open o": that is, it is a back vowel one step lower than the "closed o" found in a word like *hope*. Moreover, the lateral consonant is silent, and the "r" is dropped. As Faulkner indicated, outsiders mispronounced the name. In the Connecticut dialect of the armament company where the change was first made, it would have been pronounced [fælnə(r)]. The vowel would have been raised and fronted to [æ], which in turn would cause the lateral to be sounded more clearly. Whether the "r" would have been pronounced or not is a matter of lesser significance; many Connecticut speakers would have dropped it, like most Mississippians. At this point, however, recourse to phonetic rather than phonemic transcription is necessary, since there are two major allophones of the lateral which vary according to their phonetic environment. In the vicinity of back vowels such as "a," "o," and "u," the lateral is an alveopalatal that is often described as having a 'dark' quality. It is represented in phonetic transcriptions as [ɫ]. But in the vicinity of front vowels, a more 'clear' alveolar lateral occurs, which can be represented as [l]. In a more detailed phonetic transcription, then, the traditional pronunciation of the name would still be represented as [fɔknə(r)], while the northern mispronunciation would appear as [fælnə(r)]. Not only the altered vowel quality, but also the altered consonantal quality of the pronunciation are indicated in this transcription.

There are certain northern dialects, as well as British ones, in which no mispronunciation of the name would occur. The reasons for the variation in pronunciation of the vowel and lateral consonant in the name extend far back into the history of the English language. According to Thomas Pyles and John Algeo:

The *l* of Middle English preconsonantal *al* was lost after first becoming a vowel: thus Middle English *al* and *au* fell together as *au*, ultimately becoming [ɔ] (as in *talk*, *walk*) except before *f*, *v*, and *m*, where it became [æ] in such words as *half*, *salve*, and *psalm* (the last of which now usually has [ɑ]). The *l* retained in the spelling of the cited words and others has led to spelling pronunciations, particularly when it occurs before *m*; many speakers now pronounce the *l* except before *f*, and seem to more traditional speakers to be making a special effort to do so: a certain football team known as the *Falcons* is everywhere called [fælkənz], a pronunciation widely current among the pseudoliterate long before the appearance of the team. The spelling has as yet had little if any effect on the pronunciation of the name of the writer William Faulkner. Perhaps if the name had been written *Falconer*, which amounts to the same thing, the spelling pronunciation might in time have come to prevail.¹⁵

Whether pseudoliteracy or legitimate dialect variation should be invoked to account for the various pronunciations of preconsonantal "al" is a debatable linguistic point. But the spelling pronunciation certainly did have an effect upon the pronunciation of William Faulkner's name. In the Connecticut armament company where the young Faulkner worked, his name was mispronounced, an error that doubtless would have displeased many a young man anxious for recognition from the adult world. But it must have been particularly upsetting to a young poet like William Faulkner, whose early work demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the nuances of sound. Those who pronounced the name correctly always spelled it with a "u," in accord with their dialect's orthographic conventions. According to Frederick M. Burelbach, the novelist's great-grandfather had his name "spelled with a 'u' in one contemporary report, but since it was by a Yankee officer perhaps we should discount it as resulting from ignorance and animus."¹⁶ By now, it should be clear that the reason was of course dialectal. For speakers of dialects which would not produce the correct pronunciation given only the written form of his name, Faulkner's reintroduction of the "u" helped ensure that the fronted vowel, along with the intrusive lateral which would necessarily accompany it, would not occur.

It is important to understand the effects of a dialectal pronunciation of the altered name. There would be no possibility that the "au" digraph of the altered name would be fronted and raised like the single vocalic graph in *Falkner*. On the other hand, the lateral would almost certainly be pronounced by those who did not habitually drop r's and l's in their dialects. But this mispronunciation would entail the use of the dark alveopalatal [[t] not the clear alveolar [l,]. Indeed, even this assertion overstates the case, since what is in question is really only a dark lateral coloration to the pronunciation of the vowel. This lateral coloration would not even be as distinct as the dark "l" in a word like *kneel*, nor would it constitute a major variation in pronunciation.

These linguistic arguments clarify the phonological and dialectal bases for the northern mispronunciation which the novelist frequently encountered, beginning with his journey to Connecticut in 1918, and for the change in spelling Faulkner made to increase the likelihood of proper pronunciation of his name. To ensure that "outsiders" would pronounce his name correctly, he effected a spelling change that distinguished him from family insiders at the same time. His concern for his literary standing in the wider community is also implicitly a statement that success within Oxford and family circles alone, and on their terms, was insufficient. He did not desire a literary reputation like his great-grandfather's, which according to the modern novelist occurred within the confines of a "provincial milieu." He had already begun at an early age to distance himself from the provincials around him through his outspoken opinions about sexuality and literature, as well as his British affectations in dress. There are other reasons as well that are hinted at in the letter to Cowley. Although he claims that the change occurred for no real reason, or for a reason of no real importance, he also gives tentative approval to his parents' psychological explanation that he was "striking out for himself." This frontier idiom is a suggestive one, indicating his desire to distinguish himself from his immediate family, as well as his famous ancestry, in order to succeed on his own. This renaming allowed the youthful Faulkner the sense of an independent self. The comparable idioms of making one's own mark and making one's own name demonstrate the extent to which one's self and one's name are intertwined; for Faulkner, as for Twain and Hawthorne, these idioms function on a literal level as well as a metaphorical one. Indeed, recent work by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argues that the self is constituted in terms of the sites which language maps out for it.¹⁷ Paradoxically, Faulkner's alteration of his name also involved a reidentification with ancestors who had employed the more ancient spelling.

The fact that he "found the 'u' in the word" when dealing with "outsiders" and "the outside world" does not adequately explain why he continued the habit. Faulkner himself, of course, was the only one who could change his name in response to these dialectal factors. The notion that he went along with the outsiders' change because he might have been "secretly ambitious" rather than simply "writing for fun" is the most charming of stories. "I don't have much patience with facts," he once said, "and any writer is a congenital liar to begin with or he wouldn't take up writing. And so I couldn't tell the truth even about history ... I couldn't tell the truth about Faulkner, I'm sure."¹⁸ Indeed, it would take an inordinate degree of credulity to believe his claim that he was merely entertaining himself with the hobby of writing for fun while harboring a desire for recognition in some remote cranny of the psyche inaccessible to his conscious mind. It seems more likely that Faulkner's tentativeness in explanation reveals his awareness of the complexities surrounding the spelling change. Murry's comments offer a very different assessment of the significance of the alteration in spelling. Evidently, he saw it as a personal matter of some importance and felt that it was an issue involving his brother's own choice, not a random occurrence of little significance. It is clear that the subject was one which annoyed Murry and also led their parents to speculate about William's ambition, although the tone of their criticism as recounted in Faulkner's letter to Cowley seems mixed with pride as well.

The novelist's great-grandfather, after all, had originally altered the spelling to establish his lack of kinship to others who shared the same surname. This evidence that the earlier name change was a way of avoiding confusion with those with whom one would not wish to be mistaken as blood relations is a biographical detail that John presents as part of the family's oral history. That he offered it in print in order to shed light on his brother's case is revealing, for what makes Faulkner's "striking out for himself" potentially upsetting is the extent to which it was also a distancing of himself from his family through the alteration of the family name. Identity by its very nature is, paradoxically, established not on its own terms, but by means of the rejected other that one is not. Identity is predicated upon the discovery of differences, in the same way that groups are defined on the basis of who is excluded as much as who is included. And the young Faulkner gave ample evidence of his desire to establish his difference from his "provincial" societal and familial milieu. The linguistic argument we have offered establishes some of the advantages in dealing with dialectal pronunciations that would accrue from altering the spelling of his name. This orthographic change increased the likelihood of

the proper pronunciation of his name by the "outsiders" whom Faulkner claimed he was perhaps "secretly ambitious" in wanting to impress. Certainly his concern with the wider world was what led to the change; the novelist was concerned that it get his name right, since in Oxford there could have been little possibility of a mistaken pronunciation. *William Falkner* was how his name remained for insiders and for himself. But *William Faulkner* was the spelling of his name directed to outsiders who would read his books, in order to ensure that they pronounced his name, if not as Mississippians would, then with as little dialectal interference as possible. This orthographic pitching of himself to outsiders was based on real phonological factors. But there were psychological aspects to the change as well which suggest the complexities of his authorial role within the regional and family drama central to his fiction.

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Notes

¹Joseph Blotner, *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974), I, 3-7.

²Carvel Collins, ed. and intro., *William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry* (Boston: Atlantic-Little Brown, 1962), 10. We have also profited from Frederick M. Burelbach, "Two Family Names: Faulkner and Sartoris," *Literary Onomastics Studies* 4 (1977), 81-95.

³*Ibid.*, 11.

⁴*Ibid.*, 13.

⁵Murry C. Falkner, *The Falkners of Mississippi: A Memoir* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967), xviii.

⁶M.C. Falkner, xviii-xix.

⁷M.C. Falkner, xix.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill: An Affectionate Reminiscence* (New York: Trident Press, 1963), 210-11.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 211.

¹¹*Ibid.* Ironically, the inscription on John's grave monument reads "FAULKNER" on one side but "FALKNER" on the other, while the slab covering the grave reads "FA(U)LKNER." The issue was certainly not an insignificant one for members of his family. Subsequent generations have alternated between the spellings.

¹²Letter to Cowley [Oxford: Saturday, December 8, 1945] in Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File. Letters and Memories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 66-67.

¹³See Edward Nather, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Modest Man* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1940), 67-68; Newton Arvin, *Hawthorne* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1956), 6;

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Arlin Turner, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 395-96. Although Hawthorne's reasons for distancing himself from John Hathorne stemmed from guilt over his ancestor's role as judge in the Salem witch trials, it is perhaps relevant that Faulkner called *The White Rose of Memphis* a bad book.

¹⁴In our transcriptions, the IPA symbols have the following values: [ɔ] 'taught'; [ə] 'putt'; [æ] 'hat'; [a] 'hot'. Parentheses have been placed around the "r" to indicate that it is dropped in many American dialects, including that spoken in Oxford. Since [ɔ] is disappearing, and the older [a] is being substituted for it, future speakers will probably pronounce the novelist's name with [a]. Some of the Connecticut speakers encountered by the young Falkner may also have pronounced the name by fronting the vowel to [a], although it is the [æ] pronunciation which would have been most likely, and most grating.

¹⁵Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 3rd ed. (New York:Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 178.

¹⁶Burelbach, 81.

¹⁷For an overview of Lacan's linguistic insights into the construction of the self, see Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

¹⁸Blotner, I, 6.