Names of Characters in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*

JOSEPH M. BACKUS

THE NAMES OF CHARACTERS in *The Sound and the Fury* provide an important key to an understanding of Faulkner's technique. The following study, in suggesting the source and significance for certain of these names, attempts to identify some of the complexities by which the novelist sought to re-enforce the effectiveness of this work.[1]

First, however, Faulkner's decided awareness of the potentialities of names should be demonstrated. This can be done by comparing examples from two of his other works: *The Unvanquished* and *Requiem for a Nun.* In the first book, Faulkner calls a certain girl "Celia Cook"; in the second, repeating the scene in which she previously appeared, he calls the same girl "Cecilia Farmer." The name "Celia Cook" is clearly a forerunner of "Cecilia Farmer" and thus can be considered as a first step in the development of the name. As a second step, "Cecilia Farmer" becomes more appropriate to Faulkner's description of the name as "frail and workless" and "paradoxical and significantless."[2] In

[1] I am indebted to Prof. George R. Stewart of the University of California for urging that this study be undertaken and for much assistance with it. The study grew out of a class project in English 208 for the spring semester of 1956 at the University of California, Berkeley.

[2] These references to the name "Cecilia Farmer" appear in "The Gaol," *Requiem for a Nun* (New York, 1951), pp. 229 and 232. The name appears here and in the first publication of "The Gaol" as a short story in *The Partisan Review* (September-October, 1951). The name "Celia Cook" appears in a similar description of the same incident in "Ambuscade," *The Unvanquished* (New York, 1938), p. 17; the incident was not included, however, when "Ambuscade" was first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* (29 September 1934). The incident is repleated in *Intruder in the Dust* (New York, 1948), but here the girl is left nameless. Thus thirteen years elapsed before "Celia Cook" emerged in Faulkner's fiction as "Cecilia Farmer."

these two examples, then, Faulkner can be seen reworking a name to fit his own specifications for it. He thus indicates a care in the selection of names that is both conscious and exacting.

Less pointed but no less indicative an example is Faulkner's reference in *The Sound and the Fury* to the name of the drummer, Dalton Ames. "It just missed gentility," he has Quentin say: "Theatrical fixture. Just papier-mache . . ."[3] Here again Faulkner indicates his intention to make a name meaningful.

In both cases, however, Faulkner has called attention to names whose meaning is superficial: the connotations of "Cecilia Farmer" are made obvious; and, whatever may be the source of the name, only a matinée-idol tawdriness is suggested by "Dalton Ames." This superficiality is to be expected, since both names are assigned to characters who are simply drawn and of minor importance. By the same token, then, it may be supposed that the names for complex characters of major importance should carry a significance that is proportionally greater. Similarly, these latter names must have been chosen with greater care. These suppostions, together with the intricate workmanship elsewhere evident in *The Sound and the Fury*, would seem to justify the following examination.

Of the four Compson children, the one who has been given the name of perhaps the most significance is the sister, Candace. At first consideration, the name "Candace" may appear to have developed from this character's more frequently used nickname, "Caddy." It is readily apparent that the confusion in the mind of the idiot brother Benjy between this nickname and the golfers' cry of "caddy!" provides a convenient point of transition between past and present in Benjy's narrative. Closer examination, however, suggests that the normal process of naming was followed here: that is, the nickname developed from the proper name. In any case, it is in "Candace" that a much deeper significance can be identified.

The chief indication of this significance is found in the repeated references by Caddy's brother Quentin to an incestuous relationship between himself and his sister (pp. 98–99, 195). Here, the subject of incest between a brother and sister may vaguely recall similar cases in literature. But when it is remembered that the

[3] *The Sound and the Fury* (New York, 1929); p. 111, Modern Library edition.

proper name of Quentin's sister is "Candace," the combination of situation and name recalls specifically Ovid's *Heroides* (Epistle XI) and the incestuous relationship there involving a sister named "Canace." These similarities cannot leave much doubt that Ovid, rather than the golfers' cry, provides a likely source for Faulkner's "Candace."

That Faulkner calls his heroine "Candace" instead of "Canace" need not refute this suggestion. In literature, the two similar 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.[4] Thus Faulkner, through even a casual acquaintance with Chaucer, could have become aware of the significance of "Canace" and the historic mis-application of "Candace." In any case, his choice of a name that is only suggestive of incest, rather than one that is obviously associated with it, is consistent with his usual subtlety – particularly in the introduction of an incestuous relationship into *The Sound and the Fury.*

If Caddy's participation in incest were to be based only upon an irrational claim by Quentin, the idea of such a relationship might be abandoned after Quentin's admission (p. 195) that his claim was false. But after Caddy has been identified with Ovid's Canace, suspicion of her guilt cannot be put aside. Instead, Caddy's associations with her two other brothers must be investigated. Of these, Jason need hardly be considered. A careful study of the first section of the book, however, strongly suggests that Caddy is involved in incest with Benjy.[5] Obviously, if Faulkner sought to

[4] For example, Skeat notes that the confusion is evident among manuscript versions of *The Legend of Good Women*: in line 265, one of these reads "Candace," while five other versions have "Canace" or "Canacee." (Walter W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* [Oxford, 1899], Vol. I., p. 515.) That Chaucer meant "Canace" when he listed "Candace" as one of the women in the service of Diane in *The Parliament of Fowls* (l. 288) may be indicated in *The Man of Law's Tale*, for example, where he includes "Canacee / That loved hir owene brother synfully" in a similar collection of faithful women (ll. 78–79).

[5] An incestuous relationship between Caddy and Benjy was indicated by a chronological ordering of Benjy's section in "Each in Its Ordered Place," a paper presented by Professor Stewart and myself at a University of California English Conference, 13 November 1956. (A somewhat different version of this study appears in *American Literature* for January, 1958.) The argument for incest between Caddy and Benjy is based specifically on such passages as those from the bedroom scene (pp. 62, 63) in which Dilsey decides it dangerous for Benjy, at 13, to continue sleep-

picture Southern decadence, an incestuous affair between his heroine and her idiot brother provides the finishing touch. Here, then, the examination of a name leads to a fuller understanding of one of the novel's major themes.

Once it is determined that Caddy's shame involves Benjy, the name of this brother naturally invites examination for connotations similar to those of "Candace." Since, however, "Benjy" cannot be identified as a counterpart for the name of Canace's brother "Macareus," consideration must be directed to Benjy's original name of "Maury." Ostensibly, this name, which Benjy bore until his fifth year, came to him from his uncle, Maury Bascomb, who, in turn, might have received it from Matthew Fontaine Maury, commander of coastal defenses for the Confederacy. This, however, does not explain why Faulkner selected this name rather than that of some other Confederate patriot.

Although the answer can be no more than speculative, one explanation may be suggested. If an author were looking for a companion name for "Candace" (or "Caddy"), he might begin with "Macareus" but immediately rule this name out. Its use would be implausible when assigned to a modern American character and, like "Canace," would be baldly obvious. Therefore, in search of something more realistic and not more than vaguely suggestive, he might hit upon "Maurice." From this, a further shift to a nickname comparable to "Caddy" would quite logically produce "Maury." The proposed evolutions of the two names can be compared as follows: Canace : Candace : Caddy : :
Macareus : Maurice : Maury.

If such a process as the one outlined here can account for Faulkner's selection of "Maury," it would seem a mark of his genius that he finally did not employ "Maury" as a nickname. Thus he prevented an exact and artless parallelism.

The parallelism between "Caddy" and "Maury" is further obscured by Faulkner's changing "Maury" to "Benjy" and by his frequently directing attention to the latter name. The source of

---

ing with Caddy; the significant bathroom scene (p. 88) in which Benjy says he "pushed" at Caddy; and the last scene of Caddy's wedding (p. 41) in which Benjy appears to be overpowered by sexual frustration. In support of this argument generally, there are Benjy's increasingly mature desires, his continued dependence upon Caddy, and her consistant willingness to accommodate his needs.

this name is identified most clearly through Caddy's explanation at the time of the namec-hanging that "Benjamin came out of the bible" (p. 77); in addition, Faulkner has included several references to "Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt" (pp. 189, 107). These allusions to the Biblical Benjamin suggest that Faulkner chose this particular name as a replacement for "Maury" to emphasize Benjy's innocence and "martydrom."[6]

A work as far removed from the classics and the Old Testament as Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress," seems a possible source for the name of another brother, Quentin.[7] It should be observed first, however, that "Quentin" – like "Maury" – is not an unlikely name for members of old families in Faulkner's section of the South; and Faulkner indicates his knowledge of this in the "Appendix," where he implies that the name came down through a line of Scottish-Mississippian ancestors. In addition, Quentin's reference to himself as "Young Lochinvar" (p. 112) shows Faulkner's associating Quentin with the writing of Scott; and thus another of Scott's works, *Quentin Durward*, could have supplied the name. But the similarities between Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury* and the forty-six lines of Marvell's poem call for further consideration of Marvell as a source.

The most specific indication of this possibility 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 also becomes appropriate: "And your quaint honor turn to dust." Certainly, Quentin's conception of honor is quaint; and, as in Marvell, death is to turn this honor 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. The

[6] Faulkner inaccurately extends this emphasis in his reference to Benjy in the "Appendix" (1946) to *The Sound and the Fury* as "our lastborn, sold into Egypt" (p. 19, Modern Library edition). Also, in a non-Compson story, "Go down Moses" (1941), Faulkner makes considerable use of "Benjamin sold into Egypt" as a lament for the death of a young Negro, Samuel Worsham ("Butch") Beauchamp, whose name was no more "Benjamin" than was Benjy Compson's originally. Both works point to Faulkner's somewhat exaggerated association between the name "Benjamin" and martyrdom.

[7] This suggestion was made by Prof. William M. Gibson of New York University in conversation with Professor Stewart.

first of these ideas is expanded in lines 21 to 24 of the poem, which are almost a condensation of Quentin's preoccupation with clocks and shadows:

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.

The second rhyming word, "crime," might be reflected in Quentin's repeated references to incest. This is suggested specifically by Marvell's last two lines:

> . . . though we cannot make our sun
> Stand still, yet we will make him run.

These lines seem to be echoed in Quentin's explanation for falsely claiming to have committed incest with his sister (p. 195): ". . . if could tell you we did it would have been so . . . and then the world would roar away . . ."

Thus it is almost as if Faulkner, recalling Marvell's famous poem as a source for the name, had followed Marvell as a guide in shaping Quentin's mustily cavalier character. 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.

Similarly, "Jason," another name traditional in the Compson family, undergoes a final debasement when it is left to the unregenerate brother, Jason IV. Here the name, when considered with Jason's luckless pursuit of money and his ultimate frustration, is suggestive of the classical Jason and his quest for the Golden Fleece. The classical association is underlined in the "Appendix," for example, by use of the Latin "Lycurgus" as a middle name for the four Jasons.[8]

If the significance of "Jason" can be identified as classical, the name seems also to have distinctly non-classical origins. These

[8] In the text itself (p. 96), Faulkner has given Jason III the middle name of "Richmond," thus identifying the Compson family with the Confederacy. The name "Lycurgus," however, in its combination of the ideas "lie" and "cur," is appropriate to Jason IV. Another possible source for "Jason" is suggested by Prof. Carvel Collins who, in identifying Jason IV as one of three components in a Christ figure, points out that "Jason" stood for "Jesus" among Hellenized Jews. ("The Pairing of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, XVIII, 3 [Spring, 1957], p. 117.) That Faulkner had knowledge of this latter source, however, cannot be ascertained.

can best be traced with the source of the surname "Compson." In examining the latter, it should be noted that the surnames of many of Faulkner's characters are identical with actual surnames familiar to him. The name "Patterson" in the novel under study, for example, is still in current use in Faulkner's small town of Oxford, Mississippi. In the same novel, another surname, "Snopes," is only slightly removed from the actual Oxford surname, "Snipes." Similarly, "Jason Compson" is enough like the actual name, "Jacob Thompson," to warrant consideration of this as an additional source. This suggestion can be strengthened by external evidence: for example, the Thompson lot in the Oxford cemetery is very like the Compson lot in *The Sound and the Fury.*

It may be supposed that Faulkner hit upon the name of this actual pioneer family when he conceived a family of similar background for his fiction, and that his selection of the specific name was due to the Biblical connotation of "Jacob." The name would have been applicable for the father (Jason III), if Faulkner had already decided upon "Benjamin" as the name of one of the sons. If, then, Faulkner sought to alter the actual name for use in fiction, "Jacob" would almost certainly have suggested "Jason," a name ironically suited to the character that finally emerged in Jason IV.

For Jason and for other members of the family, a fictional surname is clearly demanded by the novel's theme. This demand seems to have been met by Faulkner's combining "Thompson" with "Compton," another common name possibly suggested to him by its similarity to "Thompson." To the reader, the resulting "Compson" appears as familiar as either of the actual names and yet is wholly the author's own. As such, it can be exploited freely in the novel.

After "Jason," the only other Compson name to be considered is that of the children's mother, Caroline Bascomb. First, her maiden name, "Bascomb," not uncommon in the South, might have been chosen to suggest the difference in background between her family and her husband's. As a possible contraction of "base come," this name would be consistent with Mrs. Compson's persistent expression of her own family's inferiority; and, as such, it would represent a typical Faulknerian subtlety in a tradition of character-naming that includes, for example, Thackeray's "Newcomes." Mrs. Compson's position is reflected, too, in her first name. In *Sartoris*, a novel published eight months before *The*

Sound and the Fury, "Caroline" is the name of a character who is obviously an interloper among Mississippians and "Carolina" that of a state that is pointedly foreign. In the later work, the connotations of both variations of the name might reasonably be expected to carry over, thus adding emphasis to Mrs. Compson's alienation.

Also to be considered are the names of the Compson Negroes, most of which are simply corruptions of given names. For example, "Frony" can be seen to evolve from "Euphronia," when it is noted that a cook in *Sartoris* bears the transitional name of "Euphrony." Similarly, "Luster" would stand for "Lester," "Dilsey" for "Dulce," "Versh" for "Virgil" and "Roskus" for "Roscius." Only the source of the initials "T. P." is entirely conjectural; it can be suggested, however, that, as the name of an ordinary but indispensable household servant, they may be wryly suited to one who plays this role.

As for significance, some of these names describe specifically the person to whom they are assigned. For example, the literal meaning of "Dulce" is appropriate to one of Dilsey's generous and amiable disposition. More generally, the simplification of white men's elaborate names by Faulkner's Negroes may indicate a characteristic that is fundamental to them: that is, an easy-going acceptance of things that enables them to "endure" the sound and fury of a dying aristocracy. At the same time, the humor inherent in these slip-shod approximations of names provides a comic spirit that is otherwise all but absent in the novel.

Beyond the names thus far discussed, there seem to be no others that warrant detailed examination. Those remaining fall between two categories: one is represented by "Mrs Bland," the significance of which is probably meant to be literal; and the other by "Mr MacKenzie," the significance of which seems inconsequential. For the most part, however, the names of characters in this work have provided a basis for its further interpretation. If they have been drawn from a wide and unrelated variety of literary and historical reference, they can be seen to achieve a harmony of meaning within the novel that extends its theme. Examined together, then, these names indicate something more than Faulkner's method of composition. The success with which he has brought them together not only attests to his skill as a novelist but also represents an ultimate utilization of character names in literature.

University of California, Berkeley