

MACBETH'S IDIOT AND FAULKNER'S COMPSONS

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Abstract

William Faulkner's use of a line from *Macbeth* for the title of *The Sound and The Fury* is a well-known instance of Shakespearean appropriation, but in this note I uncover the unrecognized appropriation of that line as it signifies when historicized. Specifically, I highlight the class dimensions that appear prominent in the *Macbeth* line when we understand the word "idiot" as the play's first audiences did, and I demonstrate how Faulkner's appropriation of the line as it signified in Jacobean English informs and reflects the central themes of *The Sound and The Fury*. Because early modern understandings of class as a largely hereditary category overlapped significantly with contemporary lineal constructions of race, Faulkner's appropriation of the historicized line with its emphasis on class is especially significant for the interactions of race and class that animate Faulkner's fiction as well as studies of appropriative uses of Shakespeare.



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On one level, characterizing the novel as "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare n.d.a, 5.5.26–28) is almost certainly the author's joke at his own expense. In relation to the content of the novel, the reason for the title seems to be fully evident: the first of its four chapters is narrated by the intellectually disabled Compson brother, Benjy. To grasp these two explanations of the

novel's title one need only understand the word "idiot" as it was meant in Faulkner's time and since: a person judged to have very low intelligence. This clinical twentieth-century meaning of the word derives from its use as a precise legal term for someone who was found to lack the mental abilities necessary for being responsible for one's own affairs and property (Goodey 2011). In Shakespeare's time, however, that was a secondary, somewhat technical meaning (Goodey 2011). When we consider Faulkner's engagement with the line in light of its usual early modern meaning, the novel's title becomes a clear encapsulation of *The Sound and The Fury* as a story about the decline of the formerly prominent Compsons of Yoknapatawpha County.

In early modern England, as C. F. Goodey explains in *A History of Intelligence and "Intellectual Disability": The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (2011), "idiot" most often denoted an ignorant and rustic common person. This sense of the word did overlap with its meaning as a legal term designating someone as lacking the cognitive abilities necessary for participation in public life. Both meanings implied that socioeconomic class and mental capacity were commensurate, with only those of the upper classes competent to wield sociopolitical influence or own land. Parsing these overlapping meanings, Goodey explains that the latter, more overtly class-based definition remained preeminent in Shakespeare's time and is, in fact, the sense primarily invoked when Macbeth calls life "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (Goodey 2011, 137; Shakespeare n.d.a, 5.5.26–28). It is in being low-class that the "idiot" is unsophisticated and even his words are insubstantial.

The Sound and the Fury is about all the Compsons becoming idiots in Macbeth's sense of the word. The rusticity of the Compsons' small-town existence and their impoverishment are both brought about by the centrality of urban spaces and mobility to a modern economy that is decidedly unlike the 'Old South'. Moreover, they downgrade themselves within the remnants of that old socioeconomic paradigm by the selling of their land in their attempts to maintain social and cultural capital, as the selling of Benjy's pasture to finance a single year at Harvard for Quentin showcases. Caddy's disgraceful sexuality and the familial dysfunction it precipitates, meanwhile, distance the Compsons, like early modern idiots, from gentility as a quality marked by both propriety and exemplary morality.

Taking the historicized meaning of Macbeth's line into account reinforces the theme of decline already conveyed in the medicalized sense of "idiot" that was dominant in the 1920s. Defined as moral and social degenerates since the nineteenth century, intellectually disabled people loomed like specters in the imagination of a public enthusiastic about the new field of eugenics (McDonagh 2008). As an "idiot" of this kind, Benjy already links the particular decline of the Compson family to degeneration on a racial, societal, or species scale. When Quentin's and Jason's chapters are considered tales told by idiots, along with Benjy's chapter, the book and its title can be seen to inform one another more thoroughly.

The fourth and final chapter of *The Sound and The Fury* is narrated in the third person and focuses on the Compsons' Black housekeeper, Dilsey Gibson. This anomalous section cannot be related to the book's title as the three chapters narrated by Compson brothers can be, but its contents nonetheless resonates with the emphasis on class conveyed by "idiot" in its primary early-seventeenth-century meaning. Jay Watson argues that the story of the Gibsons in the Yoknapatawpha corpus is the story of "[t]he black family's embrace of modern movement as an emancipatory alternative to a dead-end existence among the moribund Compsons" (210). The shift from the land-based paradigm of the 'Old South' to a highly mobile, overwhelmingly urban modernity is an economic shift that allows Black characters to pursue material advancement. Though Dilsey and the rest of her family—particularly her children—can be read simply as conventional racist caricatures of uneducated Black people, which they indeed partially are, they also have more practical knowledge and common sense than do the Compsons. It seems that the Gibsons are partly detached from idiocy in both senses, and the inconsistency of Dilsey's chapter with the rest of the novel and its title may register this significant, if not complete, disconnection.

The potential racial charge of Faulkner's Shakespearean appropriation is demonstrated forcefully within *The Sound and The Fury* when Quentin racializes his family decline with a reference to *Othello* by imagining Caddy making "*the beast with two backs*" (Faulkner 1990, 148; emphasis Faulkner's). Faulkner would draw on the same speech in *Macbeth* (act five, scene five) again, however, in *Requiem for a Nun* (1994), which repeatedly uses the words "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" in its more overt and sustained examination of how racial politics intersect with class. With the Compsons' decline framed by "idiot" in two senses, which are both eluded by Dilsey and her chapter, consideration of Faulkner's apparently historically informed engagement with *Macbeth*'s "idiot" invites further new considerations of how Faulkner's appropriations of Shakespeare may inform his treatment of race in his fiction.

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