

That Other Patriarchy: Observations on Faulkner's "A Justice"

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THE YOKNAPATAWPHA Indian stories, along with related sections of his novels, have a special place in the Faulkner canon.¹ In and of themselves these fictions are a body, a unit. It is possible to arrange them as a sequence, to reconstitute from their number a reasonably complete picture of a bygone world.² And they are additionally important as Faulkner's furthest penetration backward into the history of his region, as the departure points for an American teleology. Yet there is confusion that comes from an overemphasis upon their distinctiveness—from preoccupation with the differences between Faulkner's Indian and his "civilized" Mississippi. Furthermore, this emphasis is usually sharpened by excessive concentration upon the use made of the Indian experience in *Go Down, Moses*. An antidote for such distortion (and a ground for the proper interpretation of the other Indian materials) is available in a close reading of "A Justice."³

"A Justice" in its most obvious dimension concerns the origins of Sam Fathers, the high priest of the hunting camp episodes of "The Bear" and latest survivor of

the Old People in the Yoknapatawpha County of courthouse, jail, and plantations. The story exists in Sam's memory and is passed to the reader through the memory of Quentin Compson (the prototype of Isaac McCaslin) out of the version preserved by Sam.⁴ However, the central figure in this narrative is not the brown/black/white ancient of the boyhood of Quentin *cum* Isaac but rather the last of the Choctaw/Chickasaw chieftains resident in Mississippi: Ikkemotubbe, called among the white people David Callicot, but self-designated (long before he assumes the rank) Doom—d'homme—the Man.⁵ And the action of the story is Doom's perversion of the office of Manship, an office he usurps by poison and intimidation. In "Lo!," "Red Leaves," and perhaps even in "Mountain Victory," we are given some view of the red patriarchy in its benign phase.⁶ In "A Courtship" there appears an almost pastoral image of white/Indian relations and of Ikkemotubbe before he went to New Orleans and changed his name. We are made thus to understand the irony of Faulkner's title.⁷ There had been a "jus-

rice" among the People. The extent of (and the process providing for) its corruption is rendered in the account of Doom's obfuscation in the matter of Sam's birth and in the "narration" of Doom's Machiavellian seizure of the chieftancy in the days preceding that deliberate confusion.

It is with this narration (as Aristotle uses the term) that an explication of "A Justice" must commence. An older Quentin is giving us a recollection from his youth, a moment recovered out of a long ago afternoon's visit with Sam during one of the Compsons' regular Saturday retreats to their family farm. The narrator does nothing himself to increase the pressure of Sam's quiet talking. And he renders it for us only after he has specified the ambiguity of Sam's condition in the Mississippi of the white man. Indeed, the mature Quentin leaves intact the obliquity and self-effacement of the tailored-for-the-child telling of the old breed—a telling which had puzzled him at twelve. What he calls "the suspension of twilight" is sustained, even though the existence of a clearing beyond is implied (360). The problem of understanding is thus left to the audience. Yet Quentin communicates vital affection for both the tale and its source. Hence the irony of his account is muted and essentially elegiac. Silently it contains Sam's comedy of imitation justice and patriarchy manqué with the pathos of Sam's maturity as a man with two fathers—or three—or none.

What Sam introduces in prologue as a framework for his naming is the early life of his biological father, especially the time just before and immediately following Sam's birth. Ikkemotubbe had never much pleased his chieftain uncle. There was a promise of malice in his appearance, a "bad eye," which the old man often noted (346). At some point in his youth (probably before the idyll pictured in "A Courtship"), the boy had fallen utterly out of fa-

vor with Issetibbeha. Or else the Man fell out of favor with him.⁸ In either case, Ikkemotubbe had abandoned his role on the Plantation and gone for seven years to dwell among the white men. Issetibbeha hoped to hear of his death down river. Instead Doom returns filled with the self-assertive drive of the folk he has lived among and a right to adopt a white river pilot's name. But he is no longer David Callicot when he meets friends at the landing. Now he is Doom—with a gold brocade coat, "New Orleans salt," six Negroes, and a box of puppies. He is the Man to himself already—and also the "doom" of the Indians' inherited way of life. The augury of his countenance will be fulfilled, as will his vow that ". . . someday I'm going to own a steamboat, too" (347).⁹

Ikkemotubbe as Doom is an Indian Richard Crookback, certainly not the person once familiar to those boyhood friends (Herman Basket and Crawfish-ford) who meet him at the Big River. The shifts in his name have told a story, marked stages in a progression from something, toward something else, and by a particular path. But, if Doom is a new man, he carries within his altered selfhood the knowledge of what Ikkemotubbe and other young bucks were like in the days of their innocence. And he uses this knowledge on his friends—practices upon their weakness to draw them into full complicity with the exercise of his dark arts as bully and assassin. For immediately upon his meeting with them Doom begins to speak of the six slaves he has acquired during the boat trip—chattels of no importance, which he will divide among these friends, even though one of the slaves is a woman. This conversation swiftly entangles Craw-ford. Herman Basket, on the other hand, is really uninterested in more Negroes (they both pretend to be) and therefore is offered swift horses in their stead. And at the same time both of

the home-style Indians are given a demonstration of what happens to those who are completely immune to temptation by the "revised version" of their old companion: a sample of "New Orleans salt" in operation. Hence their spirits are still restless with anxiety and expectation, their "ghosts walking," when they become parties to regicide and lesser acts of terror (348).

But once Issetibbeha and son are dead and Sometimes-Wakeup, the next in line, has abdicated (after also watching "salt" and its effect on the puppies), Doom as the Man doesn't quite live up to his promises to his two cohorts. He has reasons to hold them off a little longer, to play a bit more of "stick and carrot." And the black (or mulatto) woman is the cause of the trouble. Crawford and Herman are "still walking" when feasting and racing to celebrate Doom's elevation are about to begin. But to complaints the Man says, "What woman?" and "I think you still believe that that puppy was sick" (that his magic didn't kill it). Then all complaints cease (350). Doom has the steamboat on his mind—as was the case all of the time. Other enterprises are, for the moment, adjunctive once he has it in his power to become the kind of Man he aspires to be: a Man who incorporates Ikkemotubbe and David Calliccoat and Doom. And the Negro woman (apart from his own "use" of her) is chiefly a pawn in his maneuverings toward a realization of that design. Doom sets the People and their slaves to moving overland the last boat to visit their homeland, a vessel that "died" on a sandbar twelve miles from the Plantation. This "walking" takes months and requires that Doom set the dogs on his own tribe to make them all agents of his pride. And, once done, the boat-moving announces Doom's Manhood in its full nature; for the steamboat "dead" again becomes the House of Doom's chieftaincy, his announcement that he possesses all the magic

of the white man, the magic of raw power over persons and things. Furthermore, Doom uses his slaves in the bargain to draw away white squatters from his prize—does this without hesitancy when the whites suggest such a trade. And Crawford's woman is one of the ten he trades.

In these pages (349-354) Doom twice breaks his word. And in consequence his friends are left to their own devices for quieting their private "ghosts." Herman Basket and Crawford (called by Sam "Pappy"), though silenced for a moment by more talk of "salt," react vigorously. No longer mere accessories, they do their own murder upon the squatters. As Doom acknowledges, they become copies of their chief (352), recovering the bartered Negroes. Yet there is complication. For while accomplishing their private ends, in addition they bring to life another character necessary for the completion of Sam's story, a character they have not anticipated. I refer to the black woman's mate. Because he is imperfect in his docility and also requires manipulation, this Negro brings a third side to the story's tension. His conflict with Crawford is the focus of the next discrete section of "A Justice." Crawford at first attempts to steal the woman outright. The black husband threatens a little murder of his own. Therefore "Pappy" gives way for a time, returns all to "help the Man," and attempts to get to the woman by pretending a back injury. After a little success, someone (probably her husband) informs on Crawford and Doom offers to let the black man see to his recuperation "at the Spring." For the Man must keep all working and undiverted—the grumbling slaves included. Crawford gets well in a hurry, and on his own.

Doom manages the next encounter between Crawford and slave with similar tact (354-356). The Indian claimant has suggested a cock-fight to settle the dispute. The

Negro has no bird. But Doom gives him one stronger than Crawford's dependable champion. And to enforce his intrusion, Doom once more speaks to his friends about the health of the puppy that died. Crawford's cock falls and is withdrawn before a decision has been reached. Thus the final disposition of the woman is postponed—even though the cock-fight resumes a bit later, at the Negro's insistence, and even though Crawford's bird is prophetically killed. Things are then quiet for two months, until Sam is born.

This event brings us to Sam's story proper, the explanation of who he is and why the "niggers" are wrong about him (356-360). Obviously, the old man is proud of what he has to tell, of an identity and dignity that is as perilous and special as that of Lucas Beauchamp, the haughty mulatto of *Intruder in the Dust*. Equally obvious is the fact that Doom had encouraged such self-esteem through the cuckolded slave when he artfully suggested that this harassed Negro should be pleased with a "fine yellow man" (358); and Doom sustains this pride by later raising the child as a warrior and offering Sam the opportunity of remaining within the tribe when his black mother is sold (344-345). Yet the basic principle of patriarchy is broken by this ambiguous choice and by the consequent pattern of Sam's life as neither red nor black—a son with no definite father, with a black half-brother and an Indian "Pappy" who is probably no kin at all. For Doom, in giving putative justice, denies the values affirmed by Francis and Saucier Weddel in "Lo!" and "Mountain Victory." He violates the "yellow man's" right to the prerogatives of a "place" implicit in the act of naming, to the security of direct commitment from liegeland to liegeman. Indeed, he denies his own blood, the anchor of all patriarchal values. For Sam is his son—as we learn from the naming (a father's pre-

rogative), from his admiration of the child, from the time of its birth, and from *Go Down, Moses*.¹⁰ And Crawford's doubly symbolic fence built around the slave's cabin is (as are salt and steamboat) only another way for Doom to preserve his splendid isolation as both modern and prince: as disembodied will, protected from delimiting involvement (including family or friends) by the arts of politics; as the *owner* (in a private, exclusive sense) of his tribe and its land.¹¹

The wall as barrier and evasion is only one last travesty upon the communal principle according to which a healthy body politic may have unified expression in the deeds and person of their "chief" and "grandfather." Doom is not possessed by his possessions. Place has meaning in his world only for himself. Said another way, he stands alone and unrelated, thus violating the rule governing the proper conduct of his station: the rule of incorporation, of interacting but distinctive identities in a "family." Hence we cannot see him as a real person; he had denied the foremost attributes of chieftaincy among the Southern Indians. Moreover, he is a precise counterpart of the merely "proud" white overreachers who sometimes succeed him as lords of Northern Mississippi. Indian thus differs from Saxon/Celt only in the relative strength of the normative pattern in his archaic culture, not in the standard by which he is fictively "weighed and measured" by his creator.

And measurement is indeed the effect of this story's last page—a final judging. For, as the boy Quentin tells his grandfather (General Compson), Sam's story amounts to "nothing" (360). Boy and man, it leaves Quentin (as it leaves his readers) with an inconclusive impression. And the older Quentin remembers the words, preserves them for his conclusion after he has pene-

trated the layers of his elderly host's recollection/apologia and discovered there that "nothing" is a *meaning*, a comment on the inevitable waste which follows from bad stewardship. Neither the identity of the transgressor nor the circumstance of his error can alter the result. Here are quiet but pointed ironies. The red man, "A Justice" indicates, forfeited his own birthright, ceased to hold in fief (or ever to have owned) a portion of God's creation the very

moment when Doom realized he individually "could sell it for money," imagined that he had a clear and exclusive title to do with it according to his own will.¹² Measurement, I say again, and of the most thoroughly modern political attitude found in any of Faulkner's protagonists. Set over against the other Indian fiction, "A Justice" makes one cycle of Faulkner's chronicle complete. The later chapters show us little that is different—and nothing that is worse.

¹*Go Down, Moses* (New York: Random House, 1942) and *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951) contain considerable Indian material. Of lesser significance are the references to the Southern tribes in *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936) and the Snopes trilogy. The Indian stories appear in *Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1950). "Red Leaves," "A Justice," "A Courtship," and "Lo!" are grouped together (pp. 313-341, 343-360, 361-380, 381-403); "Mountain Victory" is on pp. 745-777. Brief mention of the Southern Indians is found throughout the Yoknapatawpha fiction.

Lewis Dabney's *The Indians of Yoknapatawpha* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974) appeared too recently for my use in this study.

²See especially Elmo Howell's "William Faulkner and the Mississippi Indians," *Georgia Review*, XXI (Fall, 1967), 386-396; also his "William Faulkner's Chickasaw Legacy: A Note on 'Red Leaves,'" *Arizona Quarterly*, XXVI (Winter, 1970), 293-303; and pp. 271-278 of A. P. Libby's "Chronicles of Children: Faulkner's Short Fiction" (Stanford University dissertation) adds a little reinforcement of these overviews. Likewise James B. Carothers' "William Faulkner's Short Stories" (University of Virginia dissertation, 1970), pp. 128-134.

³Elmo Howell's "Sam Fathers: A Note on Faulkner's 'A Justice,'" *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, XII (1967), pp. 149-153 is concerned directly with my subject.

⁴"A Justice" is the short story that first links Quentin with *Go Down, Moses*. The little known "Lion," in *Harper's* CLXXII (December, 1935), 67-77, does the same. There is also, I understand, related manuscript evidence. Quentin's youthful imperception in this story in some measure suggests his character as the helpless and troubled observer in *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and "That Evening Sun."

⁵Faulkner mingles Choctaw and Chickasaw at will. He seems to have made some distinction between the two tribes, their histories or customs. But whether Ikkemotubbe be of the latter or the former connection never alters our view of his character or significance. And excessive preoccupation with the discretion of his originals blurs our perception of this or any of the other Indian figures in the Faulkner canon.

⁶My discussion of the Indian patriarchy appears in a reading of "Lo!" *Louisiana Studies*, III (Winter, 1964), 323-329, under the title "Faulkner and the Great White Father." The white counterparts of Francis Weddel in "Lo!" are Buck and Buddy McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses* and *The Unvanquished* (New York: Random House, 1938). Of course, matriarchs such as Rosa Millard in the latter novel are similarly useful foils. But it is the same virtue that Faulkner admires in all of these good stewards, an understanding of "brotherhood" well expressed by Saucier Weddel in "Mountain Victory," when he says (after Emancipation, of his slave Jubal) ". . . he believes that I still belong to him; he will not believe that I have been freed" (769).

⁷The judgment of Doom in "A Justice" is a parody of the direct, personal justice insisted upon by Francis Weddel in "Lo!" Both stories turn upon the same problem. And it is the injustice of leaving his worthless former slave to the mercy of negrophobic Unionist mountain whites that summons Saucier Weddel to risk (and lose) his life in "Mountain Victory."

⁸For my understanding of Faulkner's social teaching, see "Brotherhood in 'The Bear': An Exemplum for Critics," *Modern Age*, X (Summer, 1966), 278-281.

⁹In telling much of the principal story in "A Justice," "A Courtship" provides another explanation for Ikkemotubbe's self-exile (despair in love for Herman Basket's sister)—and another consequence for his return (the murder of Moke-tubbe, with his father, Issetibbeha, already dead).

None of this, however, changes the image of Doom as someone who *was* "loved the best" by the people (363). It is in "A Courtship" (a story so close in tone and detail to "A Justice" as to require some conflation of the two) that Issetibeha is identified as Doom's uncle and predecessor as the Man. The old chief is left nameless in "A Justice." Other Faulkner fictions containing Indian references are not so closely related as are these two tales.

Doom's steamboat is one in a series of machine-as-temptation tropes operating in the Faulkner canon. Others include trains, cars, airplanes, and pistols. And sometimes animals (horses especially) serve in a particular story in the same way. Each instrument (mechanical or living) is, of course, a means to an artificial transcendence for the would-be overreacher devoted to their acquisition.

¹⁹Sam always behaves himself as a chieftain's son. In Faulkner he is always represented as a "patrician." And he cannot explain himself without telling the story of Doom's rise to the Man-ship. The chief is the source of the breed's personhood. On the otherhand, Doom's behavior toward the child is out of keeping with the rest

of his character *if* Sam is not his son. Furthermore, the chronology of this story seems to suggest that the dark woman who is Sam's mother had not been in Mississippi long enough to be with child by Crawford and delivered of "the fine yellow man" when she is—in the fall, after "five months" and then "two months" (pp. 354, 356-357).

²⁰The most famous intellectual champions of Doom's species are Niccolo Machiavelli (in *The Prince*) and Thomas Hobbes (in *Leviathan*). On what is here intended by "modern political theory," see Leo Strauss' *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969) and *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). Doom is incidentally almost the stock Elizabethan Machiavel, with his Italianate coat, his poison, and his quiet subject-against-subject government by counterpoint.

²¹*Go Down, Moses*, p. 257. A juxtaposition of Ike McCaslin (whose words these are) and Saucier Weddel (whose words I quoted above) indicates how close to (and how far away from) his creator's view of property and possessions McCaslin is.