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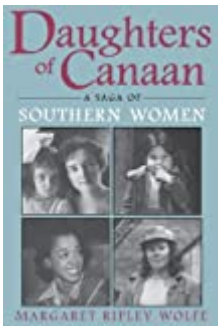

Margaret Ripley Wolfe. *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women (New Perspectives on the South).* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1902-1; $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-0837-7.

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"Women knew that a land where men were contented, uncontradicted and safe in possession of unpunctured vanity was likely to be a very pleasant place for women to live. So, from the cradle to the grave, women strove to make men pleased with themselves, and the satisfied men repaid lavishly with gallantry and adoration"–so Margaret Mitchell describes the mythic antebellum South in *Gone With The Wind*, the novel that for the popular imagination characterized the Southern woman as either flirtatious belle or long-suffering angel. Margaret Ripley Wolfe, in *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women*, reveals the inaccuracy of such stereotypes, arguing that the experience of Southern women cannot be neatly categorized; indeed, she shows that Southern women have often pioneered social change.

Wolfe, a professor of history at East Tennessee State University, rightly characterizes her study as "the first serious attempt by a professional historian to synthesize existing scholarship and interpret the experience of southern women across the centuries" (p. 5). Beginning with the women of the Chesapeake settlements and concluding with Janet Reno, Wolfe juxtaposes actual life stories with the work of historians and women's studies scholars. *Daughters of Canaan* is a saga accessible to both the general reader and the scholar: Wolfe provides for the former a fascinating look at real "steel magnolias"; and for the latter, a synthesis of primary and secondary work on Southern women–white, Native American, and African American.

Each of the book's seven chapters focus on distinctive historical periods of the South. Chapter 1 details the "importation" of women, white and black, to the early settlements in the Chesapeake area. In particular, English women were persuaded by economic hardship or judicial pressure (some of these women were convicted criminals) to go to the colonies, where the presence of women would stabilize the tenuous Virginia settlements. The 17th-century woman was essentially regarded as either breeder or servant; by the 18th century, however, women were promoted to "republican wives" or "Southern ladies," reflecting the revolutionary fervor sweeping the colonies and their increasing prosperity. Chapter 2 details this transformation, while chapter 3 focuses on the mythic Southern lady of the antebellum years.

Chapter 4 examines the impact of the Civil War on Southern women, showing that the war forced them into new and more active roles in Southern society and culture. Chapter 5 surveys the aftermath of the Civil War, including its economic disruption as well as the political activism of Southern women. Chapters 6 and 7 concentrate on the twentieth century: "New Heavens, New Earth" illustrates the challenges presented by female suf-

frage, the Great Depression, and World War II, which brought women greater economic and political power; in "A Time to Get, and a Time to Lose," Wolfe shows the impact on the civil rights and women's movements on Southern women in the second half of the twentieth century.

The strength of this study lies in Wolfe's ability to synthesize primary and secondary material to demonstrate that Southern women cannot be divided into Scarlett O'Haras and Melanie Wilkeses. In many instances Southern women were at the forefront of issues of national concern: consider Rosa Parks of Alabama or "Roe" of Texas. But *Daughters of Canaan* is not without weaknesses. At times, Wolfe's handling of individual women seems somewhat hurried and superficial. It is, of course, in the nature of a survey that depth is sacrificed to breadth. Nevertheless, some of the biographies raise more issues than they illuminate. Wolfe's sketch of Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald is a case in point. Wolfe notes that "[i]n her heyday [Zelda] represented the very embodiment of the flapper, a female persona far removed from the mythical feminine figures of the Old South and equally alienated from most of her contemporaries in Montgomery" (pp. 148-49). Yes!–but from this statement Wolfe moves directly to Margaret Mitchell without examining the individual and social consequences of such a removal. Since the contrast between myth and reality is Wolfe's concern in this study, I would have liked to see Wolfe probe a little more deeply here. Time and again Wolfe raises provocative points–for example, three Supreme Court cases directly relevant to women's lives–Roe v. Wade (1973), Webster v. Reproductive Health Services (1989), and Harris v. Forklift Systems, Inc. (1993)–originated in Southern states (Texas, Missouri, Tennessee). Are the Southern origins of these landmark rulings coincidental or do they reflect something distinctly Southern?

Wolfe marshals here a massive amount of material, primary and secondary–but her emphasis seems to be on the historians. Her very brief discussion of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (six sentences) refers to several historians, but gives no indication of what Wolfe herself thought about Jacobs's narrative. In fact, the issue of interracial sexual relations could be treated in greater detail. Southern women were very much aware of the sexual politics of slavery: the autobiographical writing of Harriet Jacobs and Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas (*The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia I. Burr, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990) testify to the soul-wrenching suffered by black and white women–yet Wolfe seems to skim over this aspect of the South's "peculiar institution."

Chapters 6 and 7 and the epilogue are also problematic in that Wolfe's discussion of the 20th-century Southern woman could be applied to most American women. Wolfe details, for example, the involvement of Southern women in World War II on the frontlines and the homefront, but she doesn't clarify either how this involvement was essentially different from that of Northern women or the significance of that lack of difference. Notably absent from Wolfe's discussion of the twentieth century is lesbianism as well as the influence of religion and fundamentalism. I also found Wolfe's epilogue particularly troubling. She concludes her study with anecdotes about Lorena Bobbitt and a Mississippi nurse who fended off rape by twisting the scrotum of her attacker (206). While she includes these stories as extreme examples of "approaches" to gender differences, such anecdotes form an odd conclusion to a study that so ably debunks stereotypes. And in her summation at the end of chapter 7, Wolfe states that "Southern women, indeed many Southern feminists, have never renounced their femininity. Radical feminists are hard to find in the South; the great majority of females are not in sympathy with lesbianism; they do not generally dispense with their undergarments or go out in public without their make-up. Furthermore, they reject the notion of an all-encompassing cross-cultural and historical patriarchal plot to subjugate women. If in fact such a plot ever existed, many Southern women have been all-too-willing accomplices" (p. 204). Here Wolfe veers uncomfortably close to media-driven stereotypes of "radical feminists" and lesbians and seems to contradict herself about patriarchal plots.

Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women clearly has limitations; nevertheless, as a "first serious attempt" to synthesize scholarship and actual female experience, Wolfe's study remains an interesting and valuable work. Well-documented, *Daughters of Canaan* brings together numerous sources and suggests avenues for further investigation; written in clear and lively prose, this book provides an intriguing glimpse of the rich and varied experience of the Southern woman.

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