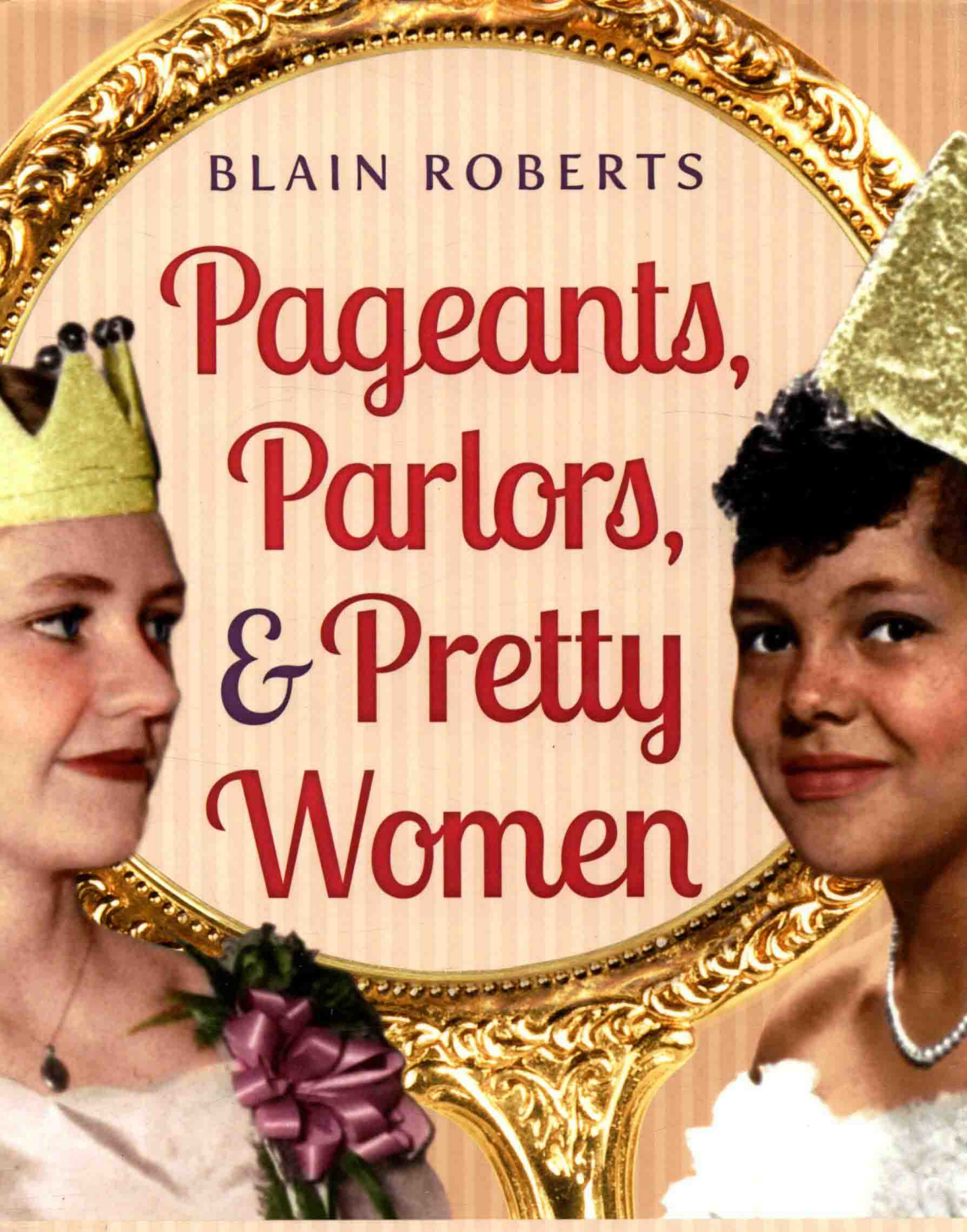
BLAIN ROBERTS

Pageants, Parlors, & Pretty Women



Race and Beauty

in the Twentieth-Century South

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Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women

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Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

In her autobiographical novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, fugitive slave Hannah Crafts provides a damning portrait of the planter class that kept her in bondage until her escape to the North in 1857. Although a few of the white women for whom Crafts worked displayed a paternalistic kindness that softened the cruelties of her life's station, most were consumed by the evils of slavery. Mrs. Wheeler, the last mistress Crafts served before escaping, was one of these. From the moment the two women met, Crafts felt uneasy. "Notwithstanding her sociality and freedom of conversation," Crafts writes, "there was something in her manner that I did not like." Crafts's suspicions were well-founded. Mrs. Wheeler was an impulsive, manipulative mistress, the embodiment of the excesses of power afforded by her class and race. After just a few days in her service, Crafts concluded that "[t]here seemed no end to her vanities, her whims, and caprices."

But Mrs. Wheeler got her comeuppance, one that nearly ruined her life. It came in a small box sold by a chemist to Crafts. And it was not, as we might expect, a poison, at least not in the traditional sense. The Wheelers had moved to Washington, D.C., from their plantation in North Carolina so that Mr. Wheeler might secure a position in the federal government. Having had no luck himself in the matter, the hapless Mr. Wheeler convinced his wife that she, as a beautiful woman, might succeed where he had not by persuading the gentleman in charge of patronage that her husband was deserving of an office. She agreed, but before undertaking the mission she asked that Crafts retrieve the box recently procured from the chemist. In it was a very fine and soft white face powder, which when applied, Mrs. Wheeler had been told, would produce a "most marvellous [*sic*] effect." "The skin, however sallow and unbeautiful," Crafts wrote of the product's promise, "would immediately acquire the softness and delicacy of childhood. Tan, or freckless [freckles], or wrinkles, or other unseemly blotches would simultaneously disappear." Wanting to look her best before going out into the world to attend to this most important task, Mrs. Wheeler applied the powder. According to Crafts, it seemed to work: "I had never seen her look better."

Two hours later, Mrs. Wheeler returned, frustrated by her inexplicable failure to acquire a position for her husband. For Mr. Wheeler, Crafts, and the rest of the household, the reason was obvious enough: Mrs. Wheeler's face had turned completely black. The transformation was shocking. "Heaven help me," Mr. Wheeler cried, "I fear that her beauty has gone forever." Oblivious to her altered appearance, Mrs. Wheeler had pleaded her husband's case as a black woman, unrecognized by her audience, mocked for her insolence. She returned with nothing to show for her effort, save her new black skin. Although the blackness gradually washed off with soap and water, the incident became the talk of Washington, D.C.—a "bit of scandal, so fresh and original," Crafts reported, "how the fashionable world loved it."

Explanations and interpretations abounded. Some speculated that Mrs. Wheeler had blackened herself on purpose, to win a wager. Others argued that she had done so in the playful spirit of "a little masquerade." A local minister gave the episode a serious spin, turning it into a morality tale. Crafts heard that he "held forth for two whole hours on the sin and wickedness of wantonly disguising the form or features and suggested it was a wonder of mercy that the presumptuous lady had not been turned irrecoverably black."

The gossip proved so malicious that the Wheelers left the city in disgrace, retreating to their North Carolina plantation. Mrs. Wheeler blamed Crafts for her misfortune, as well as for spreading rumors about the incident in North Carolina among the plantation slaves. She banished Crafts, a house slave her entire life, to labor in the fields. "With all your pretty airs and your white face, you are nothing but a slave after all," Mrs. Wheeler reminded her, "and no better than the blackest wench." Crafts was devastated at the prospect of her new fate. Her soul, she said, "actually revolted with horror unspeakable."

What do we make of this story? Although it is difficult, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has noted, to determine which parts of Crafts's autobiographical novel are embellished, the story of Mrs. Wheeler and the face powder seems far-fetched, if intriguing.[1] Mrs. Wheeler was Crafts's mistress in Washington, D.C., and North Carolina, and she may have used face powder as a part of her toilet preparations, as grooming rituals were called during her day. But no powder would have changed the pigmentation of her skin so that she became black beyond recognition. The story is a momentary detour into allegory, and yet, as such, it presents its own truths, especially about one of its themes: female beauty. Indebted to centuries-

old beliefs that prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic, most white southerners in the antebellum era held that elite white southern women were inherently beautiful because of their class status and moral superiority. Their defining physical marker was their whiteness, a trait secured by their privileged position atop the social and racial hierarchy. Theologians, proslavery apologists, and artists alike praised southern ladies' beauty in the most extravagant terms. Antebellum plantation novels, for example, widely read in the South as well as the North, depicted the southern lady—and the belle, her younger, unmarried counterpart—as one of God's most beautiful creatures. Caroline Lee Hentz, a plantation novelist who was one of the three most popular writers in the United States as late as 1892, described the appearance of one of her heroines in typical fashion in 1852.[2] Of the young Eoline Glenmore, Hentz wrote that her complexion "had the fairness of the magnolia blended with the blush of the rose. Her hair, of a pale golden brown, reminded one of the ripples of a sunlit lake by its soft waves, giving beautiful alterations of light and shade. . . . Her eyes, blue, soft, and intense as the noonday sky in June, had a kind of beseeching loving expression—an expression that appealed for sympathy, protection, love. . . . Such was Eoline in repose, a fair, delicate, and lovely young girl."[3] She was beautiful and fragile, worthy of admiration and yet in need of male protection, mindful, presumably, of the sexual subordination on which that protection was premised. Hentz's was the kind of description that slipped easily into prescription, an ideological construct that served the needs of patriarchy and white supremacy, gaining currency by force of repetition. It was also in large part a fantasy. Most white southern women were not of elite birth, and many of those who were would have been a far cry from the physical ideal.

If few women managed to embody the ideal of beauty, it was not for lack of trying. Mrs. Wheeler hoped the chemist's powder would even out a complexion made sallow by the passage of time and, Crafts suggests, by indiscretions in the sun. The tragedy that befell her was thus what someone of her position might have seen as the ultimate physical punishment. The face powder completely took away her beauty, which Crafts reports had been considerable during her days as a belle. Mrs. Wheeler became black—"black as Tophet," or hell, according to her stunned husband—the opposite of beautiful. And when her beauty disappeared into blackness, so, too, did her standing and social status.

For blackness was actually much more than the opposite of whiteness. Since the beginning of European exploration in the fifteenth century,

blackness had represented a negation of those qualities associated with civilization, morality, and beauty. European and American thinkers saw blackness as a degeneration not simply from "original color," as Winthrop Jordan has written, but also from the original state of man.[4] Just as a kind of circular logic governed whites' views of themselves, so, too, did it determine how whites viewed blacks. Dark skin and "African" features were a sign of supposed moral depravity and baseness; meanwhile, blacks' supposed moral depravity and baseness manifested itself in the aesthetically unattractive black body. In the slave South, the presumption of hypersexuality that was part and parcel of this black subhumanity was especially pronounced, serving to justify white men's rape of female slaves and, thus, the appreciation of their property.

Slaveholder Thomas Jefferson gave voice to these popular views of blackness in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. "Is it not," he asked, "the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races?" And to skin color could be added "flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, and [blacks'] own judgment in favour of the whites," which Jefferson argued was as certain "as is the preference of the Oran-ootan for the black women over those of his own species."[5] In this scheme, black women fared even worse than their male counterparts. Unattractive by virtue of their black skin, libidinal to the point of being animals (according to Jefferson, black women were prone to relations with apes), female slaves were the aesthetic and moral foils of their white mistresses.

And yet Crafts's story also shows that black women's homeliness fell along a continuum, something that Jefferson himself would likely have admitted. Black skin may have been repulsive to whites such as Mrs. Wheeler, but there were degrees of blackness. There were therefore degrees of unattractiveness as well. Crafts apparently boasted both "pretty airs" and light skin—Mrs. Wheeler went so far as to charge her with having a "white face"—both of which raised the ire of an already angry mistress. Crafts had white ancestry and had also enjoyed the material advantages that came with being a slave in the master's house. Mrs. Wheeler would probably have been in good company in seeing Crafts as more physically attractive than the "blackest wench." She did not, of course, say this directly. But her banishment of Crafts to the fields and her insistence that she was "no better" than the blackest female slave are suggestive, revealing an anxiety over a perceived threat to her own beauty and her status within the household.

Crafts's tale contains other intriguing glimpses into the meaning of

beauty among antebellum women. Mrs. Wheeler felt she simply needed a bit of touching up before leaving home. Others, however, believed that her recourse to face powder represented an act of "sin and wickedness" and that her black complexion was divine retribution for attempting to be something that she was not—for attempting to construct a disguise of sorts. Or perhaps the real issue was that this disguise had emboldened her to enter the public sphere of politics, albeit briefly and informally, a place off-limits to ladies, desperate husbands aside. Another possibility was whispered. Some thought that Mrs. Wheeler might have deliberately pretended to be black, to have engaged, as they put it, in a "little masquerade." Crafts herself does not give much credence to this theory, but that some of the Wheelers' acquaintances could conceive of such a desire at all is fascinating. Why would a plantation mistress want to look like a black woman, given the widespread disparagement of black features?

Long before the emergence of modern department stores with their glittering cosmetic counters, of beauty pageants with their scantily clad young contestants, and of beauty parlors with their noisy hairdryers and chattering women, beauty occupied a conspicuous place in the actual and imaginative worlds of white and black southern women. Their pursuit of beauty, moreover, was far from a frivolous act undertaken merely to pass the hours. These facts did not change once the social order to which Crafts and Wheeler belonged died. Indeed, the dynamics that underpinned Crafts's story lived on, proving a complex inheritance for southern women of the Jim Crow South, women born into a society that was at once so different from, yet so similar to, the one that had bound together slave and mistress.

Pageants, Parlors, and Pretty Women examines the legacy of these ideas, uncovering how the female heirs of Hannah Crafts's and Mrs. Wheeler's Old South experienced beauty in their lives. I argue that beauty, at its core, was about power and, therefore, a hotbed of contention. As Crafts's story suggests, some conflicts arose from the South's racial politics. But there were also those that dealt less with race than with other forces that for so long made the region different: the entrenched class divisions in both the white and black communities that race leaders preferred to ignore; the agricultural rhythms that shaped southern life and that begrudgingly gave way to urbanization and modernization; and the conservative gender mores that determined what white and black women could and, more often, could not do. This book shows how, by pursuing beauty, southern women mediated the crises of modern southern history, a period book-