

“WE WERE
WHOLE
AGAIN”

: Kaye Gibbons's
*On the Occasion of
My Last Afternoon*

by Mary Ann Wilson

A recent *New York Times* review by Joan Cashin of Catherine Clinton's *Tara Revisited* laments the fact that so little has been written on how Southern women experienced the Civil War (37). Certainly books like Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* have helped the situation, along with Kaye Gibbons's latest surprising offering, *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* (G. P. Putnam's, 1998). A witness of what Lewis Simpson in *The Fable of the Southern Writer* calls the "inner civil war" (95), Gibbons's narrator Emma Garnet Tate takes us through an incredible sweep of American history – 1840–1900 – reminiscing near the end of her life about her family's wartime experiences. Perhaps, amid the considerable scholarship on women and the war in the last two decades, we need to hear this small, personal voice focusing our cultural and collective memory.

Those familiar with Gibbons's first novel, *Ellen Foster* (Algonquin, 1987), will remember Ellen's bold and original rendering of her tortured personal history and will often yearn for this voice in Gibbons's latest novel. Burdened with the weight of privilege and social class, unlike her literary sister Ellen, and reflecting back from the vantage point of a seventy-year-old woman rather than from the innocent, uninhibited child's perspective, Emma writes an elegiac narrative hovering between memoir and novel. Her story places the act of writing in the foreground – "this will be the telling," Emma says (*Occasion* 27) – and defines its redemptive role in personal and collective history.

Critics have noted Kaye Gibbons's interest in the Southern female *bildungsroman* and her admiration for such writers as Eudora Welty and

Katharine Anne Porter, whose focus on female experience hers echoes (Makowsky 103). Narrators such as Ellen Foster and Hattie Barnes in *Sights Unseen* (1995) wrestle with the problems of self-definition, accommodating themselves uneasily to a world complicated by amoral, weak, or powerless parents; indeed, a primary narrative thread informing several of Gibbons's novels is the innocent child thrust into a morally ambiguous world she is too young to understand. Thus, astute readers saw Ellen Foster as the reincarnation of that archetypal American narrator Huck Finn; similarly, Hattie Barnes begins her story with the words: "I was twelve, deemed too young to be told what was happening . . . and in fact too innocent to surmise it" (*Sights* 3); and Emma Garnet Tate reflects in a blending of her past and present: "I am too young for this. I did not believe I would ever forgive my father for making me withstand more than I could bear" (*Occasion* 3). These unnatural trials make critics like Ralph Wood see Gibbons's heroines as spiritually instructive. In words applicable to the other novels, he writes of *Ellen Foster*: "The novel's real concern . . . is . . . the nature of Ellen's reconstruction: how is such a life restored, redeemed?" (843). This search for psychic wholeness animates the best of Kaye Gibbons's works, taking us from the intimate domestic worlds of the earlier novels to the larger canvas of *Occasion*. Surprising and dramatic redemptions abound: immersed in troubled family dynamics, sorting through the morass of personal – and in Emma's case – national history, Gibbons's characters explore the complex ties of blood or region that yoke us together.

Ellen Foster introduces us to characters and themes whose successive transformations in future works create a familiar and haunting Gibbons landscape, a survivor/heroine compelled to relate a tale of emotional and/or physical abuse prefigured by the epigraph from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" framing the text:

Cast the bantling on the rocks,
Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat,
Wintered with the hawk and fox,
Power and speed be hands and feet.

Gibbons thus, at the beginning of her literary career, stakes out a wild, marginal, fictive world always poised on the edge of dissolution and fragmentation despite its outwardly deceptive domestic surfaces. Central to this recurring narrative and foreshadowed most poignantly by *Ellen Foster* is the absent mother: a mother who takes her own life in this first novel, who falls victim to mental illness in *Sights Unseen*, or who dies at the hands of an inept doctor in *Occasion*.

Ellen Foster, like her creator, rejects the easy narratives of escape and rescue she reads in school, prefer-

ring instead the old stories like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, both works that emphasize "the telling." Yet ironically all three of these Gibbons works give us characters who have indeed escaped and who narrate their stories from a relatively safe vantage point: Ellen has her newly adopted family; Hattie Barnes has become a doctor and a part of that healing community who brought her mother temporarily back into the daylight world; and Emma Tate is a wealthy matriarch in the first year of a new century trying to set down in words her own private tale of maternal deprivation. In the early pages of *Sights Unseen*, Hattie articulates the dilemma she shares with these other Gibbons heroines: "I am drawn to know why and how I never abandoned the ideal of a mother" (*Sights* 5).

Ellen Foster witnesses her mother's death early in the novel, a woman too frail both physically and emotionally to survive the world her daughter Ellen learns to negotiate. Like other bookish Gibbons heroines, Ellen realizes the power of words to contain and order reality – in the books she avidly reads and in the life story she hoards: "My daddy wonders if I plan to tell somebody the whole story. I do not know if there is a written down rule against what he did but if it is not a crime it must be a sin" (*Ellen* 14–15). Watching her father hurl abusive language at her mother or hearing the judge rule that she be given to her cruel maternal grandmother, Ellen begins to construct an alternative identity for herself, a redemptive refashioning complete with a strong mother and a real home. Gibbons juxtaposes the two narratives of Ellen's life – with her birth mother and her adoptive mother – and effectively presents competing but complementary discourses of motherhood, the one marked by loss and regret, the other buoyant with Ellen's surprise and wonder at her second chance. *Ellen Foster* teems with mother-figures: Ellen's sickly, ineffectual mother; Ellen's black friend Starletta's mother who cooks, quilts, and makes a home despite their poverty; Ellen's maternal grandmother, rich, aloof, and bitter about her daughter's fate, who puts Ellen to work picking cotton; Mavis, the black surrogate mother who looks after Ellen in the cotton fields; Stella, the seventh-grader who lives in Ellen's foster home with her baby Roger; Ellen's foster mother; even Ellen herself, who lives to nurse her maternal grandmother and, in a grim replication of the introductory scene, watch her die. Responding to her grandmother's dying words that she is partly responsible for her mother's death, Ellen vows, in words anticipating Emma Tate's, to "spend the rest of my life making up for it. Whatever it was. Whatever I decided one day I actually did. One day if I ever sorted the good from the bad and the memories of what I wish was true" (*Ellen* 78–79).