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Berkin, Carol. *Civil War Wives: The Lives and Times of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

In Antebellum America, American women were supposed to live in “separate spheres” from men. The ideal woman would focus on managing the household, raising the children, and supporting her husband while not seeking fame or advancement for herself. In a time when a woman’s life was defined by her husband, most women found it very difficult to exert independence and challenge the social norms of the day. In *Civil War Wives: The Lives of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant*, Carol Berkin explored what it was like to be a woman in this environment by examining the lives of three very different women who married some of the most famous men of the time. As Berkin told each woman’s story, she examined the way each woman struggled to live within the confines of the day while also exerting their independence. Berkin used these three remarkable women to highlight the various social, economic, and political issues that surrounded all women due to their second-class status in the 19th Century.

Berkin provided a thorough and well-written study of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant in the Civil War era. Although each of these women lived very different lifestyles, they each came from wealthy, slave holding families in the Antebellum South. Each woman also left behind numerous sources, such as journals, letters, speeches, and memoirs, which assisted Berkin in telling their story. While on the surface Weld, the famous abolitionist, Davis, the First Lady of the Confederacy, and Grant, a General and then President’s wife, lived very different lives and experienced the causes and effects of the Civil War in different ways, the fact

that each women struggled to be the best wife and mother while still establishing their own voice tied them all together. Each woman faced numerous challenges and made many sacrifices as they dutifully served their husband and families. While Angelina and Varina struggled a bit with some of the conventions of the day, Julia was seemingly content with her role as wife and mother although the War and her husband's Presidency brought other challenges. Berkin succeeds in providing a sympathetic and empathetic portrayal of each woman. Although she clearly did not agree with all of the life choices the women made, and presents their faults along with their triumphs, it is clear that Berkin respects each of these women and honors the difficult choices that they often had to make in their lives.

Berkin begins the book by describing the life of Angelina Grimke Weld. Angelina is the oldest of the three women that Berkin profiles, and is the woman who probably challenged the social norms of the day the most. Angelina was born into a wealthy and well-established slaveholding family in South Carolina. She was the wealthiest of the three women Berkin described. This wealth gave Angelina opportunities later in life to explore the pursuits that she wanted, but as a staunch abolitionist, Angelina also had to wrestle with the fact that the comfortable lifestyle she enjoyed had been built on the backs of slave laborers. Early in life, Angelina began to question the choices that her family members were making and often criticized their behaviors. This led to tension with her parents, especially her mother, and with her older siblings.¹ Angelina's older sister, Sarah, became a role model to Angelina as both women eventually left the South and moved to Philadelphia where they became Quakers. Both women soon became a part of the Abolitionist movement where they gave numerous talks on the evils of slavery and spoke of true equality between the races. Here Angelina greatly differs from the other women in the book. She left

¹ Carol Berkin, *Civil War Wives: The Lives and Times of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009) 14.

everything that she knew behind, and had a public, successful, perhaps even notorious, career on the Abolitionist circuit prior to getting married. Besides advocating for the end of slavery and for the equality of African Americans, Angelina also became an advocate for women's rights, even though this was not a popular position to have at the time. In a letter in 1837, Angelina proclaimed "it is not the cause of the slave only which we plead, but the cause of woman as a responsible moral being."² As Berkin explained, Angelina was making the argument that women had the right to shoulder public moral responsibilities equal to men, rather than just suffrage or even economic opportunities. Grimke also engaged with Catherine Beecher over the proper role of women in the eyes of God. Beecher argued that "woman's subordination to man was decreed by heaven", and that all of "women's moral goals could be accomplished within the confines of domesticity."³ Both of these ideas were popular at the time, and Beecher argued that the public sphere was filled with too much violence and competition that would corrupt a women. Based on her conclusions, Beecher felt that it was unnatural and unhealthy for a woman to become too involved in any political or public issue.⁴ Grimke countered that the assumptions that women were inferior were without proof. Angelina also argued that there was not a male and female moral standard, but one moral standard, and anyone who did live up to that standard would be condemned.⁵ At the heart of Angelina's argument was the idea that "whatever it is morally right for a man to do, it is morally right for a woman to do."⁶ Grimke completely rejected the idea that the two sexes had different capacities, virtues, or were in any way not equal. Through her early career, Angelina risked not only being ostracized from her family and childhood friends, but also from the Quaker community and Abolitionist circles due to many of her strong moral beliefs that were often considered radical at the time.

² Ibid, 42.

³ Ibid, 45.

⁴ Ibid, 46-47.

⁵ Ibid, 45.

⁶ Ibid, 48.

Angelina's radical public behavior came to an end though in the 1830s when Angelina married her mentor in the Abolitionist movement, Theodore Weld. Angelina's wealth, successful speaking career, and delayed marriage had given her an independence that most women did not get to experience at the time. Angelina was still subject to the restrictions that genteel society and organized religion placed on the proper role of women. For much of her speaking career, Angelina had not spoken before mixed gender audiences, or a "promiscuous audience", since proper women were not supposed to do that in public.⁷ As the wedding with Theodore Weld drew near, many wondered if Angelina could be happy as a married woman since her world would now be defined by her husband and children, and she would be judged by how good of a wife and mother she was. The marriage between Grimke and Weld was unconventional in many ways. Since Angelina was from a wealthy family, and had grown up with servants, she did not know a lot about housework and child rearing. Secondly, Angelina's older sister and mentor, Sarah, never married and lived with the Welds for most of their life together. This created some tension and unresolved issues between Sarah and Angelina as both women struggled with what was expected of them at the time. The marriage was also conventional in many other ways. Upon marriage, Angelina's public career as a speaker came to an end as she focused on raising the children and being a housewife. Although Grimke and Weld shared many of the same views on equality, she could no longer express them publically and still be considered a proper woman. Although Angelina may have still wanted to be a part of the Abolitionist Movement, her role was going to have to be more private, for example helping Weld with his writing and research, rather than going on a speaking arrangement tour. Berkin successfully described the many changes that Grimke's life went through and the numerous struggles she had as Angelina worked to define and exert her independence in the Antebellum years. In one of Angelina's last decisions of perceived rebelliousness, Angelina acknowledged and

⁷ Ibid, 42-43.

welcomed the biracial children of one of her brothers.⁸ What many others viewed as a radical move, Angelina viewed as the right thing to do since they were family, and since she had always spoke of racial equality.

The second life Berkin explored was that of Varina Howell Davis. Varina Howell Davis was born into a planter elite family in Mississippi in 1826. At the age of 17, Varina met Jefferson Davis, age 35, a widower who was just beginning his political career. Young Varina was beautiful, educated, highly intelligent and skilled in political thought, and opinionated. Although these characteristics first appealed to Jefferson Davis, in reality he often expressed his desire for a more traditional wife who would not always let her opinions be known. Jefferson Davis often scolded Varina for not being the obedient wife he hoped to have at the time. Jefferson Davis' first wife was believed by many to be his one true love. Varina often had to compete with a ghost as the standard for how a proper woman should act. Varina and Jefferson also had conflicts over the role of his older brother Joe in their family. Joe Davis was the patriarch of the family and he had a clear vision of what Jefferson should be doing and how he should be living. Jefferson often seemed more willing to listen to his brother than his wife surrounding family and home issues, and this often irritated Varina.⁹ These conflicts would grow between Joe and Varina, and Jefferson would make sure that she knew Jefferson blamed her for the fighting. When Jefferson returned to the Senate in the late 1840s, Varina did not return with him. Jefferson told Varina "I cannot expose myself to such conduct as yours when with me here...I cannot bear harassment, occasional reproach, and subsequent misrepresentations."¹⁰ Although Jefferson claimed to love his wife, he also made it clear that if she did not change her ways, there was no way for them to live together with all of the conflict between them. For the time being, Varina worked to subdue her independent spirit and

⁸ Ibid, 97-98.

⁹ Ibid, 131.

¹⁰ Ibid, 134.

prove to Jefferson that she was the obedient wife and devoted mother that he was trying to mold her into. Despite the many differences in their personalities, they had six children together and at times appeared to have a happy marriage. Together, Varina and Jefferson faced many personal tragedies, such as five of their six children dying before Varina, but through it all Varina did prove to be a good mother and wife, despite Jefferson's repeated misgivings.

Throughout their years in Washington, Varina often preferred the company of educated men, who offered intellectual conversations, versus the company of women, who tended to avoid topics such as politics and instead focused on gossip. This was often interpreted as snobbish and aloof behavior on Varina's part by many circles in Washington. Varina recognized that she did not meet the standard set by other Washington wives, but she still preferred spending time with scholars, writers, and other well read women.¹¹ She could once again attempt to exert some independence by pursuing the intellectual social circles in Washington, but she needed to strike a balance or risk conflict with Jefferson Davis again. As a politician's wife and as the First Lady of the Confederacy, though Varina recognized the important and proper role she needed to play, even though it often limited her natural talents and intellectual curiosity. Following the war, Varina's strong independent thinking made her willing to do whatever was necessary to help get her husband released from prison. Varina redefined feminine duty in the post war years as the need to protect her children and to defend her husband. While Jefferson Davis was in jail, Varina rejected the standard ideas of the time about proper feminine behavior as she wrote to any powerful man she knew and did not know in the hope that they could help her husband. Varina also was thrown in to a much more public role while defending her husband than was often viewed as socially acceptable.¹² Her continual public efforts to free her husband were ultimately rewarded, even though her methods to achieve that freedom were not always applauded. Although Varina always

¹¹ Ibid, 143-144.

¹² Ibid, 178-179.

tried to be a dutiful wife, after Jefferson Davis died, Varina was able to redefine herself as she became a writer and journalist in New York City. Ultimately, her apartment became a salon as writers, artists, intellectuals, and politicians were always welcome to discuss issues there. The independence and intellectual thought that Varina craved throughout most of her marriage could be achieved after her husband had passed away.

The final life explored was that of Julia Dent Grant. Julia Dent Grant was born to Missouri slaveholders in 1826. Julia was never seen as a traditional beauty of the time, nor was she ever really interested in expanding her education, as Angelina and Varina had been. Yet, Julia was remembered as being confident, lively, happy, and very social.¹³ Julia's favorite activities were social activities with friends and family. When the socially awkward, but also traditionally minded, Ulysses S. Grant first met Julia, he could not help but fall in love with her vibrant personality. Despite objections from her family, Ulysses and Julia married. This initial act of rebellion was soon followed by a happy and loving marriage where both spouses valued the traditional separate spheres. Unlike Angelina and Varina who challenged the traditional roles of women, Julia embraced the gender conventions of the time. Julia never had an interest in politics and only understood the Civil War in terms of what it would do for her husband's career. Although she was born into a slave society and enjoyed the comforts that slavery brought her, Julia supported the Union, not as a political issue, but rather because her husband did. During the Civil War, Julia often aided Confederate wives because she believed she should on a humanitarian level, even though it could be seen as improper for a Union General's wife to be associating with the enemy.¹⁴ Julia was often completely unaware that she was doing anything improper. Ulysses rarely scolded his wife about this behavior or asked for her opinion about political matters as he also recognized that it was his business as the man of the family to deal with these issues. When Ulysses S. Grant

¹³ Ibid, 223.

¹⁴ Ibid, 256.

died, their complementary marriage was praised by Bishop John Newman: "Husband and wife the happy supplement of each other. He the Doric column to sustain; she the Corinthian column to beautify. He the oak to support; she ivy to entwine."¹⁵ Many who witnessed their long and happy marriage attributed it to both of them embracing appropriate and complementary roles of the time that neither Ulysses or Julia were willing to challenge. According to Berkin, Julia's independence showed itself after her husband died when she tried to get her memoirs of her husband and their life together published. Her negotiations with publishers showed how important she believed preserving his memory was to the country. Both Julia and Varina saw one of their final complementary acts in marriage as being the responsibility to memorialize their husbands for all future generations rather than have them be vilified.

Throughout the book, Berkin would make comparisons between how the three women would react to different events. While all three women were from slave holding families, only Angelina viewed slavery as fundamentally wrong and something that must be abolished. Varina never trusted the abolitionists and perceived them as going to destroy the Union.¹⁶ Julia never understood the Constitution and never bothered herself with issues of politics.¹⁷ The Civil War impacted all American families, but Berkin explained in details the numerous challenges the war especially brought to Varina and Julia. With their husbands focused on the war efforts, both women needed to have an active role in the running of the family and household accounts. For Varina, the biggest problems were faced at the end of the war when it was clear that the Confederacy was not going to win. For Julia, accounting and business were always over her head, but she strived to assist her husband in any way necessary during the war. After the war, Varina struggled to bring her family back together and get her husband out of jail. At the same time,

¹⁵ Ibid, 303.

¹⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹⁷ Ibid, 257.

Julia's earlier struggles seemed behind the Grant family since Ulysses was now a decorated war hero, celebrated by many Americans, and looking forward to a career in politics. The comparisons were a nice reminder of the numerous ways the time period and the war impacted not only these women, but all women and families. The comparisons could also help give multiple perspectives and viewpoints of the events leading up to and after the war. As Berkin explained, despite coming from similar backgrounds, each woman wrestled with the social expectations of the day. While Angelina decided to abandon her family's way of life and renounce the social conventions, and Varina continuously struggled with suppressing her intellect and independent spirit to conform to her husband's wishes, Julia reveled in being surrounded by friends and family, and wanted to be immersed only in a domestic sphere.

When most Americans think of the Civil War, they focus on the politicians and soldiers who fought in the war and often forget about how the war impact the women of the time. In order to further explore the era and it's impact on gender roles, historians, history students, and popular audiences would all benefit from Berkin's account of Weld, Davis, and Grant. With that said, the book might not be entirely suitable for a high school history class. Teachers would benefit from reading this work, especially those who like to incorporate women's history into the curriculum. A highly interested student who wanted to explore gender roles and how they changed over the course of the 19th century could also benefit from this book. The book is written at an accessible reading level for high school students, but some of the biographies get a bit tedious. Teachers could choose to focus on only one of the stories to use as a case study for their students. Another option would be to use a limited amount of chapters from the book to help students get a clearer picture of what it was like to be a woman in the 19th Century. Each of these women was married to a famous man, so how did that make them typical and atypical at the same time? It could be interesting to have students compare each of these women to each other or to try to find local women to compare the

experiences too. Classes could be broken up into three groups where each group only reads a small section of the book. Angelina's story offers numerous insights into what it was like to be radical in the 18th century. Ostracized by her family for her abolitionist views, later rejected by her Church for her ideas of full racial equality, and criticized by many for speaking in front of "promiscuous" audiences, Angelina faced many personal challenges and obstacles even if many modern students would not view her as a radical today. Varina's independent streak led to conflict with her husband as she struggled to be a good wife and mother. Her story could also offer insights to students about the challenges many women faced as they attempted to balance their own aspirations and intellectual curiosity with the needs of their families. While Angelina and Varina were pushing the limits of what a woman could do, Julia was quite content to fulfill the role of the dutiful wife and mother. Students could also benefit from reading Julia's story. Often, modern students do not understand why any woman would be against the expansion of rights to women. Even if the students did not fully understand Julia's actions, her convictions about what her proper role should be and her contentment with that role could be eye opening. It could be very interesting to discuss the comparisons between these three different women. It could also be interesting to discuss the changes and continuities over time that occur to these three women, and all women, during the 19th century. The world that each of these women was born into was vastly changed by the time they died, so analyzing the processes behind these changes could also be an insightful lesson for students.

Ultimately, the stories of Angelina Grimke Weld, Varina Howell Davis, and Julia Dent Grant, highlighted the achievements and failures of three families during the Civil War era. Although all three women were born into a wealthy, slave holding family, their life paths went in three very different directions. Each of their stories showed how brave, courageous, and independent women needed to be in the 19th century while still living under their husband's control

and living within the social norms of the day that said women were second-class citizens. Berkin explained the complex role each woman had to play to be the dutiful wife in her sphere while also exerting some of her own independence. By telling the story of all three women, the reader gains a fuller picture of the complex gender issues that the nation faced in the 19th century, and in some cases, still struggles with today.