Unringing the "Belle"

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No matter how hard I try to suppress them, the images bubble to the surface of my mind. First, wearing a billowing green dress that enhances her mesmerizing green eyes, Scarlett O’Hara flounces in, her waist corseted to 17 inches. Fluttering her long lashes and deepening her dimples, she effortlessly flirts with the Tarleton twins, begging them not to bore her with talk of war and secession.

Next waddles in Mammy, “shining black, pure African, devoted to the last drop of her blood to the O’Haras,” writes Margaret Mitchell.

Finally with uncertainty in her step comes Blanche DuBois, as Tennessee Williams describes her: “daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace, and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district.” Shocked by the harsh neon world of New Orleans, Blanche is a moth searching for a gentler light. Alcoholic, schizophrenic, and traumatized, Blanche desperately seeks a gentleman who can provide her with security and peace.

Thus prevail the great stereotypes of Southern womanhood: No matter how hard I try to suppress them, the images bubble to the surface of my mind. First, wearing a billowing green dress that enhances her mesmerizing green eyes, Scarlett O’Hara flounces in, her waist corseted to 17 inches. Fluttering her long lashes and deepening her dimples, she effortlessly flirts with the Tarleton twins, begging them not to bore her with talk of war and secession.

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On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks—wearied to the depths of her soul of “giving in” to blatant racial discrimination on a daily basis—sat resolutely on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, defying the order to give her seat to white riders and promptly facing arrest. This 42-year-old woman catalyzed a revolution that jolted the moral conscience of a nation confronting the vast chasm between its professed ideals of justice and its Jim Crow practices.

Other Southern women have expressed their strength through their art. In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Alice Walker reminds us of those countless slave women who, in the midst of a horrific struggle to survive, managed to preserve the creative impulse through their gardening, their quilt making, and perhaps most important, their storytelling. That treasure trove of virtuoso oral performances that characterize Southern culture nurtured Zora Neale Hurston, Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Walker herself—all Southern women with zest for life, passion for their art, and irrepressible determination.

Real Southern women bear little resemblance to the stereotypes from television and film (though I must admit Carol Burnett’s rendition of Scarlett in her green velvet gown created from her mother’s draperies does make me chuckle). Far from self-effacing and defined by domestic service is my friend Mary Kemp Davis, professor of English at Florida A&M University, author of a scholarly study of fictional re-creations of the Southampton slave rebellion led by Nat Turner.

Far from helpless was my dear colleague Ann Sharp, who, widowed with two children, ages six and eight, resolutely pursued her dream of a doctorate in English, and then became a professor of linguistics at Furman, a pioneer in promoting women’s and multicultural studies, and a steadfast source of wisdom and support for her students and colleagues.

Far from weak was my mother who, having had stillborn triplets and having lost a daughter that lived only one day, endured five months of confinement to bed—not being allowed to walk at all—to ensure my safe entrance into this world.

Why haven’t the stereotypes of Southern womanhood “gone with the wind”? Perhaps the reason is the entrenchment of the tradition of white Southern patriarchy raising daughters to pass from their daddies’ protection to that of their husbands.

Perhaps it’s the naïve romanticizing of antebellum culture by those from other regions of the country, as was the case with my college friends, who persisted in the distorted belief that I lived on a Tara-like plantation with a houseful of servants at my bidding.

Perhaps it’s a selective amnesia about the economic and political struggles of African-American Southern women—amnesia so prevalent that the Association of Black Women Historians issued an “Open Statement to Fans of The Help,” stating that the organization “finds it unacceptable for either this book or this film to strip black women’s lives of historical accuracy for the sake of entertainment.”

Perhaps it’s a culture of Southern politeness not entirely at ease with confrontation and resistance. Whatever the reasons, the stereotypes do a disservice to Southern women.

Drawing upon the deep-rootedness in their native soil, the sustenance of community, and the transcendence of faith, Southern women have triumphed through war, slavery, racism, illness, and heartache—without Scarlett O’Hara’s vanity, Mammy’s selflessness, or Blanche DuBois’s vulnerability. Envisioning the ideal Southern woman, Sue Huffman Brady proclaimed, “Let her be able to grapple hand to hand with destiny, to laugh at defeat, to be undaunted by opposition, and strong enough to brave the darkest hours of adversity.”

Indomitability prevails as a Southern woman’s real legacy and lifeblood.