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## 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.

## Unringing the "Belle"

*It's time to dispel stereotypes of Southern women.*

BY LYNNE SHACKELFORD

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** *Lynne Shackelford has served as a member of Furman's English department for 32 years and as department chair from 2008–2014. She has written on 19th- and 20th-century authors, including Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, Augusta Jane Evans Wilson, Joseph Heller, and Ken Kesey.*

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:

# Perspective

the narcissistic Southern belle armed with endless tricks for manipulating men, the devoted black slave/domestic servant whose identity is fully bound to caring for whites, and the physically and psychologically fragile lady in need of knightly rescue.

The Southern women I admire, however, differ dramatically from these literary creations. They are strong, forthright, courageous, and feminist. In an address entitled “Changing Ideals in Southern Womanhood,” given to the Women’s Congress at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Sue Huffman Brady called for Southern women to “throw aside the veil of helplessness and walk forth into the sunlight of independent labor.” She foretold that Southern women would “invade the realms of learning, seize its choicest treasures, destroy the fortifications erected by wrong, build in their place the stronghold of the right, and fight the best fight of which she is capable for herself, her country, and her God.”

Indeed, Southern women in various eras have fought for their full personhood. In the early 19th century, Sarah Grimké, deeply wounded when she realized she would not be allowed to follow in her father’s footsteps as a lawyer, raised her younger sister Angelina to adulthood. Then the two Grimké sisters left Charleston and migrated north, where they broke free from the women’s sphere of domesticity, liberated women’s voices in speaking publicly in support of abolition, and wrote compelling activist works, including Sarah’s subversive *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* and Angelina’s antislavery *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks—wary 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

from manipulative or clinging is, for example, my friend from Easley who, in basic training at the Air Force Academy, endured taunts about her Southern charm-school background and later, decades of misogynistic behavior to pursue a career as a pilot—today flying to Dubai, Paris, Mumbai, Milan, and other stops for FedEx.

*Real Southern women bear little resemblance to the stereotypes from television and film...they are strong, forthright, courageous, and feminist.*

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

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 the 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. **F**