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The Fact and Fiction of the Lives of the Plantation Mistresses of the Old South

Early morning dew on sweeping plantations. Big white mansions at the end of a long drive flanked by rows of trees thick with Spanish moss. Elegant women in hoop skirts and stately gentlemen with tailcoats and mustaches. These are the images that come to mind whenever the Old South is mentioned. Over one hundred and fifty years after the end of the Civil War, Americans are still fascinated with the legend of antebellum Southern society, in particularly with the plantation mistress and Southern belles. The popular film version of Margaret Mitchell’s book published in 1938 entitled *Gone with the Wind*, with its iconic plantation Tara and the infamous character of Scarlett O’Hara, was instrumental in perpetuating the fascination as well as the myths of the Old South. The modern cultural stereotype of carefree, wealthy women who lived on grand plantations and sipped lemonade while sitting on wrap-around porches barely scratches the surface of the lives these women led. In reality, plantation mistresses led complex and hidden lives, confined by the mentalities and the laws of the Southern society in which they lived.

The romanticized image of privileged antebellum women comes in large part from the brief period in their lives when they came out into society as “belles.” Catherine Clinton asserts that, “These few years between puberty and marriage were the closest that most women ever came to freedom” (63). Their time as belles was a very exciting time for the daughters of the southern planter class. Between their middle to late teenage years, the girls stopped wearing the clothes and hairstyles of their younger years and switched to dressing like adult women, with corsets, hoops skirts, long, full dresses and elegant hairstyles. They went to numerous parties in the hopes of finding a suitable man to marry. This choice of a husband was extremely important not only to the belles, but also to her wealthy plantation family in terms of upholding the family’s wealth and reputation as Southern aristocrats. For this reason, parents allowed their daughters to travel to wealthy cities such as Charleston and Richmond where the wealthiest and best suitors were likely to be (Edwards 20). Although the anxiety of finding a good husband must have always been present in the minds of the Southern belles, these years were carefree and fun compared to the hard and stressful lives that awaited them after marriage. “Plantation women often longed to recapture the flair of that too-brief time” (Clinton 62). That flair in a sense persists today, as the image of their few years as Southern belles far over shadows the less romantic reality of the vast majority of their years as mature matrons.

The face Southern plantation women put on for society and the life they led behind the scenes often contradicted each other. In accordance with the tradition of Southern hospitality, it was the duty of a planter’s wife to entertain guests, serving mint julep and lemonade on the veranda in her fine gown and being “...warm, gentle, and refined in her manner” (Clinton 16). But this image of a carefree, easy life that these women portrayed to their guests was a false one- in reality, plantation mistresses often spent their days hard at work. In Catherine Clinton’s *The Plantation Mistress*, she tells the story of a visitor who was staying at the home of an antebellum southern planter for an extended period of time. One day while strolling the grounds of the plantation alone, he came across the planter’s wife hard at work, “…considerably disarrayed; hoop removed from her skirt, she was bent over a salting barrel, up to her elbows in brine” (Clinton 16). Instead of greeting her as he should have, he decided to pass right by her without acknowledgement so as to not make her feel awkward. In doing so, he essentially paid her the same amount of attention he would have paid a slave (Clinton 16).

This story is merely one example of the psychological complexity the Southern myths surrounding plantation women’s lives created. The truth of the matter is that plantation mistresses had a multitude of responsibilities, many of which were not fun, carefree, or easy. It was the primary duty of the planter’s wives to bear him children and be a good mother to these children. The theory of “republican motherhood” was popular during the early 1800s (Clinton 7). Southern women were raising future politicians and instilling in them the correct American and Christian values. In addition to all the responsibilities associated with being a good wife and mother, plantation mistresses were essentially in charge of the entire domestic labor force for the southern household (Clinton 7). While the slaves worked in the cotton fields, the planter’s wife oversaw the production, purchase, and distribution of food for both the planter’s house and all the slaves on the plantation. She also managed the smokehouse, the garden, and dairies on the plantation as well as the budget and all the internal financial matters of the household. The plantation mistress sewed clothes and blankets for the slaves in addition to sewing them for her own family members. She also wove the cloth for the clothes and blankets and spent hours making soap and candles. The plantation mistress had the responsibility of caring for the slaves when they fell ill. The planter’s wife had a staff of house slaves to help her with all her responsibilities, but she was still in charge of ensuring each task was done satisfactorily. “The plantation mistress regularly inspected all activities that she did not herself supervise or perform” (Clinton 26). When their husbands went away on business or even during the Civil War when they left to fight for the Confederacy, they left their wives in charge of the plantations, which added even more responsibilities to the long laundry lists of these women’s daily lives. With all of these responsibilities of managing the entire domestic operation of a household and plantation, it is not surprising that the diary entries of many of these women were often filled with complaints about stress. While not a slave herself, the plantation mistress was essentially a slave to her domestic duties.

A Southern plantation woman spent the majority of her days at home on the plantation, and as such, family relationships played a pivotal role in her life. The women of a household were usually much more closely bonded than the men, and the plantation mistress looked to her female relatives for support and distraction from the drudgery of her daily responsibilities of managing the household. Female relatives not only provided company, but they were there in times of difficulty, helping with childbirths, illnesses, and deaths, and constantly offering each other support and advice (Edwards 26).

As divorces were extremely rare in antebellum society, plantation women used their family relationships to help them periodically escape when they were trapped in a bad marriage. In her book *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, Laura F. Edwards tells the story of plantation wife Marion Singleton, whose second marriage was an abusive one. Marion used to invite relatives to come stay at her home in order to moderate her husband’s abusive behavior and stayed with relatives when he was especially abusive. She also slept in her daughter’s room some nights knowing that her husband would likely not hit her if she was not alone. (Edwards 26).

Due to the fact that Southern women were so close to their families, the event of marriage was one that they approached with mixed feelings. On one hand, marriage was an exciting culmination of their period as belles, but on the other hand, it signaled the transition from one family to another. The Old South was a patriarchal society, meaning that when a woman married, she left behind her family and became a part of her husband’s family. Southern wives were obliged to follow their husbands, whether to the next plantation thirty miles away or far away to the Western frontier. For this reason, planter’s wives often discouraged their husbands from moving the family to a plantation far away from her family’s plantation. Women who moved with their husbands to a far away plantation in another state possibly never saw their family again and were consigned to communication with them solely through letter writing. Even when plantation mistresses lived close by to their parents, these women rarely left the plantation because they were tied down with so many domestic duties. Women were not permitted to travel away from the plantation unaccompanied due to the Southern men’s obsession with honor and the protection of women, and so their wives were more or less trapped on the plantation. “The dependence of a women on her family essentially lasted throughout a lifetime” (Clinton 38), and women went to great lengths to keep in touch with their family members. The sad reality of their situations was that plantation mistresses often secretly felt extremely lonely in their solitude and separation from their loved ones.

Besides living with the common emotion of loneliness, the other dominating emotion in the lives of plantation mistresses was that of fear. Slave rebellions were always a very real threat in the back of the planter class’ mind. When their husbands went away on business or to fight in the Civil War, women were left in charge of all their slaves, heightening their fear of a slave revolt without their husbands there. A plantation woman also lived with the fear of her husband’s temper of his inclination to infidelity with slave women (Stansell 4). There was the constant fear of failure to uphold her image as a hospitable Southern woman of grace and class. This fear coupled with loneliness and the stress of the logistics of managing her household and the plantation is a far cry from the image of the carefree Southern belle that history has erroneously passed down through the generations as the life led by the planter’s wives.

A plantation mistress’ fear of her husband’s infidelity to her was a one sadly based in truth. It is well known today that Thomas Jefferson had a long-term relationship and multiple children with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. Jefferson’s story is similar to that of many planters of the Old South. Since slaves were considered the property of their masters, many planters viewed slave women as objects which they could use as they pleased, and a slave woman did not have the option of refusing the sexual advances of her master. Plantation owners’ relations with slave women were sadly an accepted, albeit not advertised, part of Southern antebellum culture. “Planters went to considerable lengths to shield their white families from the scandal that public admission of their sexual union with slaves would cause; white men were expected, not to refrain from, but to conceal such affairs” (Clinton 211). This hushed up practice was the elephant in the room and put plantation mistresses in an awkward situation. Many times they worked right alongside the slave women their husbands were sleeping with, and fed and clothed the mulatto slave children that bore a striking resemblance to their husbands. Because obedience to her husband was her top priority, a plantation mistress was required to simply turn a blind eye to her husband’s adultery, although this situation must have undoubtedly put a strain on their own relationship. The image of the happy, well-to-do family with the stately plantation master and his gracious wife that the public eye saw when visiting a plantation sadly was not the case many times behind closed doors.

The cause of the planters’ infidelity was in part due to the mindset of the times. Catherine Clinton states, “White masters fell prey to the ambivalent myths they themselves had promoted about blacks: their sensuality, their bestial vitality, their promiscuous desire” (222). In his *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash wisely asserts, “…she [the slave woman] was natural and could give herself up to passion in a way impossible to wives inhibited by Puritanical training” (Cash 84). Completely contrary to the black slave women, white women were “…supposedly chaste, fragile, and above all asexual” (Clinton 229). Intimacy was a taboo topic of discussion in the Old South, and in keeping silent about issues she had with her husband’s infidelity or their sex life, a plantation mistress essentially rendered herself sexless. The stereotypical mindset was a vicious cycle – in keeping silent and living up to their stereotype as being asexual, plantation women’s husbands were in turn more inclined to look for sexual fulfillment with the supposedly “promiscuous” slave women instead of their own wives, which continued both the stereotypes of black and white women.

With the hardships Southern plantation women endured between loneliness, overabundant responsibilities, and many times the infidelity of their husbands, it is little wonder that women turned to the religion to find solace. In the early 1800s, during the times of the great religious revivals, women comprised the majority of the membership in these evangelical churches. “…although women were not allowed to preach, they could testify” (Weeks 1). Women’s newfound role in religion not only gave them comfort to endure the hardships of their lives, but also allowed them a small sense of authority and leadership. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, women were redirected away from church leadership and encouraged to practice their faith in the domestic realm. Edwards states that, “Faith did provide support and comfort for women as the trials of adulthood took their toll, but it also reinforced women’s subordination to the men of their class and their commitment to slavery” (Edwards 9). The religion of the antebellum Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians evolved to preaching the belief of predestination- that is, the belief that everything in life is determined by God. Preachers taught that white women’s spiritual mission was to be cheerfully obedient to the authority of white men (Edwards 9). Since God predestined everything, white male dominance in the Old South became not just a social order, but a divinely determined one as well. Southern plantation women naturally accepted their “divinely ordained” role because to fail to do so would mean risking eternal salvation.

One of the most famous traditions of the male-dominated Old South was the value of chivalry. Whether the families of the wealthy planter class could actually trace their lineage to old European aristocracy is highly improbable, but nevertheless, they put on the airs of bona fide aristocrats. The planters always endeavored to uphold the mannerisms of a gentleman, and likewise their wives did their best to uphold the mannerisms of a lady. As part of being chivalrous, Southern gentlemen were extremely concerned with protecting the pure and moral image of the women of the planter class. The value of a woman was based on her chaste reputation, and antebellum men went to great lengths to protect their innocent reputations. The protection of a Southern woman’s reputation was a matter of honor, and duels often resulted when one man questioned the honor of another man’s wife or sister.

From this culture of chivalry sprang up the practice of exalting Southern women of class, of putting them on a pedestal. Women were put on such a high pedestal that they were essential worshiped. “There was hardly a sermon that did not begin and end with tributes in her honor, hardly a brave speech that did not open and close with the clashing of shields and the flourishing of swords for her glory” (Cash 87). Much of this gyneolatry was a defense mechanism for guilty planters who had committed adultery with slave women and felt the need to justify their actions. Cash states that, “…the woman must be compensated, the revolting suspicion in the male that he might be slipping into bestiality got rid of, by glorifying her” (Cash 86). As the Civil War approached, Northerners condemned Southerners more and more for their immoral practice of slavery. By promoting the moral superiority of the women of the South over the North and even the rest of the entire world, antebellum Southerners defended their own honor and justified in their minds that they were not morally inferior to the free states of the North.

While this obsession with honor and a Southern woman’s purity and moral superiority was in a sense uplifting for these women, the reality was that more often than not it became simply one more way for Southern men to control the actions of their women. Fear that they would lose their reputable innocence caused men to keep women from traveling outside the realm of their plantation for the most part. On the rare occasion that they did leave the plantation, their husbands or brothers always accompanied them. No one is perfect, yet these women were viewed as the essence of moral perfection by their society. Having to live up to these unrealistic expectations must have put a great deal of pressure on the plantation mistresses to constantly embody the image society placed on them. A white woman from the planter class who fell from social grace by tarnishing her reputation was ostracized from society. “Women bore total sexual accountability; white men enjoyed total sexual control” (Clinton 204). No matter the circumstances, women were the ones who suffered the consequences of falling from the moral pedestal set up for them by white males.

With all the demands and oppressions put on Southern plantation women, it is difficult for the modern mindset not to wonder why these women accepted their roles in society without question. Although subordination to men meant they did not have “…the ability to manage property, slaves, their children, and even their own lives” (Edwards 30), plantation women did gain considerable power from their race and their class that no other women in Southern antebellum society had. Their positions in families of power and wealth gave them the opportunity to help the poor white in the South. “When elite women had contact with the poor, they played Lady Bountiful, affirming their own privileged place in the social structure and the recipients’ dependence on the goodwill of their social betters” (Edwards 28). In accordance with W.J. Cash’s theory that the elite planter class’ patronization of the poor whites kept the Southern status quo in place, a plantation mistress could use her position in society to patronize those socially below her. While she may have been restricted in many areas of her life, she was not at the bottom of the social food chain; rather, she was very near the top. Combine this fact with the knowledge that male dominance was thought to be part of the plan of religious salvation and it becomes more understandable why plantation women accepted their societal roles and both the burdens and privileges it brought them.

In conclusion, the lives of the antebellum plantation mistresses are much more complex than the modern myths perpetuated by popular cultural media such as *Gone with the Wind*.

“The legendary plantation Tara was not built of bricks and mortar. This mythic estate is a state of mind, a romanticized fixation of the American historical imagination” (Yardley paragraph 6). The key is that Tara and the characters that live there are myths. While most myths have some base in truth, the reality behind a myth is much more complex than the myth itself. There is much more to the Southern plantation mistresses than gracious manners and mint juleps. These women lived in society that was complex and often contradictory; much of their lives and their thoughts were hidden. By attempting to understand the culture and society in which they lived, it is possible to determine the fact and the fiction of the lives and the mindset of these iconic women. While Americans will perhaps always be fascinated by the romanticized image of Scarlett O’Hara and Tara, it is important that the less glamorous yet true lives of the plantation mistresses are not forgotten.

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