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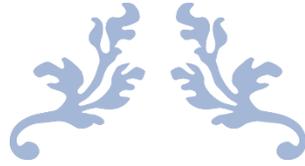
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MARY TODD LINCOLN: DUTY AND DEPRESSION

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First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln was perceived by Victorian America as materialistic and unbalanced. Behind the closed doors of the Executive Mansion, however, lie a grief-stricken mother struggling to manage an undiagnosed and untreated mental illness. Her fragile condition was exacerbated with each death of her beloved family. Yet, the First Lady played an integral role in the White House, acting as hostess, advisor to the President, and activist in her own right. She was not a passive bystander as her husband worked tirelessly to preserve the Union, but an active participant in the war effort. Following Abraham Lincoln's premature demise, Mary Lincoln's internal battle amplified tenfold. The devastated widow's mental well-being continued to rapidly decline until her death. Despite her handicap, Mary became the sole custodian of the Lincoln legacy and worked determinedly to honor his memory and wishes. After her time as First Lady came to an abrupt end, Mary continued to lobby for the lavish lifestyle she believed the wife of Lincoln deserved. She became an advocate of widow's rights, especially when it came to bereavement pensions.¹ While battling her inner demons, Mary Lincoln battled the Democrats, Confederates, Radical Republicans, American people, and her own family throughout her life. Despite her external traumas and internal turmoil, Mary Todd Lincoln was an active and trendsetting First Lady both during and after her tenure at the White House.

Born December 13, 1818 in Lexington, Kentucky, Mary Todd was the fourth of seven children in the wealthy, slave-holding Todd family.² When Mary was six years old, her mother

¹ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance: Mary Todd Lincoln and Her Husband's Memory," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 25, no.2 (2004): 39-42.

² On biographical details, see W.A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duquesne-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1354528>.

died after giving birth to a baby boy. Although Mary had already lost a younger brother, her mother's death was the first of many memorable and devastating deaths that would haunt her throughout her life. As a young child, Mary was noted to have infantile tendencies well after they should have disappeared, such as temper tantrums and hysteria. Although unconfirmed, these fits may have been early indicators of some sort of mental duress, most likely bipolar disorder. Another source of anxiety entered Mary's life when her father remarried in 1826 to a woman Mary Todd deemed to unfit to fill her mother's position. To add to the growing uneasiness, her stepmother and father began to have even more children, stretching the family's finances and adding to Mary's psychological burden.

A product of the societal movement to educate girls through formal schooling, Mary was taught to read and write at an early age and would go on to study at Ward's Academy. She then attended Madame Mentelle's French school for girls in her later adolescent years. Mary Todd was exposed to politics at an early age and was encouraged to become educated in the matter by her father. Since Lexington was the home of the renown Henry Clay, the Todd family was a presence in American politics. Mary's father, Robert, was an officeholder himself, as well as pseudo-advisor of Henry Clay's. This political socialization would prove to be imperative in the future Mrs. Lincoln's tenure as First Lady, as well as in her life afterwards.

Mary Todd became Mary Lincoln on November 4, 1842 after the couple had reunited following a previous broken engagement.³ Nevertheless, the new Mrs. Lincoln, standing at five

³ Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow, As Revealed by Her Own Letters*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press,) 2011, 12. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duquesne-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1354590>

foot two inches was deliriously happy to be seen at the side of six-foot four rising star, Abraham Lincoln. Mary and Abraham lived thriftily in the next decade, as Abe was a struggling politician. Throughout all his attempts, Mary was by his side, even though she found it hard to keep faith. Despite the constant ups and downs of Lincoln's political career, Mary Todd Lincoln was purportedly in good health from 1840-1847 other than a few headaches and some weight gain.⁴ After the births of their first two sons, Robert and Edward, Mary began to show signs of mental and physical anguish once again. She complained of feebleness and nursing sore mouth. She demonstrated periods of uncontrollable anger and had a chronic spending problem. Family members noted as early as 1848 that there was a marked change in Mary's demeanor. She had become unpredictable and prone to frequent frenzied outburst that left listeners scandalized.⁵ This sudden change coincided with her husband's rise to fame and success as a career politician. The more the Lincolns were thrust into the spotlight, the more Mary Lincoln seemed to be filled with anguish. These outbursts would be a foreshadowing of the extreme mental suffering that was to come.

Edward Baker Lincoln, the second son of Mary and Abraham, died in 1850 at the age of three. Following his death, Mary plunged into a deep and dark depression. She was heard screaming throughout the house, wailing in her closed bedroom all while refusing to take care of her other children, let alone herself.⁶ Mary's already fragile mental state was deteriorating

⁴ John G. Sotos, "'What an Affliction': Mary Todd Lincoln's Fatal Pernicious Anemia," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 58, no. 4 (2015): 421, <https://muse-jhu-edu.authenticate.library.duq.edu/article/622399/pdf>.

⁵ John G. Sotos, "'What an Affliction,'" 424.

⁶ Samuel P. Wheeler, "Solving a Lincoln Literary Mystery: 'Little Eddie,'" *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* vol. 33, no. 2, (Summer 2012): 34-46, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0033.205>.

by the second. Her grief consumed her, preventing her from doing a task as simple as feeding herself. Less than a week after Eddie's funeral, a poem entitled "Little Eddie" appeared in the *Illinois Daily Journal*. Although the author is simply labeled as "By Request", scholars believe that the Lincoln family may have penned this touching tribute themselves. However, some scholars, like Samuel P. Wheeler, rule out Mary's involvement in the poem's origin due to her strained mental state at the time of its publication.⁷ Lines such as, "Happier far is the angel child/ With the harp and the crown of gold,/ Who warbles now at the Saviour's [sic] feet/The glories to us untold" seem to have conveyed the antithesis of Mary's feelings.⁸ Her inability to care for herself or her other children indicates that Mary was not in a spiritual place when it came to her son's death. Mourning had been part of Mary's life since the death of her younger brother and mother in childhood. With Eddie's death, Mary was no longer a bereaved sister and daughter, but a bereaved mother. The weight of Edward's death bore down on Mary Todd day in and day out, intensifying her mental illness and making her job as wife and mother more difficult to manage.

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln became the first Republican president of the United States. Following Lincoln's election, South Carolina seceded from the Union, followed by ten other Southern states by March of 1861. Lincoln's entire presidency was engulfed with the issue of slavery and the preservation of the Union. As a result, Mary Todd Lincoln's tenure as First Lady of the United States from 1861 to 1865 was also consumed by the war effort. But Mary was

⁷ Samuel P. Wheeler, "'Little Eddie,'" 34-46.

⁸ "Little Eddie," *Illinois Daily Journal*, (Springfield, IL), February 7, 1850.

fighting a war of her own. She continued to be prone to spells of depression and suffered from manic-like episodes. Her shopping escapades plunged the family into debt and made Mrs. Lincoln a target of critics in the American media. However, her excessive spending may have been due not to vanity, but to reasons beyond her control. John G. Soto points to one particularly prodigal trip in January 1861 as an early sign that Mary Todd Lincoln was not mentally well.⁹

Besides her reckless behavior, Americans also disliked Mrs. Lincoln's unwomanly knowledge, interest, and participation in politics.¹⁰ As mentioned above, Mary had a well-rounded education that included learning of the inner workings of the government and politics. She was often an informal advisor to her husband, much to the chagrin of his cabinet members. Her education and political background helped her earn her place at her husband's side, helping to formulate a new role for as a First Lady who acts as a semi-policy advisor to the President.¹¹ To be sure, some of her predecessors had played active roles as First Lady, such as Abigail Adams or Sarah Polk. But Mary was uniquely prepared for her position during this time, meaning she was able to take the role of the First Lady in a direction that it had not been set towards previously.¹² In this way, Mary Lincoln served as an anomaly to her predecessors. Despite her crippling depression, she was an extremely visible part of the administration while also adhering to her womanly role. She set the stage for those who would follow in her

⁹ John G. Sotos, "What an Affliction," 424.

¹⁰ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 32.

¹¹ Mary Todd Lincoln to Abraham Lincoln, November 2, 1862, *Mary Todd Lincoln to Abraham Lincoln advising her husband to remove the hesitant Gen. George B. McClellan from command, 2 November*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mcc.032/>.

¹² W.A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln*, 192.

footsteps, such as “Lemonade Lucy” Hayes, who would take an active policy stance and push for its adoption. But Mary kept most of her political opinions private, as it would have only tarnished her reputation more to be outspoken about them. Regardless, President Lincoln relied heavily on Mary’s input and listening ear as he made some of the most difficult choices any president has had to make.

Sadly, tragedy would soon befall the Lincolns yet again. The two youngest boys, William (Willie) and Thomas (Tad) became gravely ill with typhoid fever of February 1862. Although Tad recovered, Willie died on February 20 at the age of eleven. Mary had now outlived two of her precious boys. Her grief was immeasurable. Already prone to fits and depression, Mary was plunged into her worst bout of mental illness yet. She was reported to be isolating herself in the White House and neglecting her hostess position, as well as her motherly duties. She seldom spoke to anyone except for her husband.¹³ Newspapers reported that both Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln were, “sorely affected in mind and body” and, as such, “ it is highly probable that no receptions will be held during the present session of Congress - certainly not for many months to come.”¹⁴ A devastated Abe Lincoln threatened to send an inconsolable Mary to the asylum visible from the White House unless she pulled herself together and continued on with her duty to the Union and to him.¹⁵ Mary posed for a series of mourning photos which were coming into

¹³ Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow*, 40.

¹⁴ Cor. Phil. Inq., “Sickness at the Write House,” *Cleveland Daily Herald*, March 24, 1862, https://go-gale-com.authenticate.library.dug.edu/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Newspapers&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&hitCount=103&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=11&docId=GALE%7CGT3005138910&docType=Article&sort=Pub+Date+Forward+Chron&contentSegment=ZCEN-MOD1&prodId=NCNP&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CGT3005138910&searchId=R2&userGroupName=pl3834&inPS=true

¹⁵ Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow*, 41.

fashion during this era of death and war. She was dressed from head to toe in black and wore a face of devastation and loss. Yet, beneath her sadness, Mary wore a look of determination and elegance.¹⁶ She may have been in mourning, but so was the nation. It was her duty as First Lady to try to console the nation, despite her inability to console herself.

Following Willie's death, Mary Todd was never the same. Nevertheless, she continued to soldier on. She wrote many letters to friends and family discussing the war effort, the hard decisions her husband was facing, and her own grief and struggles with illness. A common practice for the time, Mary wrote almost all of her letters on Willie's mourning stationary. Such stationary is used even when Mary is writing to a friend regarding a cabinet position.¹⁷ As her tenure as First Lady continued, Mary took a more active role in the policy decisions of the administration. She often lobbied for her champions to fill certain offices and took a vested interest in Lincoln's appointments.¹⁸ No longer a sounding board, Mary wrote to her husband regarding the leadership of the Union Army. In early November of 1862, a mere nine months after losing Willie, Mary wrote to Abraham, urging him to replace the unpopular General McClellan as the head of the Union army. An indignant Mary wrote, "My dear husband, I have been waiting in vain to hear from you, yet as you are not given to letter writing, will be charitable enough to [?] your silence, to the right cause."¹⁹ From the very beginning of the

¹⁶ *Mrs. Lincoln in mourning after Willie's death*. February 1862. The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York, Adam Matthew, Marlborough, American History, 1493-1945.

<http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/authenticate.library.duq.edu/Documents/Details/GLC05111.02.0060>.

¹⁷ Gilder Lehrman Collection, Unassociated Civil War Documents 1864, Mary Todd Lincoln to Mrs. Judge White, 24 November 1864.

<http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/authenticate.library.duq.edu/Documents/Details/GLC06681>.

¹⁸ W.A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln*, 198.

¹⁹ Mary Todd Lincoln, November 2, 1862.

letter, Mary asserted her dominance over the most powerful man in the world. She indicated that she will be heard, and she will not be ignored by her husband.

Yet, in this same letter, Mary exposes her internal turmoil. She writes that it has been, “A day or two since I had my severe attacks”.²⁰ Although Mary does not elaborate on what these attacks entail, she does say, “some of these periods will launch me away”.²¹ It appears that whatever the attacks involve, its effects are debilitating. She apparently was not in her right mind when these attacks would hit. Despite this, she seemed to be keeping up with her duties. Again, in that same letter that discusses her mental illness and her policy towards McClellan, Mary kept her husband up to date with her First Lady duties. She writes that, “Gen. + Mrs. Anderson + [herself] called on yesterday to see Gen. Leott”.²² It seems that even though Mary was having one of her attacks, she still executed her social obligations. Now, whether this was merely a social call or perhaps one of political consequence is unclear based on this letter alone. However, the fact that Mary was making this house call with another general and his wife while her husband was away may indicate that she was representing the president during this visit. Even during some of her hardest times, Mary was out and about, representing the Lincoln name and rubbing elbows with Union military officials.

Nearly two years later, Mary Todd was still working hard to do her part for the war effort and keep her mental duress under control. She continued to write on Willie’s mourning stationary. Normally, a mourning widow or mother of this time would dress in mourning garb

²⁰ Mary Todd Lincoln November 2, 1862.

²¹ Mary Todd Lincoln November 2, 1862.

²² Mary Todd Lincoln November 2, 1862.

for a time period of two to two and a half years following their loved one's departure.²³ Drew Gilpin Faust notes that this mourning dress was an important ritual during this time of prolific death. The practice of other ceremonial customs, such as the use of mourning stationary, were also integral to finding some sense of comfort and closure after the loss of a loved one.²⁴ By writing on the mourning stationary, women felt that they were still close to their loved ones who had perished. Given this analysis, then, it is not surprising that Mary Todd Lincoln subscribed to the mourning culture of the time and continued writing on Willie's stationary.

Sometime in 1864, towards the end of the war, Mary writes to a Colonel Thomas W. Sweeny about her duties as First Lady. Like most of her letters, this too is inscribed on mourning stationary. She shares that, "Taddie + [herself] are going in the carriage about a mile + half out to carry some flowers to the sick soldiers" and asks that Sweeny join the pair.²⁵ The heading of the letter clearly states, "Executive Mansion", meaning Mary and Tad were staying at the White House when this letter was composed. Clearly, Mrs. Lincoln and her son were going to visit a Union hospital near Washington to try to boost morale. This could also have been seen as a womanly, motherly role that the First Lady was expected to perform. However, Mary never publicized these visits, opting instead to go about her maternal duty quietly.²⁶

²³ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 26

²⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 149.

²⁵ Mary Todd Lincoln to Thomas W. Sweeny, 1864, *Mary Todd Lincoln to Thomas W. Sweeny regarding carrying flowers to sick soldiers*,

<http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/authenticate.library.duq.edu/Documents/Details/GLC01056>

²⁶ Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow*, 19.

Even though Mrs. Lincoln was struggling to take care of her own children due to her illnesses, she was expected to care for other people's wounded children who had fought for her husband. By taking flowers to the hospital, Mary was acting as a uniting, national figure for the war effort. She was meant to be seen as caring, motherly, and patriotic. On these visits, she would help the wounded write letters to their own mothers and give them gifts from the Executive Mansion.²⁷ Perhaps caring for the sick reminded her of her lost sons. She felt that she must care for someone else's boy since she could no longer care for her own.

Mary signed off her letter to the Colonel with "Your Friend, Mrs. Lincoln".²⁸ This seems to indicate that Mrs. Lincoln and the Colonel were familiar with one another, meaning that Mary may have had the ear of Union military officials at all levels. As the letter alludes to, Colonel Sweeny would take the Lincoln's son out horseback riding. This familiarity with military officers for a woman of this time is unusual, even for the President's wife. The First Lady would most likely have hosted these men in the White House; but Mary's letters to generals and colonels suggest that this First Lady was more familiar with them than just their hostess. She most likely talked policy with these men, as well as urged them to join her in her First Lady duties, as she did with Sweeny. Based on her own letters, it appears that Mary Lincoln was a well-connected and knowledgeable debutante.

Despite all she did for the war effort while First Lady, Mary Todd Lincoln was often the subject of harsh critiques by Victorian America. For starters, several members of Mrs. Lincoln's

²⁷ Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow*, 19.

²⁸ Mary Todd Lincoln, 1864.

immediate family were fighting for the Confederacy. Although she did have cousins fighting for the North, the media of the time choose to focus on the former revelation. Mary was painted to be a Southern sympathizer and harshly reproached for the unfounded accusation. In addition to being labeled a traitor, Mary was hated for her spending habits. Victorian society celebrated the virtues of moderation, chastity, and charity. That fact that Mary owed around twenty-seven thousand dollars by the end of 1863 did not mesh well with this societal view of a model woman.²⁹ She was perceived to be snobbish and lavish to a fault. Spending so elaborately, however, may have been out of Mary's control. There has been some speculation that these bizarre spending sessions are indicative of a manic episode as opposed to a conceited woman's desires.³⁰

This postulation is further backed up by the previously discussed letter Mary wrote to her husband in 1862. After chastising him for not responding sooner, urging the president to fire McClellan, and talking about her attacks, Mary feels that she, "[has] to ask for a check of \$100" which, "will soon be made use of".³¹ In a time where women were allowed to own very few holdings and were not allowed to have control over finances, it would not be uncommon for a wife to write to her travelling husband for some funds. Yet, Mary's choice to include this abrupt plea for money in a letter of this magnitude shows that her spending was just as important as her policy towards McClellan. She wanted more money for clothing and trappings for the carriages; these certainly would have seemed like superfluous purchases for a wartime

²⁹ W.A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln*, 196.

³⁰ John G. Sotos, "What an Affliction," 424.

³¹ Mary Todd Lincoln November 2, 1862.

First Lady in Victorian America. Her spending coupled with her Southern background and well-known outbursts and fits did not endear Mrs. Lincoln in the hearts of Americans. Instead, she was loathed, despite her inability to control the very things she was hated for.

On April 14, 1865 while Mrs. Lincoln and the President were attending the theatre, John Wilkes Booth entered the president's box and opened fire. A single shot found its way into the back of Mr. Lincoln's head, causing the president to fall backwards out of his chair next to his wife. Booth proceeded to stab a Mr. Rathbone, who was also in the box, before jumping onto the stage to deliver his now infamous line, "Sic semper tyrannis!". After the president was carried across the street into a private citizen's home, his wounds were pronounced fatal. An irate Secretary Stanton, playing some sort of perverted power politics, ousted Mary from the room where her husband lay dying, annoyed by her sobbing. Stanton would then proceed to direct the manhunt for Booth, taking on the role of commander in chief while Lincoln hovered between life and death. The casting out of Mary Lincoln from Lincoln's deathbed foreshadowed the attitude of the American public after 1865. Stanton's removal of Mary indicated that she was no longer to be treated as a revered First Lady, but as a nuisance that ought to be kept at arm's length.

Abraham Lincoln's untimely demise began Mary's downward spiral which would leave her as nothing more than a shadow of her former self. Witnessing the murder of her beloved husband deeply unhinged her in an irrevocable way. Many, including her son Robert, would maintain that she became clinically insane due to the trauma of watching her husband be murdered in cold blood.³² She donned her mourning garb once again and never dressed in

³² Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow*, 103.

anything else for the rest of her life, far exceeding the customary two-year mourning period.³³ Too overwhelmed by her grief and mental anguish, she refused to attend her fallen husband's funeral, opting instead to write letter after letter expressing her wish to simply die.³⁴ She became obsessed with reading biographies of and tributes to her late husband, combing through them for the slightest imperfection.³⁵ Mrs. Lincoln was no longer First Lady, yet she clung to her former station. She refused to leave the White House for another six weeks following the assassination.³⁶ Mary utterly despised the new President Johnson and saw him as a usurper of her husband's legacy. She saw him as the antithesis of everything Lincoln had stood for, going as far as to brand Johnson a detestable racist.³⁷ Even under extreme emotional duress, Mary made it her goal to play politics. Whether she held on to the White House because she was physically unable to move on or to make a political statement is unclear. Perhaps these ideas are not mutually exclusive. Mrs. Lincoln could not accept someone as abhorrent as Andrew Johnson taking over her husband's title. So, she shut down entirely, confining herself to her bedchambers for weeks and suffering from violent emotional outbursts that prevented the new president from taking up residency in her husband's home.³⁸

After Johnson had given Mary what he considered an extensive amount of time to mourn, the former First Lady and her sons returned home to Illinois and the new president took up residence in the Executive Mansion. No longer First Lady, Mary devoted her time to two

³³ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 26.

³⁴ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 26.

³⁵ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 32.

³⁶ Jason Emerson, *The Madness of Mary Lincoln*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), 20, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duquesne-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1354611>.

³⁷ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 34.

³⁸ W.A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln*, 212.

major undertakings: protecting her son, Tad, and preserving the Lincoln legacy. Her mental struggles and personal trauma exacerbated her paranoia. Although not entirely incorrect, Mary was convinced that the American media was looking to undermine her and her husband's legacy. She believed that Republican politicians owed their success to Lincoln and theorized that their failure to care for her after his death was their way of antagonizing her.³⁹ No longer able to rely on her husband's salary, Mary was quickly drowning in her ever-increasing debt. She, in a somewhat delusional mindset, believed that it was the government's responsibility to care for her, materially and financially, as the widow of the greatest president of the United States. As producer of the great Abraham Lincoln's sons and gatekeeper of his legacy, she saw it fit to claim that she was an extension of her late husband.⁴⁰ He had been honored both in his life and his death, so Mary deserved the same treatment. Despite suffering so greatly that it was often debilitating, Mary did everything in her power to make sure she was not cast aside by the ungrateful Washington bureaucrats.

Mary's spending problem was only worsened by President Lincoln's death, turning into, what scholar Jason Emerson has called, "money mania".⁴¹ Shopping provided a sense of solace. The immoderate extent of it, however, is believed to have been out of Mary's control; it was a manifestation of the abundance of her suffering. Following her husband's death, she owed anywhere from ten to seventy thousand dollars.⁴² Again, believing she was owed a debt that could never be repaid by the country, Mary began to lobby Congress for a financial bailout. She

³⁹ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 29.

⁴⁰ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 29.

⁴¹ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 23.

⁴² Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 26.

felt that she was entitled to President Lincoln's salary that he would have collected for another four years had he not been assassinated; this would have amounted to roughly one-hundred thousand dollars total.⁴³ However, biased by the public's negative perception of Mrs. Lincoln, Congress refused to give her what she felt was rightfully hers as The Great Emancipator's widow. To be sure, Congress did not totally ignore her demands. They decided to follow the precedent that had been set when William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor died in office: the widow would receive the remainder of that year's salary.⁴⁴ For Mary, this was not even a quarter of the payout she had expected. This slap in the face by the very men whom her husband had elevated to power galvanized Mary Todd. She made it her mission to lobby Congress on behalf of widows' pensions and take what should have been hers as the caretaker of her husband's legacy.

Yet, as she became more resolved in her mission, her mental wellbeing decreased rapidly. Seeing that dealing with Congress would be a long and arduous process, Mary decided to take matters into her own hands. She, somewhat manically, began to attempt to sell her clothing and other personal effects under a pseudonym.⁴⁵ The media soon discovered her ruse and persecuted her relentlessly for it, dubbing the escapade the, "Old Clothes Scandal."⁴⁶ Even Mary's son, Robert, began to worry about the soundness of his mother's mental state. Her outbursts continued and the public's perception of the former First Lady deteriorated even

⁴³ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 30.

⁴⁴ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 30.

⁴⁵ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 39.

⁴⁶ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 29.

further. This public malevolence coupled with her fruitless efforts to maintain her status as protector of the Lincoln legacy intensified Mary's already palpable anguish.

Mary desperately clung to her youngest child, Tad, in the post assassination years. Her oldest son, Robert, took up the mantle from his father as head of the family. He staunchly subscribed to the Victorian notions of gentlemanly duty and mastership.⁴⁷ However, he did allow his mother and younger brother go off to Europe in 1868 in order to get away from the cacophony of media attacks and reminders of Lincoln's murder. Mary enrolled Tad in school over in Germany while she tramped through the continent looking for treatments for her ailments.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, she continued her crusade to pass a proper widow's pension bill through Congress.⁴⁹ The former First Lady utilized her impressive political skills, calling on old acquaintances in Washington and pushing them to adopt her agenda. Notably, Mary organized a writing campaign in the United States, all the way from Europe, in order to secure a more generous stipend from Congress.⁵⁰ She relentlessly wrote letter after letter in an effort to enlist as many as possible to lobby on her behalf. She was even able to persuade a Boston spiritualist to write a twenty-nine paged petition on her behalf to Senator Sumner in which he cited her contributions to preserving the Union as reason enough to increase the stipend.⁵¹ Even an ocean away, Mary Todd was making herself heard.

In one particular letter written in 1870, Mary laments to Mr. James Orne about the direness of her situation. She writes that, "the loved wife, of the man, who died in his country's

⁴⁷ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 21.

⁴⁸ Myra Helmer Pritchard, *The Dark Days of Abraham Lincoln's Widow*, 47,99.

⁴⁹ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 41.

⁵⁰ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 42.

⁵¹ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 42.

service has been left to shed the tears of bitterness & live in poverty – broken hearted”.⁵² This pitiful assessment comes after Mary complains of, “inflammation of the spine”, being, “unable to move only from chair to chair”, and, “having been prostrated by quite severe illness”.⁵³ Whether these are legitimate claims or the musings of a hypochondriac, Mary Todd Lincoln was clearly struggling. This laundry list of ailments, combined with her distraught analysis of the Lincoln legacy, indicate that Mary had fallen down the deep hole that is depression. She begs Orne to help her, writing, “Through your great influence cannot you have me by the 1st of March means to have my affairs here settled and means given me even if a few thousand to go home”.⁵⁴ Since Congress has neglected her, she must now turn to friends and acquaintances to financially support her, yet another sign of some sort of mental illness. Mary has descended into a state of poverty and agony where she, “live[d] in a room without a carpet, where in former years, [she] would not have placed a servant”.⁵⁵

In July of 1870, Congress finally awarded Mary Todd a stipend of three thousand dollars a year; this was significantly less than her original number of five thousand, yet still a major victory for widow’s rights.⁵⁶ Yet, on the heels of this victory was another great tragedy. Tad fell ill with typhoid in the middle of 1871, passing away at the age of seventeen. Mary had now outlived her husband and three sons. This great final tragedy served as a penultimate indicator of Mary’s demise. Still wearing mourning garb for her husband, Mary now wore black for her

⁵² Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne, February 4, 1870, *Mary Todd Lincoln to James Orne requesting assistance for her health*,

<http://www.americanhistory.amdigital.co.uk/authenticate.library.duq.edu/Documents/Details/GLC03651>.

⁵³ Mary Todd Lincoln, February 4, 1870.

⁵⁴ Mary Todd Lincoln, February 4, 1870.

⁵⁵ Mary Todd Lincoln, February 4, 1870.

⁵⁶ Jennifer L. Bach, “Acts of Remembrance,” 43.

son as well. Following Tad's death, she claimed to have visions of Willie and Tad as spirits that haunted her.⁵⁷ These visions, Bach suggests, may have been indicative of a progression of bipolar disorder.⁵⁸ Mary, feeling plagued by her own delusions, turned to spiritualism and séances for some kind of comfort.⁵⁹ Finding none, her depression and outbursts soon became too much for her family, especially Robert, to handle.

As her last remaining child, Mary clung to Robert and sought his comfort and protection from the spirits that plagued her. However, Robert could not handle his own grief, let alone his mother's. Having no place of her own, Mary lived with Robert and his young family. However, her manic episodes and wailing misery proved unpleasant to deal with and unbearable to live with. At this point, Robert Lincoln moved to press charges for a sanity trial against his mother in 1875. He alleged that her erratic behavior was no longer just eccentric, but harmful and worrisome. Numerous witnesses, including Robert Lincoln himself, testified that Mary was deranged, paranoid, delusional, and, most importantly, insane.⁶⁰ The jury returned a verdict of insane and sentenced Mary Todd to an asylum until such time that she proved sound of mind.

Hurt by her only son's treachery and still battling her own trauma and mental illness, the former First Lady felt that she had hit rock bottom. Following her sentencing, Mary attempted to commit suicide by overdosing on an opiate.⁶¹ This suicide attempt, again scholars posit, points to a diagnosis of bipolar disorder in Mrs. Lincoln. With Robert's betrayal, she had now lost every member of her family. She felt that she had little to go on for. The next morning,

⁵⁷ John G. Sotos, "What an Affliction," 424.

⁵⁸ Jennifer L. Bach, "Acts of Remembrance," 46.

⁵⁹ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 33

⁶⁰ W.A. Evans, *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln*, 242.

⁶¹ John G. Sotos, "What an Affliction," 426.

Mary, riding in the presidential car, was taken by train to the Bellevue Place sanatorium. The Bradwells, Mary's closest friends, tirelessly lobbied for her release. Myra Bradwell and her husband, James, wrote to Mary's other relatives and friends claiming that Mary was perfectly fine and being held against her will. The Bradwells arranged for a series of interviews to take place so Mary could plead her case to the media.⁶² However, Robert Lincoln became annoyed by their meddling and had the sanatorium invoke strict limitations on visitation for Mary Todd.⁶³ So, the Bradwells decided to go public with Mary's case, making sure that it was the subject of every media story in August of 1875.⁶⁴ Finally, after having been committed since May, Mrs. Lincoln was declared sane and mentally competent in September of 1875. However, she and Robert would continue to have a somewhat estranged relationship for the rest of her life.

Following her release from Bellevue, Mary took up her crusade for widows' pensions once again. Her "money mania" persisted as she continued to spend lavishly while begging Congress for more funding. She returned to Europe once again, hoping to escape the scrutiny of the press and Robert Lincoln. Although her time in Europe was ultimately a quiet experience, Mary continued to suffer ailment after ailment. To keep her health under control, Mrs. Lincoln took up to five different medications, including inorganic mercury and laudanum, a type of opiate.⁶⁵ The seven years between her confinement and her death were marked with a continued decline in mental health and physical well-being. However, Mary's commitment to her duty to protect the Lincoln legacy and to finally receive a proper stipend from Congress

⁶² Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 94.

⁶³ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 91.

⁶⁴ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 94.

⁶⁵ John G. Sotos, "What an Affliction," 425.

remained resolute. Despite her estrangement from Robert, she still was paranoid that he would meet the same gruesome end as his father. These fears were only exacerbated when President James Garfield appointed Robert Secretary of War in 1881.⁶⁶ Following President Garfield's assassination, Congress decided to revisit the issue of widow's pensions. Although blind and paralyzed at this point, Mary Lincoln continued to organize a rigorous lobbying effort in order to persuade Congress. In the end, they finally acquiesced to Mary Todd's demands, awarding both Mary and the newly widowed Julia Garfield each a five-thousand-dollar stipend in 1882.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Mary would never see that money. After a chaotic and tragedy-ridden life, Mary passed away, most likely from a stroke, on July 16, 1882.

Although often discounted by historians, Mary Todd Lincoln was an extremely powerful and influential woman for her time. She represents a sort of taboo woman that Victorian era America tried to hide away; her mental duress and possible bipolar disorder made her into a villain in the American public's eyes. Yet, she is the perfect example of how a woman of determination and grit can persevere through the greatest tragedies and hardships in order to perform her duty. Mary certainly was passionate about her work and the politics behind it. Though she suffered greatly throughout her life, she never gave up. She defined a new era of womanhood and a new role for the First Lady of the United States of America.

⁶⁶ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 131.

⁶⁷ Jason Emerson, *The Madness*, 131.

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