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“Madam” Elizabeth:

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley’s Sisyphean Attempt to Join the “Cult of True Womanhood”

Bella Biancone

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May 15, 2022

Nineteenth century notions of femininity and etiquette were governed by strict societal standards. “True Womanhood” was defined by four fundamental virtues— piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.ⁱ Any female who failed to observe these values was not considered a respectable lady. However, there was another pre-requisite for joining this revered cult: whiteness. No matter how pious or domestic a woman of color was, she could never hope to be considered a proper lady by Victorian standards. In discerning what it meant to be a member of that “cult of True Womanhood,” Black women were used to determine the boundaries of white womanhood; a “True Woman” was to be the antithesis of the stereotypical sexual and dominant Black woman.ⁱⁱ That understanding, however, would be challenged by a Black woman, Elizabeth Keckley. Keckley, a Black woman, a former enslaved woman, and a modiste to the Washington elite, published her autobiography *Behind the Scenes, or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four in the White House* in 1868, detailing her emancipation and her time working for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Its publication received widespread attention, leaving most appalled with her candor about the First Family. Keckley’s memoirs were less so a reflection of her life and more so a commentary on the life of Mary Lincoln.ⁱⁱⁱ In choosing to present her life as such, Keckley pierced the tranquil sphere of the domestic realm, bringing it into the public forum. With everything to lose as a Black woman in the postbellum period, one must ask the question: why would Keckley write the work in the first place? Though it may seem complicated at first glance, the answer is rather simple: respectability. Although Black women were often used to define “True Womanhood” for white women, Elizabeth Keckley’s prose uses a white woman, Mary Todd Lincoln, to show how a Black woman like herself much better represents “True Womanhood.” Yet, the manner in which she does so appears to oppose the very virtues she purports to represent.

Elizabeth Hobbs was born in Dinwiddie, Virginia around 1818 to enslaved parents. Although in her own autobiography Keckley reports that her father was taken west and never seen again, she would later come to find out her biological father was, in fact, her master, Armistead Burwell.^{iv} Elizabeth married James Keckley, an enslaved man who pretended to be a freedman, something Elizabeth would not find out until after the wedding.^v During the course of her enslavement, Keckley was beaten, harassed, assaulted, and raped. Yet she chose include very little about her trauma in her autobiography, opting instead to write: “Notwithstanding all the wrongs that slavery heaped upon me, I can bless it for one thing—youth’s important lesson of self-reliance.”^{vi}

It was that self-reliance that enabled Elizabeth to earn enough money from her seamstress work to purchase freedom for her son and herself.^{vii} She left her troublesome husband behind and moved herself and her son the Washington D.C. in the hopes of a new start. She soon gained notability for her impeccable dressmaking skills. She introduced herself to Mrs. Jefferson Davis with the hopes of becoming a modiste to the ladies of Washington.^{viii} After turning down an offer to go South with the Davis’ in 1860, Keckley became First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln’s dressmaker, confidante, and, according to the latter, best friend.^{ix} Elizabeth spent four years in the Lincoln White House, sewing dress after dress for Mrs. Lincoln, caring for her sons, and comforting her in the wake of each of her family member’s deaths. After the President’s assassination, Mary demanded that “Lizabeth” accompany her back West.^x After assisting the unbalanced widow for some time, Keckley returned to her business in Washington. Years of her life were consumed with the demands and tantrums of Mary Todd Lincoln. In a decision to pen her own life’s story, Elizabeth Keckley used the book as a way to covertly “go public with her anger” and assert herself as a proper woman.^{xi}

Under the guise of writing with the intent to “place Mrs. Lincoln in a better light before the world,” Keckley spends the next one hundred and fifty pages backhandedly disparaging the woman.^{xiii} Of course, it would not be ladylike of her to do so outright. As a result, Keckley carefully couches her disdain for Mary Todd in a tone of concern and care, the proper attribute of a “True Woman.” In chapter five, entitled “My Introduction to Mrs. Lincoln,” Keckley describes Mary as a “confident and self-possessed” woman.^{xiii} Although she earlier she says that Mary gave off a dignified aura of calm, this description of “confident and self-possessed” is a loaded one. Women of this period were expected to be submissive in all aspects of their lives. This often meant abnegating one’s needs, vanity, and desires in the interest of working for one’s husband and children.^{xiv} Despite claiming so, calling Mary Todd Lincoln “confident and self-possessed” was far from complimentary. In contrast, Keckley goes to great lengths to show how she consistently gave to others, whether that be her son, Mary Lincoln, Willie and Tad Lincoln, or the newly freedmen in Washington D.C. She deliberately picks episodes to include that cast herself in her the role of the proper lady and Mary Todd in one of childlike insolence and disregard. In placing Keckley’s work next to Barbara Welter’s “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” it seems as if Keckley wrote this biography in an effort to prove that she embodied the core principles of being a “True Woman” and that Mary Todd Lincoln did not. This was not an outrageous claim, especially since the press loathed Mary and her unwomanly extravagance.^{xv} However, for a Black woman to make this claim against her former white employer, although subtly doing so, was scandalous.

Of the four virtues mentioned in the opening of this work, Welter argues that piety was “the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength.”^{xvi} Women were to be spiritual leaders in their families, showcasing God’s teachings even in every stitch they sewed. Keckley opens her

book acknowledging the greatness of God: “God rules the Universe. I was a feeble instrument in His hands.”^{xvii} She makes several remarks throughout the book that show her to be a pious woman. She asks God to bless her clients and paints Him as a kind and loving entity.^{xviii} In contrast, she reports that “God, no!”, a rather crass remark that offends the Second Commandment, was a favorite expression of Mrs. Lincoln.^{xix} Contrary to the prevailing Victorian norm, it was Abraham Lincoln, not his wife, who was the spiritual leader of the family.^{xx} Mary would complain that she felt as if God and her fellow man had forsaken her, something that any “True Woman” would be embarrassed to even think about.^{xxi} Given this comparison, it is clear which of the two women was more pious, at least, according to Keckley.

The two women’s different treatments of death are perhaps the most telling demonstrations of their piety, or lack thereof it. In a time where death, especially of young children, was so prevalent, “a virtuous woman was expected to understand death in a spiritual context.”^{xxii} Elizabeth lost her son, George, in Missouri where he was fighting on behalf of the Union Army. Throughout the text, Elizabeth only mentions her son in passing, opting instead to focus on the deaths of the Lincoln family. Her grief is contained, as she presents herself as a respectful, private mourner who possesses “emotional self-restraint.”^{xxiii} Upon the death of Willie Lincoln, Elizabeth writes that “God called the beautiful spirit home.”^{xxiv} This is clearly contrasted against Mary Todd Lincoln and her infamous obsessive mourning.

With the passing of her son, Keckley reports that Mrs. Lincoln was “inconsolable. The pale face of her dead boy threw her into convulsions.”^{xxv} Rather than help lay her son to rest, Mary refuses to go to Willie’s funeral, leaving Elizabeth to prepare Willie’s body. Keckley gives an account of a conversation between the President and the First Lady where he took Mary to the look at the asylum visible from the window. He asked his wife, “Mother, do you see that large

white building on the hill yonder? Try and control your grief, or it will drive you mad, and we may have to send you there.”^{xxvi} According to Keckley, “the mere mention of Willie’s name would excite [Mary’s] emotion” debilitating her for hours on end.^{xxvii} She even goes as far as to categorize Mary Lincoln’s grief and depression as “supernatural.”^{xxviii} Here, Keckley is blatantly questioning Mary’s piety as suggests unholy forces are at work around her. She writes as if concerned for the well-being of Mrs. Lincoln, but the inclusion of such language seems to point to another motive at play; perhaps, Keckley included these episodes, some of which she most likely was not present for, to expose Mary Lincoln as unwomanly. The trend continues as Elizabeth details the aftermath of the death of the President. She observes that, “Tad’s grief at his father’s death was as great as the grief of his mother, but her terrible outbursts awed the boy into silence.”^{xxix} Here, Keckley compares Mary to a child, arguing that she is more infantile than her twelve-year-old son. Mary spoke of committing suicide on many occasions, a topic that was most certainly not discussed, let alone contemplated, by polite society.^{xxx} To do such a thing was a mortal sin; it was a direct rejection of God. Mary, by Keckley’s account, was an unrighteous woman who worried about herself rather than her Creator’s wishes.

The value of purity went hand in hand with that of piety. The absence of purity was “unnatural and unfeminine.”^{xxxi} A woman who lacked such a virtue could scarcely call herself a “True Woman.” As part of this purity, women were expected to dress modestly to preserve their virtue.^{xxxii} Keckley portrays Mrs. Lincoln as quite a vain woman. At one point, she details how Mary wore a low-cut dress and enjoyed being ogled at by the President.^{xxxiii} In her own narrative, however, Keckley chooses to relay a scene in which she resisted an assault on her virtue. When the neighbor of her master ordered her to strip so he could beat her, she replied: “No Mr. Bingham, I shall not take down my dress before you.”^{xxxiv} At this point, she is letting the reader

know that she values her purity and will protect it, even in the face of violence. To do such a thing as a Black woman of the time was formidable. Keckley later speaks about her rape, but only ambiguously, as it was not a proper topic to be discussed in depth. She writes: “I do not care to dwell on this subject, for it is one that is fraught with pain. Suffice it to say, that he persecuted me for four years, and I—I became a mother.”^{xxxv} She goes on to absolve herself from any blame and to underscore the importance of “the virtue of girls in [her] position.”^{xxxvi} Keckley simultaneously challenges and affirms the ideal notion of purity in the “cult of True Womanhood.” She accepts a female’s responsibility to value and protect her own virtue, thus conforming to the standard of the time. But, in absolving herself from any guilt and by simply being a Black woman discussing her rape by a white man, Keckley is radicalizing the notion of purity. During this time, white women’s purity hinged on the notion that Black women were impure.^{xxxvii} For Keckley to include herself among the ranks of the pure “True Women” who worked to protect their virtue, she is challenging the very idea of womanhood.

In terms of submissiveness, Keckley walks a fine line with her work. The publishing of the book in the first place seems to exhibit insubordination as opposed to submissiveness. Nevertheless, she painstakingly attempts to show herself to be the proper, demure Black woman society asked her to be. When pressed to make another dress on top of her already towering workload, Elizabeth acquiesces.^{xxxviii} Although she has a flourishing business in Washington, she goes out West with Mary after the assassination because Mary asked her to do so.^{xxxix} Throughout the course of her time with Mary, Keckley was deferent in every way. This would have been considered the proper role for someone of her class, gender, and race at the time. As she recounts conversation after conversation, Keckley makes it clear that she is merely a listener, not a participant in these stories. When Mary comes into her living quarters, Elizabeth is

dismayed since “it would be more consistent with [a lady’s] dignity to send for [her], and let [her] come to them, instead of their coming to [her].”^{xl}

Mary, as portrayed by Keckley, however, was anything but submissive. Keckley chooses several scenes that showcase the First Lady’s brazenness at its finest. She notes that Mrs. Lincoln often chimed in on Cabinet affairs and “rarely lost an opportunity to say an unkind word of” many different politicians.^{xli} Her council, Hogan argues, was “unsolicited and often unwelcome.”^{xlii} Rather than respect her oldest son’s wishes to join the Union Army and her husband’s sanctioning of the former, Mary adamantly refused to allow it.^{xliii} Keckley even includes an excerpt of a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln where the former told the latter that she could not take a piece of furniture they left the White House just because he liked it; after the President’s death, Keckley reports that Mary took the stand anyway, directly violating her husband’s wishes.^{xliv} Elizabeth Keckley describes Mary Lincoln in many ways, but submissive was not among that list of adjectives.

Perhaps the most prized of the four cardinal virtues of “True Womanhood” was domesticity.^{xlv} It is in this category that Elizabeth Keckley decisively outperforms Mary Lincoln. When recounting her early years, Keckley writes that, “with [her] needle [she] kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months.”^{xlvi} Crucial to upholding the tenant of domesticity was a obtaining a command of “every variety of needlework.”^{xlvii} She became a master seamstress, respected by all the ladies in Washington. She maintained a home and took pride in her space. Keckley tries to establish that she respected the privacy that domesticity necessarily engenders. Again, she bristled when Mary entered her apartments in violation the boundaries between public, meaning Elizabeth’s professional life, and private, meaning her home.^{xlviii} She also claims to have protected the sanctity of domesticity within the Lincoln

household when a woman attempted to infiltrate the White House staff in order to “publish a scandal to the world.”^{xlix} She chastised the woman for asking her to aid in such a thing and asked her to leave her residence, again preserving her home and the Lincoln’s as a “sacred and protected space.”^l

In contrast, Keckley presents no evidence that shows Mary Todd to be a domestic woman and, instead, presents stories that prove her to be the antithesis of a “True Woman.” In the aftermath of her husband’s death, Mary rejects all visitors who come to pay their respects, violating the proper role of woman as hostess.^{li} She threw away expensive bouquets presented to her, totally rejecting the hospitality that was being extended. After reporting this, Keckley notes that she “never saw a more peculiarly constituted woman. Search the world over and you will not find [Mary’s] counterpart.”^{lii} Keckley arguably adds this commentary to note that because Mary Todd is a character unto herself, she should not be considered a proper lady.

Within this realm of domesticity, the roles of nurse and mother “added another dimension to [a woman’s] usefulness and her prestige.”^{liii} Yet, as Keckley notes again and again, Mary Todd Lincoln fulfills neither of these roles. After the death of Willie, she was prostrate with grief, often convulsing and wailing throughout the White House.^{liiv} She was barely able to care for herself, let alone her children. It is Elizabeth, instead, who tended to Tad and prepared Willie’s body for burial. In Mary’s grief, Elizabeth acted as a sort of nurse to her, comforting her at her bedside and fetching whatever it was the First Lady may have needed.^{liv}

Keckley also details how Mary Todd sought to repay her astronomical debt by selling her clothing after leaving the White House.^{lvi} To do such a thing was to undermine the Victorian convention of the separation between the public and the private; the sale of the clothing was bring something domestic into the open, as well as an embarrassing demonstration of a woman

being immodest in dealing with money.^{lvii} Keckley goes as far as to say that this incident was the result of Mary's belief that she had, "struggled long enough to keep up appearances, and that mask must be thrown aside."^{lviii} By including that line, Keckley is insinuating the Mary was the one with a disregard for the separation of the domestic and the public. According to her, Mrs. Lincoln, rather than herself, who was the one who wished to betray that central part of "True Womanhood." That is, betray the inner happenings of the home by making private affairs public.

Despite Elizabeth Keckley's valiant efforts, she failed to prove herself to be a "True Woman" and was condemned for attempting to do so in the first place. The *New York Times* dismissed her work saying that "she supports herself by taking in sewing— and by writing a book. She would much better have stuck to her needle."^{lix} The review accused her of dishonoring proper decorum by committing a "gross violation of confidence" which results in the work having "very little merit indeed."^{lx} Another review in the *New York Daily Herald* noted that some readers will find the work to be "food for astonishment that a colored woman should write at all," disparaging, not only Keckley, but her entire race and sex with one stroke.^{lxi} There was widespread criticism that Keckley, despite her assertion that "everything [she has] written is strictly true" and that "nothing has been exaggerated," had invented conversations and events that took place within the White House.^{lxii} This claim seems to be bolstered by the fact that Keckley recounts conversations that took place years before she had met Mary Lincoln and, therefore, could not possibly have been privy to.

Keckley's juxtaposition between herself and Mrs. Lincoln is "so pronounced that it almost seems impossible to accept [her] pure motives and good intentions when writing about Mary Todd Lincoln."^{lxiii} In writing the book, she transgressed the very lines of propriety that she was trying to demonstrate. She published a tell-all book, as a Black woman in 1868, about her

former white, female employer. In doing so, she “betrayed the personal confidences of a presumably trusted friend and, perhaps more importantly, disrupted the racial, social, and economic hierarchy that defined the Reconstruction Era.”^{lxiv} To be sure, becoming a member of the “Cult of True Womanhood” was an unattainable goal, not just for a Black woman, but for any woman. The standards are a product of Victorian norms and problematic racist and sexist notions. Try as she might, Elizabeth Keckley could never be considered among those ranks, and nor could Mary Todd Lincoln.

After the publication of Keckley’s book, Mary Todd Lincoln never wrote to her dear “Lizabeth” again. A racist parody of her memoirs, entitled *Behind the Seams; by a N*gger Woman who took in work from Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Davis*, disgustingly disparaged Keckley and diminished her trauma and triumphs to white supremacist propaganda.^{lxv} Robert Lincoln, on behalf of his mother, bought as many copies of Keckley’s book as possible to burn. He publicly denounced Keckley and convinced the publisher to quit printing the book.^{lxvi} The profound backlash resulted in a loss of most of her customers and forced Keckley to take a job as an instructor of sewing at Wilberforce University, her son’s alma mater.^{lxvii} Eventually, Keckley’s only source of income was her deceased son’s twelve-dollar monthly pension.^{lxviii} The woman once affectionately called “Madam Elizabeth” by President Lincoln died alone in a Home for Destitute Women and Children in 1907.^{lxix} Elizabeth Keckley dared to climb the pedestal of the “True Woman” and claim that title of “Madam Elizabeth” for herself. Unfortunately, society halted her efforts time and time again, punishing her wanting to belong on a platform that too narrow to stand on to begin with.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179>.
- ⁱⁱ Carolyn Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer: Elizabeth Keckley's 'Behind the Scenes' and the Politics of Public Wrath," *African American Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): 28, doi:10.2307/2901182.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer," 21.
- ^{iv} Lisa Shawn Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln: Elizabeth Keckley and the Rhetoric of Intimate Disclosure," *Southern Communication Journal* 78, no. 5 (2013): 407, doi:10.1080/1041794X.2013.845243; Elizabeth Keckley, *Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2011), First published 1868 by G.W. Carleton & Co., 20. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duquesne-ebooks/detail.action?docID=797782>.
- ^v Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 407-408.
- ^{vi} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 19-20.
- ^{vii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 30-32.
- ^{viii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 38.
- ^{ix} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 95.
- ^x Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 95.
- ^{xi} Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer," 21.
- ^{xii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 14.
- ^{xiii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 47.
- ^{xiv} Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 159-160.
- ^{xv} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 14.
- ^{xvi} Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 152.
- ^{xvii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 13.
- ^{xviii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 33, 53.
- ^{xix} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 71.
- ^{xx} Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 418.
- ^{xxi} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 150.
- ^{xxii} Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 419.
- ^{xxiii} Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 418; Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer," 32.
- ^{xxiv} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 52.
- ^{xxv} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 53.
- ^{xxvi} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 53.
- ^{xxvii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 58.
- ^{xxviii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 58.
- ^{xxix} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 87-88.
- ^{xxx} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 91.
- ^{xxxi} Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 154.
- ^{xxxii} Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 157.
- ^{xxxiii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 52.
- ^{xxxiv} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 25.
- ^{xxxv} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 27.
- ^{xxxvi} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 27.
- ^{xxxvii} Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer," 28.
- ^{xxxviii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 43.
- ^{xxxix} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 95.
- ^{xl} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 72.
- ^{xli} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 63.
- ^{xlii} Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 419.
- ^{xliii} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 60.
- ^{xliv} Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 93-94.
- ^{xlv} Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 162.

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- xlvi Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 30.
- xlvii Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 165.
- xlviii Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 72.
- xliv Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 49.
- ¹ Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 419.
- li Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 89.
- lii Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 84.
- liii Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 163, 171.
- liv Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 53.
- lv Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 53, 86-91, 98-99.
- lvi Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 119-135.
- lvii Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 419-420.
- lviii Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 119.
- lix "NEW PUBLICATIONS," *New York Times*, Apr 19, 1868, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-publications/docview/92444917/sc-2?accountid=10610> (accessed December 2, 2021).
- lx "NEW PUBLICATIONS"
- lxi "Book Notices," *New York Daily Herald*, April 20, 1868, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/329416031/?terms=Elizabeth%20keckley&match=1> (accessed December 2, 2021).
- lxii Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 113.
- lxiii Sorisio, "Unmasking the Genteel Performer," 35.
- lxiv Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 420.
- lxv Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 410.
- lxvi Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 410.
- lxvii Monroe A. Majors, *Noted Negro Women; Their Triumphs and Activities*, Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, Printers, Binders, and Engravers, 1893, 260, <http://www.everydaylife.amdigital.co.uk.authenticate.library.duq.edu/Documents/Details/Notednegrowomentheirtriumphsandactivities>.
- lxviii Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 421.
- lxix Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 73-74; Hogan, "Exposing Mary Lincoln," 421.

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