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A Few Comments about the Unfair Criticisms of Abraham and Mary Lincoln
or
Two sides of a Penny

Rebecca Clark

There are a tremendous number of books and articles printed about Abraham and Mary Lincoln. They comment, critique, and analyze every aspect of their lives before, during, and after the Lincoln Presidency. No triviality has been deemed too small or inconsequential to dwell upon and debate. In fact, the Lincolns, from the beginning of Abraham's courtship of Mary Todd to after the fatal assassination, were treated unfairly and subjected to false attacks by the press, public, and family members for self-serving agendas, and nefarious purposes. Despite her family's qualms over her choice of a husband, Mary saw in Abraham qualities others could not see; she knew that one day he would be great.¹

Being veterans of the political world, but also deeply embroiled in the debates over slavery and secession, Abraham and Mary Lincoln probably expected negative public comments about Lincoln's policies, especially after he became President. Because of his dress, looks, voice, and mannerisms, many people unfairly judged him.² Until they met him, or listened to his message, they treated him with merriment and incredulity when first seeing him in public.³ For example, Elizabeth Grimsley, Mary's cousin who traveled to Washington, D.C. with the Lincolns for the inauguration, wrote of overhearing a New Yorker discussing Lincoln's qualification to become President: "Would his western gaucherie disgrace the Nation?"⁴ Elizabeth was upset because she felt Springfield was as culturally advanced as any Eastern city, citing many prominent politicians of the time who came from the West, including Stephen

¹ C. C. Ritze, "In Defense of Mrs. Lincoln," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Apr., 1937): 22, 44.

² Stephen Berry, *House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, A Family Divided By War*, (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 27, 31, 98.

³ William H. Herndon, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), 109 – 110.

William E. Gienapp, *Abraham, Lincoln and the Civil War America: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 34.

Berry, 99.

⁴ Elizabeth Todd Grimsley, "Six Months in the White House," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Vol. 19, No. 3/4 (Oct., 1926 - Jan., 1927): 44.

Douglas and Lyman Trumbull.⁵ While some critical comments caused dismay, other comments aroused amusement in the Lincoln family: "The President bears himself well, and does not seem the least embarrassed."⁶ *Harper's Weekly* had originally subscribed to this discriminating view, but reporting in subsequent support of Lincoln's July 1861 speech, it declared, "I can forgive the jokes and the big hands and the inability to make bows. Some of us who doubted were wrong."⁷

The public reacted unfairly to Lincoln before he was sworn in as President, and how he dealt with an assassination plot on his way to Washington and with other threats timed to take place on his day of inauguration. While still in Springfield, he received a letter from "Vindex" claiming to be, "One of a sworn band of 10 who have resolved to shoot you in the inaugural procession on the 4th of March 1861."⁸ While Lincoln refused to be intimidated by these rumors, he earlier agreed to enter the District of Columbia in secret and to have a strong military presence during his inauguration which was unusual at that time.⁹ After President Lincoln's security response was discovered, he was scorned by the public and press alike.¹⁰

Lincoln's critics were not exclusively from the political and social spheres, but came from the private sector as well. Slandered by his wife's family throughout their courtship and marriage, Lincoln discovered that many Todd family members disapproved of him as "good enough" for Mary, and they thought he would not be successful. When he proved them wrong, their dislike for him, further increased.¹¹

⁵ Grimsley, 44

⁶ Grimsley, 50.

⁷ Gienapp, 85.

⁸ Catherine Clinton, "Wife versus Widow: Clashing Perspectives on Mary Lincoln's Legacy," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2007): 11.

⁹ Gienapp, 77.

Justin G. Turner, Linda Levitt Turner, *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 78.

¹⁰ Gienapp, 77.

¹¹ Berry, x, xi.

Ironically, Lincoln would help Mary's Confederate side of the family during the war; in return, they used their relationship with Lincoln against him.¹² The Todds feigned respect as they surreptitiously took advantage of Lincoln. While seeking concessions for themselves and enemies of the Union, they attained Confederate advantage through Lincoln's kindness.¹³ On visiting the White House, the husband of Margaret Todd, Charles Kellogg, solicited a patronage position from Lincoln. Government officials informed Lincoln that Kellogg was a rebel supporter and had been overheard making comments to this effect. Kellogg admitted he had originally sided with the South until they attacked Fort Sumter, after which he swore his allegiance to the North. Not only was this untrue, but a letter written after the Fort Sumter attack surfaced to the contrary. He quietly escaped to the South upon learning of the mounting evidence against him. Once safe below the Mason-Dixon Line, he informed a Confederate journalist that he was Mary Todd Lincoln's brother in law, and he admittedly committed treason when he revealed how General George B. McClellan had sent soldiers to the West, leaving the Capital undefended.¹⁴

The undeserved treatment of Lincoln by the Todd family persisted throughout the war. David Todd, Mary's half-brother, spoke of visiting the Lincolns at the White House and bragged of conniving "chump" Lincoln into giving him information about Northern war efforts.¹⁵ He routinely proclaimed that, "he wanted to cut his brother-in-law's heart out."¹⁶ David's relationship to the Lincolns was often estranged, so much so that it is difficult to determine truth from fiction. Mary's beloved sister, Emilie, held Lincoln personally responsible for the war and her husband's death. She reflected long held Todd family traits by failing to

¹²ibid.

¹³ Berry, 172.

¹⁴ Berry, 117 – 118.

¹⁵ Berry, xiii, 62, 89.

¹⁶ibid.

acknowledge personal or Southern responsibility for the war.¹⁷ Both incidents serve as examples of how some of the Todd family disparaged Lincoln, in contrast to his loving and accepting attitude towards them as beloved family members, despite political differences.

While Abraham received his share of unfair and untruthful criticism, his wife was certainly subjected to much more bad press. Knowing her husband would receive criticisms for his policies, she probably did not expect to be the target of so much political and social disapproval. Granted, Mary frequently placed herself in politically questionable situations making her susceptible to bad publicity.¹⁸ Many insinuations and claims of unfounded attacks were meant only as an undermining of the Lincolns and of the president. Rarely did the public hear about Mary's noblest endeavors, such as visiting and tending to injured Union soldiers or bearing the burdens of sustaining her children while her husband oversaw the war effort.¹⁹

Growing up, Mary was an excitable little girl who desired attention during her impressionable years, and, while she tried to be dignified, she became impulsive, vocalized her opinions freely, and "revealed a stubborn nature, a shrewd, independent mind, and a sharp tongue." But there was no cruel intention towards others.²⁰ With little parental supervision, there is small wonder that the Todd children did not learn to exercise more self-control.²¹

Mary was accustomed to being pampered as a child, and expected the same indulgence as an adult.²² Mary did not display the "typical" female decorum of her day, which was to stay out of the man's world, and she paid the price for these attitudes. She enjoyed politics, but she was also highly educated and unafraid of exhibiting her intelligence. In some instances, her

¹⁷ Berry, 174.

¹⁸ Clinton, 13 – 14.

Grimsley, 56.

¹⁹ Turner 145, 149 – 150, 179.

²⁰ Turner, 4 – 6.

²¹ Berry, 14.

²² Berry, 99.

intelligence went beyond the capacities of many politicians; she also proved a match for her husband's agile mind.²³ In the 1800s, exhibiting intelligence was considered by many as an undesirable trait for women, and women who did so were regarded as “hysterical” (uncontrollable).²⁴ Mary spoke her mind and offered her opinion, whether it was desired or not.²⁵ She was either unable or unwilling to completely restrain these traits in her adulthood, which unfortunately, made others view Mary in an unfavorable light.²⁶

The Todd's hometown of Lexington, Kentucky diminished in size and economic importance during Mary's childhood.²⁷ Mary, and other female residents, “overachieved” to compensate for this decline of social awareness and to counter the perception of being uncivilized homesteaders.²⁸ When paying afternoon visits to newcomers, the ladies would dress as if going to a ball.²⁹ Mary associated her overdressing as being sophisticated, which in turn commanded respect and envy.³⁰ Childhood events demonstratively impacted her adult life and followed the Lincolns into the White House; for example, obtaining respect and admiration from the clothing she wore. That Todd kind of reasoning – expecting attention and respect, for herself, the president, and the White House -created one foundation of a constant barrage of verbal attacks against her for the rest of her life.

²³ Turner, xv.

Clinton, 14.

²⁴ Clinton, 14.

²⁵ Elizabeth, Keckley, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: G. W. Carleton and Co., 1868), 125 – 127, 129. accessed 18 Oct 2015.

<https://archive.org/stream/behindscenes00keckrich#page/n9/mode/2up>

²⁶ Clinton, 2.

Berry, 22, 92.

Turner, xvi.

²⁷ Berry, 19.

²⁸ Berry, 21.

Turner, xvii.

²⁹ Berry, 21.

³⁰ Berry, 21 - 22.

The blame for many negative allegations against Mary can be placed on William Herndon.³¹ While not all of Mary's notoriety as a difficult woman stems from Herndon, much of what we know about the Lincolns' private lives, whether true or not, comes from his book, *Herndon's Lincoln*.³² According to Herndon, Lincoln never divulged personal matters to anyone: "He never spoke of his trials to me or, so far as I knew, to any of his friends."³³ Yet Herndon still presents intimate, family details as the truth, which bring into question the validity of suppositions he otherwise presents as facts about Abraham and Mary. A few of Herndon's biographical claims included: the Ann Rutledge romance; Abraham left Mary standing at the altar on January 1, 1841; and, finally, sorted details of the Lincoln's personal lives, including their courtship and their married lives together. Each of these fables can quickly and briefly be debunked. When Honore Willie Morrow was researching information to write a biography about Mary, he came to the conclusion she "was one of the most lied about women in the world."³⁴

It has been maintained that Herndon and Mary always mutually disliked one another almost from the beginning of her relationship with Lincoln.³⁵ This enmity supposedly began when they first met at a ball and a socially awkward Herndon clumsily complimented Mary by stating she danced with the "ease of a serpent" which, as some have asserted, produced a lifelong bitterness towards him by Mary?³⁶ Claims were also made that Herndon resented that he was

³¹ Ritze, 8.

Clinton, 6.

³² Douglas L. Wilson, "William H. Herndon and Mary Todd Lincoln," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Summer, 2001): 1.

John Y. Simon, "Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 11 (1990): 28.

³³ Herndon, 183.

Gienapp, ix, 41.

³⁴ Clinton, 6.

³⁵ Wilson, "William," 1.

Turner, xiii.

³⁶ William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1924), 195.

Wilson, "William," 3.

never included in social events at the Lincoln home.³⁷ Whether true or not, they are definitely at odds after he wrote his book. One theory espoused by some critics is that Herndon was able to retaliate against Mary for past grievances by promoting inaccuracies of the Lincoln's lives.³⁸

It is hard to believe a culturally educated girl such as Mary would keep a lifelong hostility toward Herndon over an insensitive compliment or that Herndon would spew such hatred against Mary for not inviting him to her house for a meal. Herndon knew Mary had not invited any of Abe's associates for dinner at her house; in addition, Douglas L. Wilson claimed that Herndon and Mary spoke civilly to each other whenever Mary appeared at her husband's law office.³⁹ After Lincoln's assassination, Mary enthusiastically and willingly allowed Herndon to interview her for his planned Lincoln biography. Would she had done so if there was animosity between the two? Had she expected to have her, or her husband's, reputation soiled and maligned by him, she would not have agreed to speak to him.⁴⁰ Why did Herndon include these specific accounts in his book? Did he harbor a secret hatred for Mary and, therefore had an ulterior motive in interviewing her or did he want to present his relationship with Lincoln as closer than it really was. Whatever the reason, Herndon publicly disparaged, not only Mary, but also his old law partner by implying that Lincoln was not smart enough to recognize that Mary manipulated him.⁴¹

Simon, 14 – 15.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

Wilson, "William," 17.

³⁹ Wilson, "William," 5-6.

⁴⁰ Clinton, 8.

⁴¹ Ritze, 35.

Wilson, "William," 1, 10, 21.

First, Herndon claimed Lincoln fell so deeply in love with Ann Rutledge that her death in 1835 was the catalyst for his melancholy that lasted for the rest of his life.⁴² While some type of a relationship between Lincoln and Rutledge existed, whether friendship or romantic, it is doubtful it could have been as intense as Herndon claimed because a year after Ann's death Abraham began *sparkling* Mary Owens.⁴³ In fact, Abraham would also date his future wife's older sister Frances, prior to Mary's arrival in Springfield in 1840.⁴⁴

In his book, Herndon also related a tale of another relationship with a young girl, Kate Roby, in Lincoln's youth. Apparently, they spent much time together, taking strolls and staying out late at night.⁴⁵ These same examples he used to promote the commencement of Ann's and Abe's "love" but he assured his readers Kate and Abe were not "in love." Other than the fact Kate was the only one of these three individuals alive to state so, how can Herndon be sure Abe was in love with Ann when he committed the same actions with another person years earlier?

Herndon learned of the Lincoln – Rutledge love story after the deaths of both Abe and Ann, forcing him to rely on statements and opinions of their friends and acquaintances. Critics claim Herndon was biased towards this account as a way to attack Mary, that he influenced his sources to answer questions in a specific way, and that he mixed the truth with fantasy while exaggerating Lincoln's insanity over Ann's death.⁴⁶ They state the informants could not have accurately remembered events and conversations years after this affair (some as long as almost

⁴²Douglas L. Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln, Ann Rutledge and the Evidence of Herndon's Informants," *Civil War History*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Dec., 1990), 301.

Simon, 16.

⁴³Simon, 26.

Turner, 11.

Berry, 31.

⁴⁴Maggie MacLean, "Civil War Women, Women of the Civil War and Reconstruction Eras 1849 – 1877," 18 June 2016, <http://civilwarwomenblog.com/elizabeth-todd-edwards/>

Berry, 30.

⁴⁵ Herndon and Weik, 35 – 36, 119.

⁴⁶ Wilson, "Abraham," 304 - 305.

Simon, 20.

thirty years later), that they desired a stronger connection to Lincoln's early life or they were not aware of any engagement until they were informed of rumors after Ann's death.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Herndon's supporters claim he valued honesty and that he thoroughly investigated and reaffirmed the respondent's open-ended statements.⁴⁸

The question of Lincoln's sanity and its severity is also in dispute. According to Herndon's research, two schools of thought developed over Lincoln's mental status after Ann's death: those that thought he was distraught over her and those that thought he was studying too hard for his legal course.⁴⁹ Even those that believed Lincoln mourned Ann disagreed on the level of his distress. Some thought he became a "little bit crazy", while others believed he was "near insanity."⁵⁰ Most people were unaware of this episode in Lincoln's life until Herndon presented his argument during a lecture he gave in November 1866, titled "Abraham Lincoln, Miss Ann Rutledge, New Salem, Pioneering, and *the* Poem called Immortality? or 'Oh! Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud."⁵¹ According to Herndon's research, even at the time of Ann's death, many friends, relatives and neighbors did not know of an engagement between her and Abraham.⁵² But, in his book, Herndon only presents part of the facts – that Ann and Abe were engaged and theorized Abe went crazy after her death.⁵³ Thus, if he is not completely forthcoming with all the details, how much of his "facts" should be believed?

⁴⁷ Wilson, "Abraham," 305, 308. *ibid.*
Simon, 23 – 24.

⁴⁸ Wilson, "Abraham," 307 - 308.

⁴⁹ Wilson, "Abraham," 310, 324.
Simon, 24.

⁵⁰ Wilson, "Abraham," 302 - 303, 309, 319.
Simon, 19.

⁵¹ Simon, 13.
Wilson, "William," 1.

Wilson, "Abraham," 301, 304.

⁵² Wilson, "Abraham," 311.

⁵³ Herndon and Weik, 119 – 133.

If Herndon truly wanted to discover the reason for Lincoln's melancholy, why did he not consider Lincoln's life prior to Rutledge with the death of his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln and his sister, Sarah whose deaths greatly affected him?⁵⁴ If Herndon believed Lincoln's melancholy was a result of love, then the love of his mother and sister may be a more likely cause than his love for Ann. One cannot help wondering, if Lincoln became so despondent after Ann's death because of his great love for her, per Herndon's theory, why did he not become suicidal after the deaths of his beloved sons. Did he not love them or would Herndon have us believe Lincoln loved Ann more?

Herndon's second assertion portrayed Lincoln as absent, and despondent on a "supposed" wedding date of January 1, 1841. When he was finally "located," his friends feared he would commit suicide.⁵⁵ Herndon described Lincoln as being so distraught, that he did not participate in the state legislative session until the very end, and then only to answer roll call.⁵⁶ But, Mary's brother-in-law, Ninian Edwards, and other friends and relatives who were supposedly at the aborted wedding, informed Herndon that this incident had never happened.⁵⁷ William E. Barton, author of *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, proved these claims as preposterous.⁵⁸ He found no evidence of a wedding announcement published in the paper, no marriage license applied for or obtained, and Lincoln was present at the legislature starting January second and even gave a speech during the session. Barton further maintains that when Lincoln mentions the "fatal first of January, 1841," he was writing to his friend of the date he broke his engagement to Mary, and not jilting Mary at the altar.⁵⁹

⁵⁴Simon, 30.

⁵⁵ Herndon, 74.

⁵⁶ Herndon and Weik, 201 – 202.

⁵⁷ Douglas L. Wilson, "Abraham Lincoln and "that fatal first of January," *Civil War History*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (June 1992): 102, 109.

⁵⁸ Wilson, "fatal first," 122.

⁵⁹ Ritze, 10.

Except for the date, Barton's theory is confirmed by Joshua Speed, Lincoln's closest friend and confidante. It is likely Speed was the only person Lincoln confided in, especially his conflicted feelings towards Mary; therefore he is more apt to be aware of actual events.⁶⁰ After establishing a timeline from Speed's account of events, Lincoln likely broke his engagement to Mary the early part of December 1840 so there could not have been a wedding the next month; furthermore, there is documentation that Mary might not have even been in Springfield on the first of January so Lincoln would not have been able to break their engagement that day, much less abandon Mary at the altar.⁶¹

Lincoln's uncomfortable nature around women limited his association with them. While he was attracted to them, he feared the closeness involved with relationships, and he questioned his ability to make a female happy. This developed a pattern of emotional attachment, distancing, and finally finding fault, essentially ending any romances and relationships.⁶² An example of this pattern can be found when he broke off an earlier engagement with Mary Owen, claiming she would not like living in Springfield when, in fact, he realized that he did not love her or find her appealing.⁶³ His courtship with Mary Todd follows the same pattern. Mary, herself had commented Lincoln had a hard time expressing his innermost feelings to her during their marriage.⁶⁴

Finally, Herndon informed the reader of tales about Mary's and Abraham's personal lives. He could not understand the unlikely connection and love between them because of their many and vast differences, therefore, in his opinion, there had to be another reason for them to

⁶⁰ Wilson, "fatal first," 103.
Herndon and Weik, 204.

⁶¹ Wilson, "fatal first," 115, 120.

⁶² Gienapp, 33, 34.

⁶³ Clinton, 3.

⁶⁴ Gienapp, x.

marry.⁶⁵ His insistence Abraham married Mary for honor, while Mary married only for revenge and ambition is unbelievable and lacks comprehensible evidence to support this conclusion.⁶⁶ First, Mary wrote letters to a friend soon after the “fatal first”, no words about a wedding that did not take place, but she did write of her concern for Abraham and a desire to recommence their relationship.⁶⁷ Mary was proud and outspoken, she would not have quietly and calmly accepted a disappearing bridegroom on her wedding day without angrily making mention of such a transgression in this (or any) correspondence.⁶⁸ Additionally, when they chanced to meet again, it is doubtful she would have begun another relationship with Abraham if he had embarrassed her in front of her friends and family. The idea that Mary would marry Abraham just to make his life miserable because he left her at the altar is unrealistic and senseless by any standard.

Mary’s animosity towards one who deceived her was much more definitive. After discovering her good friend and bridesmaid, Julia Jayne Trumbull, took part in undermining Lincoln’s bid for the Senate in 1854, she declared Trumbull “would be dead to her” for her part in the deception.⁶⁹ If she felt betrayed by Julia, and forever ended their friendship, she would not have quietly accepted Lincoln’s abandonment. As for Abraham, for almost two years he moved on with his life without Mary; if he had felt duty bound to marry her, he would have done so sooner.⁷⁰ Herndon himself wrote that Abraham had gotten over Mary, muddling his argument of a duty bound Lincoln. If Abe had felt honor bound to wed Mary Todd because he had been engaged to her in order to assuage his honor, then why did he not have the same feelings to

⁶⁵ Herndon Weik, 191 - 192

⁶⁶ Herndon, 74, 82 - 84.

⁶⁷ Ritze, 10 - 11.

Turner, xv.

⁶⁸ Ritze, 10 - 11, 42.

⁶⁹ Berry, 46 - 48.

⁷⁰ Herndon, 81 - 83.

Gienapp, 35.

marry Mary Owens? According to Herndon, Lincoln had stated “if Mary Owens ever returned to Illinois a second time he would marry her” and Mary moved to New Salem (in 1836) after she was made aware of Lincoln’s declaration.⁷¹ He further asserted that Lincoln later started to worry that he would not make Mary Owens a good husband and broke off the engagement.⁷² Herndon describes Mary Owens similarly to Mary Todd – well educated, cultured, “reared in plenty” and they both recognized that Lincoln lacked social graces. He does not accuse Mary Owens of feeling bitter towards Lincoln when he breaks the engagement but he insists Mary Todd sought revenge.⁷³ What is the difference between these two situations?

Critics claim Mary was ambitious. While this may be true, they neglect to tell us what goals, aspirations, and desires she could have possibly accomplished in marrying Lincoln. At this juncture in his life, Lincoln had very little promise of a prosperous future.⁷⁴ Mary enjoyed the finer things in life, which Lincoln could not provide early in their marriage. But Mary and Abraham loved each other, and that is all that mattered.

Mary was a popular girl and had many suitors; even Stephen Douglas courted her around the same time as Lincoln.⁷⁵ The Todd family maintained the story that Mary, as a young girl, knew she would marry a man who would become the President; if true, Douglas had a better political advantage than Lincoln.⁷⁶ Financially, socially, and politically he was far more accomplished than Lincoln. Had Mary concerned herself solely with ambition, she would have thrown her lot in with Douglas, not Lincoln. After the 1860 election, a political commentator remarked, “She started with Mr. Lincoln when he was a poor young man, and with no more idea

⁷¹ Herndon and Weik, 136.

⁷² Herndon and Weik, 137.

⁷³ Herndon and Weik, 137 – 138.

⁷⁴ Ritze, 33.

⁷⁵ Turner, 10, 14.

⁷⁶ Clinton, 4.

Berry, 22.

Ritze, 33 – 35.

of being called to the Presidency than of being a cannibal.”⁷⁷ Modern critics like Stephen Berry acknowledge Mary not only loved Lincoln, but they “completed each other.”⁷⁸

Herndon told of a loveless Lincoln marriage, where Mary constantly harangued Abraham, who often left home to escape her tantrums. Many of the personal letters between Mary and Abraham have been lost or purposely destroyed, but she wrote to her friend Mercy Levering in 1840 that “her hand would never be given without her heart.”⁷⁹ In 1848, Mary penned a letter to Abraham, who was in Washington D. C. at the time saying, “I wish instead of writing, we were together. I feel very sad away from you....”⁸⁰ In another letter dated April 16, 1848 from Washington D.C., and sent to Mary in Lexington, Lincoln wrote of missing her: “When you were here I thought you hindered me some in attending to business; but now, having nothing but business I hate to stay in this old room by myself....”⁸¹ While he was president, he sent a letter to Mary (who was in New York) to come home and stated he missed her.⁸² Obviously, he had great affection for Mary.

Close to his day of death, Mary spoke of Lincoln as “almost boyish in his mirth & reminded me, of his original nature, what I had always remembered of him, in our own home.”⁸³ In the moments leading up to the assassination at Ford’s theater, they were holding hands; Mary expressed concern to Abraham of what their companions would think of their action, and Lincoln told her that they would not think anything about it.⁸⁴ These are not words, or actions,

⁷⁷ Clinton, 4.

⁷⁸ Berry, 37.

⁷⁹ Turner, 14.

⁸⁰ Turner, xiii.

⁸¹ Clinton, 8.

Turner, xiii.

⁸² Turner, 154.

⁸³ Turner, xiv.

⁸⁴ Clinton, 16.

of two loveless people who are only enduring a troubled marriage. They loved each other, plain and simple.

Finally, in Lincoln's own words, he expressed his love for Mary: at a White House reception in retort to comments of Mary's revealing dress and outlandish hair accessory, Lincoln replied, "my wife is as handsome as when she was a girl, and I, a poor nobody then, fell in love with her; and what is more, have never fallen out."⁸⁵ What Herndon supposed as duty bound, more than likely, the Lincolns knew as love.

Even though Herndon had taken liberties with many facts in his book, it was partly Mary's fault that the public came to believe what he wrote about her. Mary was not like most women of her day; she was intelligent, outspoken, understood politics, and she had a terrible temper. Herndon writes "but when offended or antagonized, her agreeable qualities instantly disappeared beneath a wave of stinging satire or sarcastic bitterness."⁸⁶ How many residents of Springfield, including her husband, and later in the nation's capital, felt her "stinging satire or sarcastic bitterness"? Stephen Berry writes of Mary forcing Abe outside his home without pants and chasing him with a knife.⁸⁷ Incidents such as these would provide fodder for others to believe the rumors that Mary was "crazy" and to become sympathetic towards Abe.⁸⁸ In their minds, Herndon's reasons why the Lincolns married are justified or, even consider his claims as a comeuppance for Mary.

Almost from the beginning, opinions from Washington society about Mary were not favorable. Technically, the area was part of the Union but there were many Southern sympathizers living there who did not like Westerners, Yankees or Republicans so Mary, and

⁸⁵ Clinton, 16.

⁸⁶ Herndon and Weik, 194.

⁸⁷ Berry, 36 – 37.

⁸⁸ Berry, 99.

Abraham, were already prejudiced against.⁸⁹ She was considered an unfashionably dressed backwoods person and their view of her continued to deteriorate.⁹⁰ Her attempts to gain love and respect by spending lavishly and eccentrically through her wardrobe and appearance worsened as First Lady, partly caused by her husband's steady paycheck and encouraged by individuals who wanted to take advantage of Mary's position. She exhibited many examples of the infamous Todd "me" mentality rather than concern for propriety, such as wearing lavender instead of black to a state funeral.⁹¹ At times, Mary would take it upon herself to berate some of Lincoln's appointees when she felt her husband was being taken advantage of. This made her appear "strong-minded" and was not in her favor.⁹² Instead of taking the time to learn about Mary or accepting her as is, Society had already made up their minds. They were willing to believe the worst when she, or her family name of Todd, became embroiled in scandals. For a "high strung woman," the strain of dealing with the attitudes and treatment in her new home would exacerbate her temperament.⁹³

Some citizens of Washington were impressed with Mary at first, but their attitude changed over time and they began to ostracize her.⁹⁴ A British journalist documented the fact that "Washington ladies...miss their Southern friends, and constantly draw comparisons between them, and the vulgar Yankee women and men, who are now in power."⁹⁵ William O. Stoddard, one of the President's private secretaries, documented how well Mary was performing as First Lady, but "women queens of society" deliberately refused to acknowledge this fact.⁹⁶ White House etiquette excluded Mary from attending some public events, and according to cousin

⁸⁹ Turner, 77.

⁹⁰ Berry, 98 – 99.

⁹¹ Berry, 100.

⁹² Turner, 135.

⁹³ Turner, 77 – 79.

⁹⁴ Clinton, 13.

⁹⁵ Clinton, 12.

⁹⁶ Ritze, 59 – 60.

Elizabeth, these were events well suited to Mary. If Mary had abandoned protocol to the benefit of her strengths, she may have made a more favorable impression and received less negative press.⁹⁷

As First Lady, Mary endured rumors and innuendos claiming she was a spy and traitor for the Confederacy.⁹⁸ Some state secrets had been revealed, which prompted Washington D.C. to speculate that Mary was actually the source of all leaks.⁹⁹ She was accused of being "not loyal," a rebel sympathizer, and someone who divulged information to the South. Because she had brothers in the Confederate army, some people believed that Mary was guilty of treason.¹⁰⁰ Contrary to these rumors, it was she who uncovered a guest at the White House eavesdropping outside doors and passing information to interested parties.¹⁰¹ The South also ironically accused her of being a traitor, betraying her Southern heritage and culture.¹⁰² The Todd family was not alone in having family members committed to different sides of the Civil War. She did have family members with Rebel sympathies but she also had family members with ties to the North, first and foremost her husband. In order to allay accusations, Mary requested all of her correspondence to be read before she received it.¹⁰³

Another mark against Mary is the claim she engaged in frivolous shopping sprees, whether it was to refurbish the White House, or to purchase personal items for herself. Stephen Berry calls Mary's trips to New York and Philadelphia as "an orgy of purchasing."¹⁰⁴ Upon

⁹⁷ Grimsley, 67 – 68.

⁹⁸ Turner, xvii, 79.
Clinton, 10.

⁹⁹ Berry, 101 – 103.

¹⁰⁰ Berry, 103.
Grimsley, 56 – 57.

Keckley, 134.

¹⁰¹ Grimsley, 58.

¹⁰² Turner, 156.

¹⁰³ Clinton, 13.

¹⁰⁴ Berry, 102.

arriving at the White House, her Springfield friends and relatives thought it looked like a “second rate hotel.”¹⁰⁵ Mary obviously felt the official image of America needed updating, and while she may have ignored prudence in refurbishing the estate, the White House did need repairs and updates. As Catherine Clinton indicates it might have been unwise for Mary to spend so much money, whether it was for the White House or for personal expenditures, while America was involved with fighting the war. But, given the fact Mary was well aware the country was at war, it is unclear if she did in fact keep her expenditures to a minimum or if she spent money irresponsibly.¹⁰⁶ Either way, these stories of her spending created new enemies and gave old ones more ammunition to further isolate her from the public.¹⁰⁷ Fiscal conservatives challenging Mary’s overspending for the White House would be the same ones who complained of frivolous spending done by their own wives.

In true Todd thinking, Mary had a reasonable purpose for many of the dresses she bought. The press portrayed the Lincolns as “country bumpkins,” and Mary understood the necessity of displaying proper etiquette in order to counter the stereotypes and misconceptions that Easterners had about Westerners.¹⁰⁸ Mary had always loved pretty things (dresses, jewelry, hair accessories, etc.), and with her husband’s suddenly plentiful and regular income, along with merchants willing to give her a line of credit, she may have “lost her way” in creating an aura of opulence and sophistication.¹⁰⁹ According to Cousin Elizabeth, who accompanied Mary on one of her shopping

¹⁰⁵ Clinton, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Clinton, 13, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Ritze, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Keckley, 87.

Clinton, 15.

Berry, 98.

¹⁰⁹ Clinton, 14.

sprees, the amount of money the newspapers reported that Mary spent was grossly exaggerated.¹¹⁰

Another scandal concerned David, her brother, who had been relieved of his duty as commandant of a Confederate prison camp for committing atrocities including murder.¹¹¹ The *New York Times* printed the shocking story to undermine the Lincoln administration and to humiliate Mary.¹¹² Because she was not well-liked, Southern and Northern critics used this story to further justify their disapproval of her.¹¹³ When Mary announced “by no word or act of hers should [David] escape punishment for his treason against her husband’s government,” her sister, Elodie proclaimed Mary was no longer her relation.¹¹⁴ Mary defended herself against false accusations of spying and being a Southern sympathizer, but she was still condemned and vilified by the Northern public and her own family.

Mary was not the completely selfish, self-centered person that Herndon and others would have us think. Her niece, Katherine Helm, wrote *The True Story of Mary: Wife of Lincoln*, as a rebuttal to the negative beliefs.¹¹⁵ Mary quietly performed good, Christian acts that she did not want to be brought to public attention. She wrote to the President about her concerns for the homeless and former slaves and supported the Contraband Relief Society which provided necessities to these individuals. She paid much attention to the soldiers who were in hospitals by visiting them and offering them comfort in whatever form she could – wrote letters for them, brought flowers or food from the White House, all done deliberately without fanfare or the public’s knowledge.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Grimsley, 59.

¹¹¹ Berry, 85 – 89.

¹¹² Berry, 92.

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Berry, 93.

¹¹⁵ Clinton, 6.

¹¹⁶ Letter Mary Todd to Abraham Lincoln 3 November 1862

Most importantly, Mary did not neglect her husband. Politics was something Abraham and Mary had in common when they first met, and she played an important role in his rise in the Republican Party. She listened to his ideas, advised him, encouraged him toward his political aspirations, cheered him up and supported him in times of defeat, did what she could to get him elected and reelected, and was very loyal to him.¹¹⁷ While he was president she was worried about his health and tried to make a peaceful home for him in order that he could forget the nation's problem for a short time. Frequently, Lincoln went without eating so Mary would invite company for breakfast so he would have to join them and get an opportunity to eat, she also insisted on a daily drive which provided him a chance to relax.¹¹⁸

Mary intentionally placed herself at risk to support her husband. General Scott had advised Lincoln to move his family away from Washington for their protection. When Mary asked Lincoln if he was leaving, and he replied in the negative, she then informed him that she would be staying as well.¹¹⁹ General Scott was impressed with Mary's courage and his opinion of her increased.¹²⁰ For some, though no amount of courage, or any other aptitude, would sway how they viewed the First Lady.¹²¹ Even Herndon had to admit "she was gifted with a rare insight into the motives that actuate mankind; there is no doubt that much of Lincoln's success was in a measure attributable to her acuteness, and the stimulus of her influence."¹²²

Keckley, 113

Turner, 137, 140 – 141, 145.

¹¹⁷Clinton, 5.

Keckley, 143 – 144.

¹¹⁸Turner, 120, 154.

Grimsley, 55.

¹¹⁹ Clinton, 13.

Grimsley, 65 – 67.

¹²⁰ Clinton, 13.

¹²¹ibid.

Grimsley, 65 – 67.

¹²² Ritze, 28.

Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States during a catastrophic time for the country. There were many tensions and differing opinions during the Civil War, and the Lincolns knew criticisms were a reality they must endure. Hardest to disregard were the unfair and vile accusations made by the public and the Todd family, especially against Mary. Both Lincolns had faults, no doubt. He suffered from deep melancholy and lacked manners and social graces; she had a temper and could be impulsive at times.¹²³ Despite views that Herndon and other critics falsely promoted, Mary and Abraham loved and had pride in each other. Mary's bequest to this country was her ability to see through Lincoln's "backwoodsness" and recognize his great potential – as a husband and as the leader of his country.¹²⁴

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¹²³ Ritze, 65.

¹²⁴ Clinton, 18.
 Ritze, 68.

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