Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln: A Challenging 19th Century Union

by

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The mental state of both Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln had a profound impact on their relationship and on each other's lives as well as their own. This paper will demonstrate that impact in several dimensions of their lives, including the impact of their respective challenges on their marital relationship, an analysis of how their mental health issues influenced their actions in relation to others (i.e. Lincoln spending more time working in order to delay going home), and a review of how their own mental health problems affected their decisions.

Young Abraham and Mary: Early Challenges

In 1866, Caroline Dall spoke to William Herndon (Lincoln's law partner and a biographer) and "spent three days examining the biographical materials" gathered by Herndon. She stated that based on the materials she read, Thomas Lincoln "ill-treated A[braham] to such an extent that he drove him from home." Augustus. H. Chapman "deplored Thomas' "great barbarity" in dealing with his boy". Dennis Hanks remembered "Thomas would whip young Abe for minor indiscretions. "Sometimes Abe was a little rude," Hanks testified. "when strangers would ride along & up to his fathers fence Abe always, through pride & to tease his father, would be sure to ask the stranger the first question, for which his father would sometimes knock him a rod. Abe was then a rude and forward boy."" Thomas "would pick up a big clod and knock little Abe off the fence, crying 'Let older people have the first say, will you boy?'" Whenever Thomas whipped his son, Abe "never bawled but dropt a kind of silent unwelcome tear, as evidence of his sensations- or other feelings." Thomas "would not whip Abe or scold him before folks, but would take him by himself and tend to him after they was gone." "One day a poor neighbor named Jenkins, who usually went barefoot" visited the Lincoln Family. "Abe greeted him heartily: "Hello, Mr. Jenkins. You are doing better than you used to. You have a

new pair of boots." Thomas Lincoln took his son aside and "gave Abe a little drilling" because his remarks might have wounded Jenkins feelings. "Well,' said Abe, 'he's got the boots."" [1]

According to Lincoln's cousin Sophie Hanks, his father got the angriest at Lincoln's habit of correcting people ("if they said something that wasn't right Abe would up and tell them so. Uncle Tom had a hard time to break him of this."). Lincoln would "very often would correct his father in talking when his father was telling how anything happened and if he didn[']t tell it jest right or left out anything. Abe would but[t] in right there and correct it… Thomas would then slap the lad".[20] When Lincoln released a bear cub that was caught in a trap set by Thomas he was "reportedly "beaten by his father"'.[2]

Thomas "looked upon bone and mussel [as] sufficient to make the man" and considered "time spent in school as doubly wasted". Thomas would "slash" Abe "for neglecting work by reading". On multiple occasions, Thomas hid or threw out Lincoln's books. According to the autobiography Lincoln wrote for his presidential campaign, Lincoln "separated from his father" when he was 23 and "studied English grammar, imperfectly of course…studied and nearly mastered the Six-books of Euclid,…". Five years after Abe left home, his father "scoffingly remarked: "I suppose that Abe is still fooling hisself with eddication. I tried to stop It, but he had got that fool idea in his head, and it can't be got out. Now I hain't got no eddication, but I get along far better than ef I had."[3]

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[1] Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life Vol 1* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 33-37.
[2] Burlingame, *Abraham*, 33-37.
[3] Ibid; *Lincoln: Speeches, Letters, Miscellaneous Writings, Presidential Messages and Proclamations: 1859-1865*, (New York, NY: Library of America, 1989), 162.

In adulthood Lincoln became estranged from his father. When Thomas Lincoln was on his deathbed (in 1851), Lincoln refused a request from his dying father for a visit. Lincoln told his stepbrother who had been sent to deliver Thomas's request "that if we could meet now, it is doubtful whether it would not be more painful than pleasant." After Thomas died Lincoln didn't attend his funeral "or have a tombstone placed on his grave." According to Lincoln, his father's treatment of him had been "cold and inhuman".[4]

Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks Lincoln according to their neighbors was "not very sociable" and "didn't go out among the neighbors," who "wanted to be sociable but they stopped going to see her because she would not come to see them". She had "a sad appearance", was "rather gloomy", and "possessed great melancholy" Some who knew her believed that the gossip about her being born out of wedlock (which was common knowledge among her neighbors) contributed to her depression.[5]

As a teenager Lincoln got along socially but not romantically with girls. He was six feet tall by the age of 16. They considered him to be "to green and awkward" to be attracted to him romantically. One local girl remembered that "he was so tall and awkward" and that "all the young girls my age made fun of Abe. They'd laugh at him right before his face, but Abe never 'peared to care. He was so good and he'd just laugh with them. Abe tried to go with some of them, but no sir-ee, they'd give him the mitten every time, just because he was… so tall and gawky, and it was mighty awkward I can tell you trying to keep company with a fellow as tall as

[4] Burlingame, 33-37.
[5] 40-41.

abe was." Accounts from other girls who knew him in his teen years tend to agree with this statement.[6]

In his youth Lincoln was as uninterested in women them as they were in him. According to his friend Anna Roby at this age "Lincoln didn't like girls much". His cousin Sophie Hanks, His Stepmother, and several other people close to him agreed. His relative Dennis Hanks called him "the bashfullest boy who ever lived". This statement lends credence to the idea that he was interested in girls by this age he just was socially awkward and shy when it came to romance which many interpreted as a lack of interest. Also at this age he saw studying as a priority over romance.[7]

By his early twenties when he was living in New Salem, Illinois (1830s), he was still socially awkward around women. He rarely attended social occasions "where the sexes mingled" and when he did "he never danced or cut up". Fellow New Salem resident Jason Duncan remembered that Lincoln "was verry reserved towards the opposite sex". Duncan couldn't "recollect of his ever paying his addresses to any young lady". According to resident James Short, Lincoln "didn't see the girls much," because "he cared but little for them," when he desired company he "would just as lieve the company were all men as to have a mixture of the sexes". Statements from many others corroborate the idea that wasn't a matter of lack of attraction to women but rather a social awkwardness around them". According to one young New Salem women in his mid-twenties Lincoln was "a very queer fellow" and "very bashful"

[6] 41-2.
[7] Ibid.

According to another young local woman Lincoln was "so awkward I was always sorry for him" he "did not seem to know what to say in the company of women".[8]

Unlike Lincoln whose childhood consisted of log cabins in the woods of Kentucky and Indiana, Mary Todd grew up in "an elegantly appointed mansion full of European imports…" in the city of Lexington, Kentucky. Mary was the fourth child of Eliza Parker Todd (the descendant of friends of George Washington) and Robert. S. Todd (the son of "the eminent general Levi Todd"). Mary's father Robert Todd possessed over sixty slaves on his estate. While Robert opposed slave labor "in principle", slave labor was used both in the household and as source of income. Mary's mother Elizabeth "Eliza" Todd was responsible for "disciplining" the slaves. Usually there were three slaves in the household at a time, all female and all on loan from Eliza's mother. In 1825, when Mary was six years old her mother died at the age of 31 following the birth of her seventh child. After her mother's death, her father "paid little attention to Mary and her siblings". Her father Robert began courting his second wife Elizabeth "Betsey" Humphreys mere weeks after Eliza's death and got engaged less than six months after. They were married the following year in 1826. Her father's engagement and remarriage so soon after her mother's death must have been jarring and difficult for seven-year old Mary. Their marriage would result in nine half-sibling over the following fifteen years.[9]

Unlike Lincoln who for the most part was self-educated, Mary received a high quality education for over a decade and excelled academically. This included Madame Victorie Charlotte Leclere Mentelle's Academy "where French was spoken exclusively". While there she

[8] 97-102.
[9] Catherine Clinton. *Mrs. Lincoln: A Life*. (Harper Perennial, 2009), 9-15; Jean H. Baker *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*. (W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 25-30.

studied “social graces such as conversation, dancing, and letter writing.”.[11] The Todds also enjoyed a rich, elite social life. At the time Lincoln was moving from his father’s cabin to New Salem (Illinois), Mary was visiting Henry Clay’s mansion “to show off her new pony”. Both Mary and all her other siblings from her father’s first marriage left home at a young age to get away from their stepmother’s perceived “relentless persecution”. This is why Mary went to live with her sister in Springfield where her sister Elizabeth “brought over her sisters one-by-one, introduced them to society, and gave them weddings”. The only major experience in childhood they had in common was that both of their mothers died while they were still young. Lincoln was nine when his mother was by milk sickness, Mary was six when her mother was killed by a post birth bacterial infection.[10]

Before meeting Mary Todd, Lincoln had two previous serious relationships. The first and most meaningful one was with Ann Rutledge. She was “the daughter of one of his early New Salem landlords, James Rutledge”. She was a skilled cook, intelligent, educated, “pleasant, a good conversationalist, hardworking and domestically accomplished”. She had a “kind nature that one observer described as “angelic” and a modesty that left her “without any of the airs of your city belles”. According to her cousin James McGrady Rutledge, she was “a girl who’s company people liked… seeming to enjoy life and helping others enjoy it”. Unlike attitudes towards Mary Todd later on people considered her to be “a woman worthy of Lincoln’s love”. According to Parthena Nance Hill “Lincoln was deeply in love with Ann”. Initially she was engaged to a merchant named John McNamar. McNamar left for New York to “fetch his

[10] Clinton, 9-15; Baker, 40.

family". He did not return for three years and during his absence he wrote so rarely that she had assumed the engagement was off. During McNamar's absence, Lincoln began to court her.

During their courtship he escorted her on evening walks, helped her with household chores, studied grammar and sang songs together. Ann's sister Nancy stated "he declared his love and was accepted for she loved him with a more mature affection than she had ever felt for McNamar. No one could ever have seen them together and not be convinced that they loved each other truly". In 1835 "Abe and Ann evidently became engaged but decided to postpone their wedding for a year because she wished to further her education and Lincoln wanted to prepare for the bar". She also wanted properly break off her engagement to McNamar. While waiting for McNamar's return (so she could end the relationship in person), "Ann became sick, most likely with typhoid fever." She died a several weeks later.[11]

Ann's death in August 1835 caused Lincoln to sink into a deep depression. He was "so profoundly grief-stricken that many friends worried that he might lose his mind". Henry McHenry remembered that "after…" her death "he seemed quite changed, he seemed retired & loved solitude, he seemed wrapped in profound thought, indifferent, to transpiring events, had but little to say , but would take his gun and wander off in the woods by him self, away from the association of even those he most esteemed…" Lincoln's friends were concerned that he might commit suicide and were "compelled to keep watch and ward over Mr. Lincoln" because he was "from the sudden shock somewhat temporarily deranged." We watched during storms-fogs-damp gloomy weather Mr. Lincoln for fear of an accident". It took him a very long time to recover from his grief. According to a friend of his "long after Ann died, Abe and I would be

[11] Burlingame, 97-102.

alone perhaps in the grocery on a rainy night, and Abe would sit there, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands, the tears dropping through his fingers."[12]

Lincoln's second courtship was in New Salem, Illinois with the Kentuckian Mary Owens. Owens' father was a wealthy planter in Green County, Kentucky. She dressed more elegantly than most New Salem women. She was "5 feet 5 inches tall, plump, weighing between 150 and 180 pounds, and considered "not pretty," "matronly," "strong nervous & muscular,"" and had a "massive, angular , square, prominent, and broad" forehead, "fair skin & deep blue eyes" and dark, curling hair". Even though she was less pretty than Ann Rutledge, she was "intellectually gifted and accomplished". She was remembered as "smart, sharp, quick & strong minded, very intellectual," a "good conversationalist" and a "splendid reader". Also she "loved wit & humor", had an excellent disposition, was jovial, social, good-natured, gay and lively, light-hearted and cheery," and "kind and considerate". These features are all things that would have been of great appeal to Lincoln. When it came to romance Lincoln tended to place a much greater value on intellect and personality than looks. This is supported by his choices in romantic partners. Mary Owens and Lincoln saw "eye to eye" on politics. This was probably important for Lincoln. Three years after Lincoln first met Mary Owens (who he had not seen since then) her sister Betsy Abell proposed that Lincoln marry Owens. Lincoln courted her for a year and a half before ending the relationship. The courtship went badly. When she came to New Salem in 1836 to be courted by him, he was disappointed by how she had changed. "I knew she was over-size, but she now appeared a fair match for Falstaff" Lincoln confided to a friend(Lincoln is referring to Sir John Falstaff was a morbidly obese character that appears in three of Shakespeare's plays). Also, according to Lincoln she had aged poorly: "when I beheld her, I could not for my life avoid

[12] Ibid.

thinking of my mother; and this, not from withered features, for her skin was too full of fat, to permit its contracting in to wrinkles; but from her want of teeth, weather-beaten appearance in general , and from a kind of notion that an in my head, that nothing could have commenced at the size of infancy, and reached her present bulk in less than thirty five or forty years; and in short, I was not [at] all pleased with her…" These comments show that while looks weren't the most important factor in a romantic partner, they did matter to some extent. Lincoln Even so, Lincoln's conscience kept him from letting himself break off the relationship for superficial reasons. He tried to persuade himself "that the mind was much more to be valued than the person". Lincoln had feelings for her and liked her as a person but struggled to look past her appearance.[13]

Lincoln felt convinced that "no other man on earth would have her".[11] He "dreaded" the idea of marrying her but felt that he had already committed since he had promised Owens' sister that he would marry her and "would take care of her for better or for worse…".[11] He determined "At once…to consider her my wife; and this done, all my powers of discovery were put to the rack, in search of perfections in her, which might be fairly set-off against her defects. I tried to imagine she was handsome, which, but for her unfortunate corpulency, was actually true. Exclusive of this, no woman that I have seen, has a finer face."

Lincoln "was fixed "firm as the surge repelling rock" in my resolution" even though he was "continually repelling the rashness, which" had led him to agree to Mary Owens. He stated that in his whole life he had "been in no bondage, either real or imaginary from the thralldom of which I so much desired to be free…". Lincoln contemplated how he "might procrastinate the

[13] Burlingame, no page given (hereafter "n.p."); "John Falstaff." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Nov. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Falstaff..

evil day for a time, which" he "really dreaded as much-perhaps more, than an Irishman does the halter…"[14]

When Lincoln finally proposed, Owens turned him down.[11] Lincoln was shocked: "I verry unexpectedly found myself mortified… in a hundred different ways, my vanity was deeply wounded by the reflection, that I had so long been too stupid to discover her intentions, and at the same time never doubting that I understood them perfectly; and also that she whom I had taught myself to believe nobody else would have, had actually rejected me with all my fancied greatness. Other men "have been made fools of by the girls; but this can never be with truth said of me. I most emphatically in this instance made a fool of myself." He blamed himself for the rejection as he felt that if she would reject him, he must not be worthy of being her husband. This was a major blow to Lincoln's self-esteem. His confidence that no other man would want her made him feel that if she, of all people would reject him, he must be even less desirable as a husband than he considered her to be as a wife. He was so hurt that he dejectedly decided to never marry, as he could never "be satisfied with any one who would be block-head enough to have me"[15]

When looking at Owens' perspective the reason for her rejection becomes clearer. Owens' main problem with Lincoln was that she considered him to have poor manners.[11] Owens provides multiple examples to support her perspective which while she perceived as poor manners, both were cases of an unfair misinterpretation of Lincoln's behavior. Once, when on a walk with Owens and the wife of Lincoln's friend Bowling Green (Nancy), they were walking up a steep hill and Mrs. Green was struggling to carry her child. After the walk, Owens

[14] *Lincoln: Speeches and Writings: 1832-1858*, (New York: Library of America, 1989), 38-39.
[15] Burlingame, n.p.

criticized Lincoln for not offering to help.[11] Lincoln responded "Why, she never asked me…". Lincoln went on to state he had thought Mrs. Green "would be afraid to let a fellow like me touch her baby for fear he might break it or something. I'd carry a bushel of them for you, Mary". Even though Owens interpreted this as poor manners, this story illustrates an example of Lincoln's low self-esteem. An additional example which was provided by Owens simply shows an example of a lack of self-awareness on her part. One day while traveling with other New Salem women and their suitors they came to a creek at which all the suitors except Lincoln assisted their companions in crossing. While Owens doesn't specify what form the assistance came in, within the context of Lincolns refusal to assist her and his reaction to her request to assistance ("With a laugh, Lincoln replied that he reckoned she was plenty smart "enough to care for herself"") it seems quite likely they were carried across. In this context it seems Lincoln was trying to spare her feelings with his response as it is unlikely Lincoln had the strength to carry her across as she weighed "between 150 and 180 pounds" when they first met in 1833 and as previously stated by 1836, she had gained a lot of weight. When put in that context it is actually an example of good manners on Lincoln's part.[16]

Fateful Meeting: Abraham and Mary as a Couple

[16] Ibid.

Mary Todd was the cousin of Lincoln's Law partner John Todd Stuart. It seems likely that Lincoln and Mary Todd first met when their mutual friend Joshua Speed brought Lincoln to events at the home of Mary's sister and brother-in law (Elizabeth and Ninian. W. Edwards) where Mary was staying. Mary was "short, plump, and, though not pretty, had striking blue eyes and a fine complexion". According to her friends, Mary was "witty impulsive & made no attempt to conceal her feeling, indeed it would have been an impossibility had she desired to do so, for her face was an index to every passing emotion… ". Mary had "an unusual gift of sarcasm" and "now and then indulged in sarcastic witty remarks, that cut like a Damascus blade".[17]

Among rivals for her affection were "a grandson of Patrick Henry, future U.S. Senator [and political rival to Lincoln] Stephen A. Douglas, Edward D. Baker, James Sheilds, and Lyman Trumbull…" Lincoln began courting Mary Todd during the winter of 1839 to 1840. A relative of Ninian Edwards (Mary's brother-in-law) recalled Lincoln admired Mary's "naturally fine mind and cultivated tastes" as she was "a great reader and possessed of a remarkably retentive memory," was "quick at repartee and when the occasion seemed to require it was sarcastic and severe". Mary's "brilliant conversation, often embellished with apt quotations," made Mary "much sought after by the young people of the town" both socially and romantically. These features are what attracted Lincoln to her.[18]

Mary's sister Elizabeth while initially approving of the relationship changed her mind as she got know him. While like Mary she saw "Lincoln was a man on his way up", his humble background showed in his behavior. He was "careless of his personal appearance" and

[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.; Jason Emerson, *The Madness of Mary Lincoln*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), p 7.

"awkward and shy" among other issues. Lincoln was aware of his flaws. He once confessed he avoided church "because "I am conscious I should not know how to behave myself". Over time his social awkwardness when among people of higher class backgrounds improved but his choice in clothing didn't.[19]

Early in their relationship Mary was aware of Lincoln's social awkwardness and "lack of polish". Occasionally Mary would tease him about it, which he found hard to understand as he didn't consider it to be important. Her cousin Stephen. T. Logan "warned Mary that Lincoln " is much to rugged for your little white had to attempt to polish". Mary never got over it and Lincoln made little effort to change his ways. When in town (Springfield, Illinois), he would usually spend Sundays at the Edwards' home with Mary. Their mutual friend Joshua Speed would usually accompany Lincoln. During the early stages of their courtship (winter and spring of 1840) Lincoln was frequently out of town for politics (campaigning in southern Illinois) and his work as a lawyer. He couldn't have seen Mary that summer as she had spent it with relatives in Missouri. According to Speed, they courted through the mail during this time. According to many people who knew and spoke to Mary during this stage of the courtship, Mary was by this time determined to win Lincoln's affection and his hand in marriage. In attempting to attract Lincoln Mary "read much & committed much to memory to make herself agreeable"(according to Mrs. Benjamin Edwards). This could be interpreted as her being manipulative in an attempt to attract Lincoln, but to me it seems to be illustrative of her low self-esteem. It implies she didn't think Lincoln would want to marry her unless she changed herself (through self-education and behaving differently).[20] Despite their limited amount of time spent together, they became

[19] Burlingame, n.p.
[20] Ibid.

engaged in the fall of 1840. Why they became engaged as soon as they did is unknown. If some of their courtship by mail during that year survived, historians would probably have a better understanding of their attraction to each other. In late 1840, Lincoln "broke off" their engagement. According to a friend of Lincoln's, he had come to the conclusion "that they "were not congenial, and were incompatible" and because of this "they ought not to marry." There were other motives involved in this decision. In the fall of 1840 "he fell in love with Matilda Edwards". Matilda was Ninian Edwards' (Mary's brother-in-law) 18 year old cousin who had recently arrived in Springfield.[21]

Like Mary, she was "very bright" and "she moved at ease among the social and refined classes". Unlike Mary, Matilda had a "gentle temper…conciliatory manners, and the sweetness of her heart made her dear to all who knew her." Also, she was described as "something of a coquette", "a most fascinating and handsome girl, tall, graceful, and rather reserved,". Lincoln was "among…many…men who held her dear…". During "the winter of 1840-1841" Matilda Edwards and Mary Todd "seemed to form the grand center of attraction. Swarms of strangers who had little else to engage their attention hovered around them, to catch a passing smile". Matilda "received twenty-two offers of marriage before wedding Newton. D. Strong in 1843". In January of 1841, Springfield resident Jane. D. Bell wrote (to her sister-in law) that "Lincoln had declared "if he had it in his power he would not have one feature in her face altered, he thinks she is so perfect". According to Bell, "Lincoln and Joshua Speed "spent most of their time at [the] Edwards [home] this winter" and that "Lincoln could never bear to leave Miss Edwards's side in company" because "He fell desperately in love with her." Even so, Lincoln was "too shy

[21] Ibid.

to approach" Matilda romantically, who told Elizabeth Edwards that Lincoln "never mentioned Such a Subject to me: he never even Stooped to pay me a Compliment".[22]

Before breaking off the engagement Lincoln admitted to John. J. Hardin "that he thought he did not love" Mary Todd "as he should and that he would do her a great wrong if he married her." Lincoln told Mrs. William Butler "it would just kill me to marry Mary Todd." Referring to Matilda Edwards, Lincoln's close friend Joshua Speed "recalled "Lincoln -seeing another girl-& finding he did not love [the women who eventually became] his wife wrote a letter saying he did not love her." When Lincoln showed Speed the letter he "tried to persuade Lincoln to burn it up". In response Lincoln said "Speed I always knew you were an obstinate man. If you won't deliver it I will get Some one to do it". "Speed replied" (according to Speed) "I shall not deliver it nor give it to you to be delivered: Words are forgotten-Misunderstood-Passed by-not noticed in a private Conversation- but once you put your words in writing and they Stand as a living & eternal Monument against you. If you think you have will & Manhood Enough to go and see her and Speak to her what you say in that letter, you may do that".[23]

Lincoln followed Speed's advice. Lincoln later recounted what happened to Speed and according to Speed's recollection "told her that he did not love her-She rose-and said 'The deceiver shall be deceived wo is me.', alluding to a young man She fooled….Lincoln drew her down on his Knee-Kissed her- & parted-He going one way & She another-Lincoln did Love Miss [Matilda] Edwards-'Mary' Saw it- told Lincoln the reason of his Change of mind-heart & soul-released him." According to Elizabeth (Mary's sister) afterwards Mary ""wrote a letter to Mr. L Stating that that She would release him from his Engagements," with the understanding

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

"that She would hold the question an open one-that is that She had not Changed her mind, but felt as always."". This shows still had feelings for him and hoped he would change his mind.[24]

The decision for Lincoln between love and commitment tore at his conscience. Ninian Edwards recalled "in his Conflicts of duty-honor & his love went as Crazy as a Loon." On January 21st, 1841, Martinette Hardin McKee (Mary's cousin[17]) wrote her brother "We have been very much distressed, on Mr. Lincoln's account; hearing that he had two Cat fits and a Duck fit." A cat fit meant "Anger or panic expressed verbally loudly and with overt bodily gestures". A Duck fit was slang for becoming hysterical, angry or excited in a way that resembles an angry duck.[25]

One week later Jane. D Bell wrote that Lincoln "is in rather a bad way….The doctors say he came within an inch of being a perfect lunatic for life. He was perfectly crazy for some time, not able to attend to his business at all. They say he does not look like the same person." During this time in which he went "crazy for a week or so", he was "nursed back to health at the Butlers' home, where his friend Orville. H. Browning was staying".[11] According to Browning, Lincoln "was so much affected as to talk incoherently, and to be delirious to the extent of not knowing what he was doing. [This] aberration of mind resulted entirely from the situation…he got himself into-he was engaged to Miss Todd, and in love with Miss Edwards, and his conscience troubled him dreadfully for the supposed injustice he had done, and the supposed violation of his word which he had committed."[11] Many of Lincolns friends, including James. H. Matheny and

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid; *14 "Catfit - Wiktionary, The Free Dictionary." *Wiktionary*, en.wiktionary.org/wiki/catfit. Accessed 18 Feb. 2024; *15 Harris, J.C., et al. "Green's Dictionary of Slang." *Duck Fit, n. - Green's Dictionary of Slang*, Green's Dictionary of Slang, greensdictofslang.com/entry/uqst5jq#:~:text=In%20phrases,temper%2C%20to%20become%20extremely%20excited. Accessed 18 Feb. 2024.

Joshua Speed were worried that Lincoln would commit suicide. "According to Speed , they "had to remove razors from his room-take away all Knives and other such dangerous things-&c-it was terrible." "Lincoln declared that he "would be more than willing" to die, but, he said, " I have an irrepressible desire to live till I can be assured that the world is a little better for my having lived in it."".[26]

Before Lincolns friends got the chance to "confiscate potentially lethal objects, a fellow legislator, Hiram. W. Thornton, recalled encountering Lincoln "sitting on a box behind a woodshed. One leg was resting upon the other in a flexed position and he was whetting a knife o the bootleg."" When he asked what Lincoln was up to, Lincoln responded "I am just getting the knife sharp enough to do what I want to do with it.". Concerned (because of Lincoln's emotional state), Thornton took the knife and then talked to him. Lincoln "emphasized that he was no good and he had better be out of this world than in it." If Thornton hadn't taken the knife it could have completely changed the course of history. Same is true on other occasions where Lincoln was contemplating suicide. If it wasn't for his friends, he might have not gotten through his periods of depression. On January 20th, Lincoln confided in John. T. Stuart "I have, within the last few days, been making a most discreditable exhibition of myself in the way of hypochondriaism [i.e., depression] and thereby got an impression that Dr. Henry is necessary to my existence". From the 13th to the 18th of January, Lincoln spent several hours a day with Dr. Henry. During This period of Hypochondrism, Lincoln tried to get Dr. Henry the position of postmaster for Springfield because he believed that unless Dr. Henry "gets that place he leaves Springfield".

[26] Burlingame, n.p.

He forwarded John Stuart "a petition in his favor signed by all or nearly all the Whig members of the Legislature, as well as other Whigs."[27]

There days later (the 23rd) he "elaborated "I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful face on the earth. Whether I shall ever be better I can not tell; I awfully forbode I shall not. To remain as I am is impossible; I must die or be better, it appears to me." On the 24th James. C. Conkling observed that Lincoln looked ""reduced and emaciated," with barely enough strength "to speak above a whisper."" Conkling was worried for Lincoln, stating "Poor L! How are the mighty fallen!...His case at present is truly deplorable but what prospect there may be for ultimate relief I cannot pretend to say. I doubt not but he can declare 'that loving is a painful thrill, And not to love more painful still' but would not like to be intimate that he has experienced 'That surely 'tis the worst of pain To love and not be loved again.'"[28]

Not long after, Lincoln seemed to have fully recovered. On January 26th Sarah. E. Hardin told her husband (John. J. Hardin) "I am glad to hear Lincoln has got over his cat fits[.]. [W]e have concluded it was a very unsatisfactory way of terminating his romance[.]. [H]e ought to have died or gone crazy[.] [W]e are very much disappointed indeed."[29]

For the next several months, to Mary's disappointment, Lincoln avoided her. It is possible he went so far as to consider leaving the country. On March 5th, Lincoln's former law partner John. T. Stuart recommended Lincoln "for the post of chargé d'affaires at Bogotá, Colombia". This may have been done at Lincoln's request. In June, Mary "lamented…that

[27] Ibid., Lincoln, *Speeches,* 26.
[28] Burlingame, n.p.
[29] Ibid., Baker, *Mary,* 17-22.

Lincoln "deems me unworthy of notice, as I have not met him in the gay world for months". Mary was comforted by her observation "that others were a seldom gladdened by his presence as my humble self" but, she admitted "I would that the case were different, that he would once more resume his Station in Society, that 'Richard Should be himself again,' much, much happiness would it afford me." The phrase "Richard should be himself again" meant she desired him to recover from his mental illness. It is a variation an "Richard's himself again" (meaning someone had recovered from an illness and returned to normal) which is from Shakespeare's play Richard III.[30]

During their separation in 1841, Lincoln courted Sarah Rickard (The sister of Elizabeth Butler). He had met her many times while boarding at the home of Elizabeth and William Butler from 1837 and 1842. She was 12 when they first met (Lincoln was 28). He courted her in 1841 (when she was 16) and proposed marriage to her "remarking that since she was name Sarah, she was destined to marry Abraham"(a biblical reference). His proposal was rejected since, as she explained later "his peculiar manner and his General deportment would not be likely to fascinate a young girl just entering the society world.[31]

In the summer of 1841, Lincoln's close friend Joshua Speed fell in love with and got engaged to his neighbor Fanny Henning. Like Lincoln with Mary Todd, upon Fanny's acceptance Speed felt "immense suffering" because he "doubted that he really loved her". Lincoln sent Speed several letters that "reveal as much about their author as they do about their recipient". Lincoln "assured speed that his anxiety was groundless, rhetorically asking his

[30] Ibid., 187-90; "Persons: McKee, Martinette." *Papers of Abraham Lincoln*, papersofabrahamlincoln.org/persons/MC42422. Accessed 21 Feb. 2024; Pascal Tréguer, "'Richard's Himself Again': Meaning and Origin." *Word Histories*, 20 June 2022, wordhistories.net/2020/05/25/richards-himself-again/.
[31] Burlingame, *Lincoln,* 187-90.

doubt-torn friend: "How you came to court her? Was it because you thought she desired it; and that you had given her reason to expect it? If it was for that, why did not the same reason make you court Ann Todd [cousin of Mary Todd], and at least twenty others of whom you can think, & to whom it would apply with greater force than to her? Did you court her for her wealth? Why, you knew she had none. But you say you reasoned yourself into it. What do you mean by that? Was it not, that you found yourself unable to reason yourself out of it? Did you not think, and partly from the purpose, of courting her the first time you saw or heard of her? What had reason to do with it, at that early stage? There was nothing at that time for reason to work upon. Whether she was moral, amiable, sensible, or even of good character, you did not, nor could not then know; except perhaps the last from the company you found in her in. All you then did or could know of her, was her personal appearance and deportment; and these, if they impress at all, impress the heart and not the head. Say candidly, were not those heavenly black eyes, the whole basis of your early reasoning on the subject?"[32]

Lincoln may have had his relationship with Mary Todd in mind when writing this letter of advice to Speed. If so, it helps to explain why he broke off the engagement and also why he renewed it. It wasn't exactly that he didn't love Mary Todd, but that he thought he loved her for the wrong reasons (money and obligation). As Lincoln thought about why he loved her following the recovery from his mental breakdown, he may have realized that he was mistaken about his reasoning and decided to renew the engagement. Following Speed's marriage to Fanny on February, 15th, 1842, Lincoln wrote another letter to Speed in which he seems to be advising and reassuring himself and Speed simultaneously. "I do fondly hope…that you will never again need any comfort from abroad. But should I be mistaken in this… still let me urge you, as I have

[32] Ibid.

ever done, to remember the dep[t]h and even the agony of despondency, that verry shortly you are to feel well again. I am now fully convinced, that you love her as ardently as you are capable of loving. Your ever being happy in her presence, and your intense anxiety about her health, if there were nothing else, would place this beyond all dispute in my mind. I incline to think it probable, that your nerves will fail you occasionally for a while; but once you get them fairly graded now, that trouble is over forever. I think if I were you, in case my mind were not exactly right, I would avoid being idle; I would immediately engage in some business, or go to making preparations for it, which would be the same thing." From this letter it seems that by this point, that Lincoln had made the decision to renew his relationship with Mary.[33]

The Lincolns and Mental Health Challenges

Inside the wedding ring Lincoln had purchased for Mary Todd he had had inscribed the phrase "Love is Eternal". Growing up wealthy seems to have made it difficult for Mary to accept and adjust to the drastic change in income and social status that came with marrying Lincoln. She also was constantly self-conscious about Lincoln's behavior. According to another Springfield resident "it hurt her that Lincoln was so plain and dressed so plain". She complained to her half-sister Emile that "it hurt her that L. would open [the] front door instead of having [a] servant do so and because L. would eat butter with his knife she raised 'merry war'". When a friend told her "Mary if I had a husband with a mind like yours [has,] I would[']t care what he did", Mary "admitted: "It is very foolish. It is a small thing to complain of". Even though she was aware it was unfair of her, it didn't stop his behavior from bothering her.[34]

[33] Ibid.
[34] Burlingame, n.p.

As President, Lincoln continued his lifelong habit of dressing below his station. Mary "criticized him for having shirt cuffs to frayed for a man in his exalted station". She went to Ward Hill Lamon for help in teaching Lincoln how to properly remove his hat. Even with "the best efforts of Lamon and Secretary of State… Seward" there was no improvement. Her criticism might have been in response to her own out-of-control spending as First Lady, one of several strong indications of increasing mental deterioration. Both Mary Todd and Abraham Lincoln struggled with mental illness throughout their lives and had a history of mental illness in their families. Mental illness (especially melancholy) in Lincoln's family was probably genetic.[35]

Lincoln's father Thomas struggled from melancholy throughout his life. Thomas Lincoln could be "taciturn" and "very quiet" and "often got the 'blues' and had some strange sort of spells, and wanted to be alone all he could when he had them. He would walk away out on the barrens alone, and sometimes stay out sometimes half a day" Thomas's brother Mordecai and Mordecai's sons were "known 'as men who at times communed with themselves , absorbed in their own thoughts.'" Mordecai was said to be "affected with all kinds of nervous disorders" the most common of which was "sustained period of melancholia and depression…" . Mordecai was also known to have "broad mood swings which were probably intensified by his heavy drinking." Lincoln's Great Uncle testified in court that he had "a deranged mind." "According to a family historian who grew up in the late nineteenth century, the descendants of Mordecai Lincoln "suffered from all the nervous disorders known. Some were on the ragged edge." "On the ragged edge" meaning they were on the verge of insanity. There are several other examples of family members of Lincoln struggling with mental illness including Mary Rowena Lincoln,

[35] Ibid.

Benjamin Mudd, and Mary Jane Lincoln (who was committed to an a asylum in 1854 due to insanity caused by what the court deemed hereditary mental illness) .[36]

Lincoln's mother Nancy Hanks Lincoln also showed symptoms which show it is very likely that she suffered from depression. Almost every description of Nancy describes her as sad.[19] Her cousin John Hanks stated "her nature "was kindness, mildness, tenderness, sadness.""[19] Lincoln remembered his mother as "intellectual, sensitive and somewhat sad."[37]

Mental illness was most likely also genetic for Mary as there is a history of mental illness within her family. Mary's youngest biological sibling, Dr. George. R. C. Todd (according to a fellow physician) "referred to himself as the "black sheep" of the family, that he did "not get along with people," and that he was "very egotistical, and extremely jealous of his professional reputation. Very peculiar and eccentric. Drank whiskey to excess"". According to Dr. Todd's lawyer, Dr. Todd was "inclined to be abrupt almost to brusqueness in his manner to those whom he did not like", "he took no pains to conceal his dislike for those who had incurred his displeasure,' and "refused to consort with his own contemporaries to any great extent.". Also, Dr. Todd was "given to moods of deep melancholy". Like Mary "he had an explosive temper that bordered on madness". A Union POW considered him ""the most vicious wretch I ever knew" because he cruelly mistreated enemy [Union] patients"". As a doctor for the Confederacy he would ""in raving fits of madness" assault sick and wounded' Union soldiers who he was supposed to be helping. "When a young Union lieutenant from Kentucky irritated him, Dr. Todd "pulled him off the bunk to the floor and kicked him in the most brutal manner". The prisoner

[36] Ibid, 19-20; Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness*. (Mariner Books, 2006), 12.
[37] Shenk, *Melancholy*, 12.

died the next day. When Dr. Todd was told this he declared "I am G-d d-d clad of it. I meant to kill the son of a b-h before he left here.". Dr. Todd also looted private homes during the Gettysburg campaign. Several of Mary's other siblings also exhibited signs of mental illness. Her "eccentric, heavily tattooed half-brother David" (who ran away from home when he was 14" also brutally abused Union POWs. While stationed at Libby Prison in Richmond. David was "known as one of the most brutal officers" at the prison. Among other actions he "slashed a POW with his saber and kicked the corpses of the Union dead, calling them dammed abolitionists.". Mary's older brother Levi was "described by his wife as an improvident drunkard with a "cruel and inhuman manner". Levi "alienated family and acquaintances and died friendless" and alone in 1865. Mary's sister Ann was "Pugnacious" and "loud voiced" and was considered "the most quick tempered and vituperative" of the Todd sisters (including Mary).[11] Ann was "usually in a temper". Mary said Ann was a woman who "possesses such a miserable disposition & so false a tongue" that no one respects" her. Mary thought "Ann's "tongue for so many years, has been considered 'no slander'- and as a child & young girl, [she] could not be outdone in falsehood…I grieve for those who have to come in contact with her malice, yet even that, is so well understood, [that] the object of her wrath, generally rises, with good people, in proportion to her vindictiveness" When some showed Ann this quote Ann replied "Mary was writing About herself". While it true that Mary's temper was probably as almost as (if not as) bad as Ann's, Mary's behavior when angry was very different. Mary's sister Elodie warned her fiancée "I am a Todd, and some of these days you may be unfortunate enough to find out what they are…I cannot govern my temper or my tongue…" and "I am one of the most unforgiving creatures you ever knew". Furthermore, niece Julia (Elizabeth and Ninian Edwards' daughter) was considered mentally unstable. Julia's mother said "Insanity,

appeared… in the case of my own daughter, at the early age of thirteen, - for six months, she was so decidedly flighty, as to be closely guarded…[at] no time was she ever natural in her demeanor. God pity those who are the victims – and who are the anxious suffers in such terrible afflictions!". In 1845, 18 year old Julia married Edward Lewis Baker who was the co-owner of the Springfield *Illinois State Journal*. When visiting Washington in 1864 "Julia Baker scandalized polite society with her bizarre, risqué behavior". Julia's close friend Ada Bailhache (who was married to Baker's business partner) "recalled "Mrs. Baker was a wayward girl and very attractive women to the great sorrow of her family and friends. There was a scandal connected with her about 1872, and Mr. Baker was sent a consul to the Argentine Republic where they remained until Mr. Baker's death" thirty-five years later. In the 1870s a court decided Julia was unable to manage her own affairs and appointed a trustee to manage them. Julia's sister Elizabeth Edwards Clover inherited much of Mary Todd Lincoln's wardrobe when she died even though the clothing was long out of style. As one resident of Springfield recalled, nobody "thought anything of it" since "the Todds had always been eccentric". Julia's niece (Mary's great-niece) "died in the Norbury Sanitarium" which was a "Private Residential Home for the Treatment of Nervous and Mental Disorders".[38]

These genetic issues might have been passed through Mary and Abrahm to the next generation of Lincolns. Their son Robert wrote from Georgia in 1906 "I have been down here trying for nearly two months trying to recover from a nervous breakdown".[11] Their son Tad had a host of challenges that were not considered diagnosable in the 19th century.

[38] Burlingame, n.p.

As a child Mary was known for "precocious charm and a penchant for melodrama". Beginning in childhood Mary was deeply interested in fashion. In an attempt to imitate a style popular with women the time of her childhood (but not considered appropriate for children), Mary fashioned hoopskirts out willow reeds for her and her cousin. Proud of her work she showed her stepmother who ridiculed her declaring "what a fright you are "and ordered May and her cousin to "take those things off & go to Sunday school." Mary's cousin recalled "we went to our room chagrined and angry. Mary burst into tears, and gave the first exhibition of temper I had ever seen or known her to make. She thought we were badly treated, and expressed herself freely on the subject." Betsy would tell the story so often for years afterwards it became a "standing joke" in the family. Throughout her life she had a desire for clothes which developed to the point of an obsession. One factor that may have contributed to her addiction to buying clothing may have been her struggles with self-esteem. Mary was insecure about her physical appearance. She called her body a "ruddy pine knot" and an "exuberance of flesh". She was also insecure about her husband's financial status as she was had grown up wealthy and had difficulty psychologically adjusting to a middle class income. She seems to have fought these psychological insecurities through the purchasing of elegant and beautiful clothing. Clothing, especially the purchasing of new clothing was a commonly reoccurring topic in her letters. Due to Mary's spending sprees during Lincoln's presidency (much of which was funded my misappropriated government money), Congress denied her a pension after Lincoln's assassination.[39]

[39] Ibid., n.p, 97-102, 168-184; Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln*, 17-19; Baker, *Mary,* 25-30; Justin G. Turner, and Linda Levitt Turner. *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*. (Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1987), xvii.

According to Mary's cousin and childhood friend Margret Stuart "she was very highly strung, nervous, impulsive, irritable, having an emotional temperament much like an April day, running all over with laughter one moment, at the next crying as though her heart would break." Orville. H. Browning considered her to be "demented" and remembered that Mary "was a girl of much vivacity in conversation but was subject to…spells of mental depression…As we used to familiarly state it she was always 'either in the garret or cellar'". All these traits suggest Mary Todd was struggling with bipolar disease.[40]

Throughout his life Lincoln suffered from periodic "melancholy", an old-fashioned term for clinical depression. Lincoln stated "he felt like committing suicide often" and "although he appeared to enjoy life rapturously, Still he was the victim of terrible melancholy. He sought company, and indulged in fun and hilarity without restraint" but "when by himself, he was so overcome with mental depression that he never carried a knife in his pocket." Throughout his life Lincoln struggled with night terrors. He would wake up "in the middle of the night trembling" and "talking gibberish".[41]

Lincoln also struggled with low self-esteem and a "deep-seated inferiority complex" his whole life. This was one of the reasons for his famous modesty. These issues most likely originated from a self-consciousness of his humble origins. In his campaign autobiography he states that "he regrets his want of education, and does what he can to supply that want". While Lincoln had very little formal education, he worked very hard to educate himself mainly through reading books. His lack of formal education was probably the largest contributing factor to his low self-esteem. Self-consciousness about his education probably increased when he was

[40] Burlingame, n.p.
[41] 97-102, 168-184.

elected President. This is due to him being the first U.S. president lacking a significant formal education. Lincoln did have a little formal education but it was sporadic and limited in quality. Except for Lincoln, the only U.S. President to lack a formal education was his successor, Andrew Johnson. Lincoln's issues with self-esteem only increased his ambition as it led him to have a powerful desire the admiration and respect of others. In a campaign speech he declared "I have no other [ambition] so great as being truly esteemed of my fellow citizens".[42]

Out of Mary Todd Lincoln's nine half siblings eight of them ended up supporting the Confederacy. Mary made no effort to hide her anger towards them. In 1862 she expressed "hope that her brothers in confederate uniform would be captured or slain. "they would kill my husband if they could, and destroy our government -the dearest of all thing to us." she declared, shortly after her half-brother Samuel…" was killed in the battle of Shiloh. In 1863, when her half-brother Samuel was killed, she stated "it is natural that I should feel for one so nearly related to me," but he had "made his choice long ago. He decided against my husband, and through him against me. He has been fighting against us; and since he chose to be our deadly enemy, I see no special reason why I should bitterly mourn his death." When her half-brother David was condemned by the press for his actions as chief of Richmond's prisons, she "told a reporter that "by no word or act of hers should he escape punishment for his treason against her husband's government." An important recurring detail of her reactions to her half-brothers deaths and troubles is that she saw their betrayal as personal. In all of them she refers to their betrayal of her husband ("would kill my husband if they could", "He decided against my husband", and "his treason against her husband's government") rather than her country or the president or simply

[42] Burlingame, n.p.; List of Presidents of the United States by Education." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 27 Nov. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_presidents_of_the_United_States_by_education.

referring to Lincoln by name. By referring to their betrayal as a betrayal of her husband, she is saying they betrayed her by extension.[43]

One of the traits Mary was best known for was her "unusually high temper… that invariably got the better of her…". When Mary was "offended or antagonized "her agreeable qualities instantly disappeared beneath a wave of stinging satire or sarcastic bitterness."" John Hay and John Nicolay nicknamed Mary "Hellcat". Usually, once her anger passed, she felt remorse for her behavior.[44]

Several friends of Lincoln claimed following his assassination (meaning they waited until Lincoln couldn't refute their claims) made the claim that Lincoln never loved Mary. This was more out of bias against Mary because her mistreatment of Lincoln than from actual evidence. While Lincoln didn't display love in the same way as most people, there is proof he loved her. If he hadn't loved her, it is quite unlikely he would have tolerated her faults as long as he did with little complaint.[45]

The main promoter of the claim that Lincoln never loved Mary was his former law partner William Herndon. It is well documented that Herndon and Mary Todd hated each other. In 1866 Herndon gave lectures about Lincoln's relationship with Ann Rutledge. Mary Todd never forgave Herndon as this understandably was perceived as a slight against her relationship with Lincoln. In 1867, Mary wrote that Herndon was a "miserable man!" and a "dirty dog" and that he had been a "hopeless" alcoholic before being saved by Lincoln. Mary "never once let…[Herndon]…enter her house, despite the fact that her husband worked on a daily basis with

[43] Burlingame, n.p.
[44] Emerson, *Madness,* 7.
[45] Burlingame, n.p.

Herndon for seventeen years not four blocks away. Herndon's revenge was to gather all the negative reports" about her that he could in order to portray her as insane and Lincoln's relationship with her as "domestic hell."[46]

After Lincoln's assassination, she became much more noticeably unstable. Seven months after her husband's assassination Mary wrote "When I reflect, as I am always doing, upon the overwhelming loss, of that, most idolized bot [her son Willie in 1862], and the crushing blow, that deprived me, of my all in all of this life [Abraham], I wonder that I retain my reason & live."[22] Mary's nephew Albert Stevenson Edwards "believed that she "was insane from the time of her husband['s] death until her own death".[11] In 1875, a court in in Illinois judged her to be insane and ordered for her to be confined in a mental hospital.[47]

[46] Charles B. Strozier, *Your Friend Forever, A. Lincoln*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), p xiii-xiv.
[47] Burlingame, n.p.

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