Review Essay

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That subspecies of Abraham Lincoln studies relating to Mary Lincoln continues to flourish in traditional and untraditional venues. A new biography of the controversial first lady is in the wings, as are re-publications of older ones. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum has organized a fair-minded, intelligent special exhibition covering her life. Recently she has emerged as an amplified fictional character in an off-Broadway musical as well as in several novels. No doubt to her chagrin, the episode that has triggered most attention is what Jason Emerson calls “her institutionalization episode,” that is, the so-called insanity trial that took place in Chicago in 1875, her subsequent incarceration in an asylum for just less than four months, and a year later, a Chicago court’s decision that “her reason had been restored.”

Jason Emerson’s answer to whether Mrs. Lincoln was crazy or not appears in his title The Madness of Mary Lincoln. His is a well-researched account with new material and details, especially about her months in the asylum and her subsequent life overseas in Pau, France. Emerson concludes, with some help from a modern psychiatrist, that Mary Lincoln suffered from that recently defined and surprisingly common modern illness of bipolar disease. Of course Mary Lincoln’s insanity—or not—has always been linked to her only surviving son Robert’s orchestration of her trial. If she was not insane, Robert is revealed as what his mother once called him—“my bad son.” As a staunch defender of Robert and a believer that Mary’s only surviving son has been unfairly attacked by, among others, feminists with agendas, part of Emerson’s own agenda is to exonerate Robert by proving his mother’s insanity and the subsequent necessity for her incarceration by a dutiful son who had no choice.

There is a third intention here, presented in an appendix. This is the publication for the first time of new letters mostly from Mary Lincoln to her benefactors James and Myra Bradwell, along with an explana-
tion of their complex provenance. It is worth remembering that these letters were kept by Robert’s lawyers. A descendant of the Bradwells, their granddaughter Myra Pritchard, sold the letters (and some that evidently did not survive) to Robert’s wife, Mary Harlan Lincoln. Pritchard believed that this material would place Mary Todd Lincoln “in a more favorable light.” For Emerson, as for few other historians, there was that hoped-for iconic trunk in the attic, in this case filled with material kept by Robert Lincoln’s lawyers. Emerson deserves great credit for finding letters that help fill some of the gaps in our understanding of Mary Lincoln’s years in Pau and for making them available to the public.

The heart of this story is Mary Lincoln’s insanity trial, institutionalization, later liberation from the sanatorium (where she faced an indeterminate sentence), and her exile in Pau. Emerson begins his story with Lincoln’s assassination, the event that some believe precipitated his wife’s mental deterioration. The author fills the flashbacks of her pre-assassination life with episodes highlighting her nervousness and anxiety—her migraine headaches, her fall from a carriage, her temper tantrum at City Point, and of course her beloved third and fourth sons’ deaths in 1862 and 1871. By the time Lincoln was assassinated, the supposed bipolar disease that Emerson believes was present in Mary’s youth (a classic sign) was in full bloom. In May 1875 when his mother faced another anxiety attack, Robert was justified in taking the legal steps necessary to send his mother off to a sanatorium for mental patients.

In telling this story, The Madness of Mary Lincoln is so judgmentally dedicated to making the case for her insanity and the exculpation of Robert that Mary becomes a one-dimensional mad harridan. Even those who tried to obtain her release—her sister Elizabeth Edwards and the Bradwells—are condemned by Emerson for their deceitful interference and trickery. What is new and praiseworthy here is Emerson’s careful deconstruction of Mary Lincoln’s few months in the Bellevue sanatorium as well as her later years in Pau.

Robert emerges, in Emerson’s hands, as a Victorian gentleman intent on filling “those intangible masculine principles of duty and honor” (21). Thus when the time came, he fulfilled his responsibility by putting his mother in an institution. It is Robert’s “strain and difficulty”—and his “concern, compassion and benevolence”—with which Emerson empathizes, not his mother’s humiliation. But one still wonders why this son did not have the grace to warn his mother of her upcoming trial. In an earlier episode, why didn’t he stay in Chicago after Tad’s death in 1871 before leaving so precipitously for his own monthlong
rest cure in the West, despite his mother’s approval? And surely manly
duty does not change. So why only four years after the trial in 1879 did
Robert write his aunt that “if I could have foreseen my own experience
in this matter [that is his mother’s trial and institutionalization] no
consideration would have induced me to go through it again” (128–29,
italics mine).

With the exception of the depiction of Robert Lincoln as a Victo-
rian gentleman, there is little social or medical context in this book to
situate the specifics of the Mary Lincoln episode within the cultural
mandates of the period. This was a time when women suffering from
“hypochoondriacalism” were the favored population of asylums. Doc-
tors routinely delivered not just chloral hydrate but the opiate lauda-
um to female patients. Certainly society shaped some of the choices
that were made, and this setting should be more explicitly treated in
The Madness of Mary Lincoln. For example, an essential part of being
a Victorian gentleman involved treating mothers, during this age of
growing maternalism, with respect and filial affection. And the need
to fill asylums was certainly a consideration for the alienists (psychia-
trists) of the day.

When Mary Lincoln finally gets a voice (she is denied one during
her trial) in the new Bradwell letters, there is room for disagreement
with Emerson’s interpretation of the material. Driven by a need to fill
out the depressive phase of bipolarism, Emerson finds a possible epi-
sode of depression in the letters written after her release. Reading the
same letter—specifically the one sent from Sorrento, Italy, in 1878—I
do not see clinical depression, but rather the same kind of lugubri-
ous melancholy that beset her husband and that might be expected
from an aging, physically sick woman who had lost a husband and
three sons to death and a fourth in a dysfunctional family relationship.
One wonders, speculatively and counterfactually, had Willie and Tad
survived, how they would have handled their mother’s episodes of
anxiety.

Arguments over the trial have so polarized historical interpreta-
tions that it is difficult to appreciate the options that both mother and
son had in an episode that typifies the kinds of disagreements the
historian David Hackett Fischer identified as the “fallacy of a falsely
dichotomous question.” In such historical questions the two parts are
always considered as mutually exclusive and necessarily polarized.
In this case the false question is Mary Lincoln—Sane or Insane? There
is the possibility of middle ground.

And if the historical context and correct question-framing are miss-
ing in Emerson’s single-minded focus, his attachment to a modern
Diagnosis can also be challenged on the basis that it is at best a presentist approach to the past and at worst an incorrect one. Today’s experts often disagree about the boundary between nervous debility and psychosis, even when they can interview live patients on their couches. One of the troubling things about the insanity trial is the failure to have the “defendant” testify or even to provide her with a lawyer who would make her case for posterity. Indeed Robert and his friends worried that she might find just such an advocate. In any case it was not hard for me to find a psychiatrist who, given the facts of the case, disagreed with the determination that Mary Lincoln was insane and suffered from bipolar disease.

Emerson deserves credit for his assiduous research. He has helped fill in the record about the Mary Lincoln-Bradwell relationship, about Elizabeth Edwards’s behavior, and other details. Overall he has provided answers that others may not entirely agree with but must consider. Mary Lincoln once said that she wished she could forget herself, and in that process of remembrance, she made certain of a persistent historical audience, even as we approach the bicentennial of her birth in 1818. Emerson’s book is a contribution to this audience.