Wife versus Widow: Clashing Perspectives on Mary Lincoln’s Legacy

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The puzzle of Mary Lincoln’s relationship with her husband continues to fascinate and indeed perplex many, if not most, Lincoln scholars. Did he love her first? Did he love her best? Did he love her at all? Was she the only woman who could cajole him from his deep spells of melancholy and propel him toward his destined greatness in which she firmly believed? Did she nag and abuse him and give him no peace, especially when wartime cares wore him down? Or was she incidental—a partner only for propriety’s sake or a requisite vessel to produce the children he so cherished? Claims and counterclaims continue to shake, rattle, and roll Lincoln scholars. I had originally wanted to entitle this meditation “What if John Wilkes Booth had been a ‘bad shot?’” but was persuaded by older, wiser colleagues that such a title went beyond shaking, rattling, and rolling.

Yet, perhaps it is instructive to revisit the couple’s relationship by postulating a counterfactual ending for their marriage. How would we regard the life and legacy of Mary Lincoln if she had been the one fatally wounded that night at Ford’s Theatre? What would be the reigning interpretation of the Lincoln marriage if it had been Mary who perished from an assassin’s bullet that fateful April 1865 eve?

I am not a fan of such speculation if it misleads historians and readers to use “what if” as some sort of predictive exercise. But I think an alternative scenario can suggest a better appreciation of context and provide a gentle prod for more diverse interpretations. Most important, it could enrich our understanding of the role Mary Lincoln played in her husband’s journey to the White House.

When I tell people I am working on Mary Lincoln, they often draw a blank and say “who?” or ask me to repeat myself. So I am forced to

The author delivered a version of this paper at the Abraham Lincoln Association’s Annual Lincoln Symposium on February 16, 2006, at the Old State Capitol State Historic Site in Springfield, Illinois.
use the name to which she rarely resorted—that I’m writing a biography of Mary Todd Lincoln. And invariably I’m then asked: Was she crazy? To which I reply: Medically or mentally? Logically or legally? Clinically or culturally? At one particular point in her life or continuously throughout adulthood? Was she psychologically unbalanced or victimized by Victorian values that adjudged female intellectuals and ambitious women as “hysterical”? Was she hormonally challenged? Impaired by diabetes? Struck down by the side-effects of menopause? Debilitated by late onset dementia? All of the above? Fascination with Mary Lincoln is woven into the tangled skein of debates over the Lincoln marriage, and so, nowadays, I am also quizzed: Do you think Lincoln was really gay?1

This most recent gush of headlines about Lincoln’s psyche and sexuality has not derailed my investigations. Thus far, I don’t believe that evidence indicates Lincoln’s most intimate attachments were such that we can label him as “homosexual,” “gay,” “bi-sexual,” or even so repressed that he was gay and didn’t know it. For now, the evidence of Abraham Lincoln’s attachments and expressions towards other men seem not unusual for his day. Correspondence between Edwin M. Stanton and Salmon P. Chase includes the language of affection and intimacy men frequently employed during this era, such as Stanton to Chase in 1846: “No living person has been oftener in my mind;—waking or sleeping,—for, more than once, I have dreamed of being with you,” and “Let me take you by the hand throw my arm around you say I love you, & bid you farewell.”2

Whatever my speculations, I admit that I’m guessing—like everyone else. That’s what we biographers do, provide educated guesses. Will there ever be reliable, convincing evidence about Abraham Lincoln’s sexuality? Can we possibly plumb the depths of observations and come up with anything more than speculation? Coy sensationalism—and even outright fabrication—has so plagued the discussion that the issue is nearly impossible to untangle. Discussions of Lincoln’s sexual attitudes and activities are legitimate as long as they are not pitched

1. It is unfortunate that two controversial books on Lincoln—C. A. Tripp’s The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Free Press, 2005) and Joshua Wolf Shenk’s Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness (New York: Houston Mifflin, 2005)—appeared within months of one another and became paired in the popular imagination. The books are extremely dissimilar with respect to both Lincoln and his psychology.

Abraham Lincoln’s personal life is far from an open book; rather it
invites a bounty of books. There have been few full-scale biographical
studies of Lincoln that deal effectively with his married life. Most give
short shrift to the topic, with brief and dismissive commentary that
seemingly mirrors opinions on his wife. Since contemporary observ-
ers provided such varied and clashing opinions on Mary Lincoln,
nineteenth-century material serves several competing agendas.

If we try to examine the “facts” of the Lincoln courtship and even
the wedding, disputes immediately erupt: Who was more invested in
the marriage during the courtship? Did Mary flirt with one too many
rivals and force Abraham to call it off? Did his attraction to Matilda
Edwards cause Lincoln to get cold feet on the matter of Miss Todd? Did
reminders of the impediments to acceptance of his previous proposal
(the one he made to Mary Owens) delay the nuptials? Did the disap-
proval of Mary’s relatives become an obstacle when the couple first
became romantically involved? Was there a wedding scheduled on
January 1, 1841, and, if so, who called it off? Was this broken engage-
ment referred to by Lincoln in his correspondence as “the fatal first”? Was his disappointment in love the source of his deep depression in
the winter of 1841?

Whatever the source of this bleak period, we do know that Abra-
ham Lincoln and Mary Todd suspended relations for more than a
year following January 1, 1841. Was the courtship renewed through
the intercession of sympathetic friends or as some act of “revenge”
on Mary’s part? With a dwindling supply of available mates, was
the prospective bride or even the prospective groom forced to settle,
rather than holding out to find a soul mate? Was the hasty trip to the
altar on November 4, 1842, the result of a change of heart? Or a sign
of other impending changes, as a recent novel, The Emancipator’s Wife,
has speculated that Mary may have been pregnant before her wed-
ing? And what role did Stephen Douglas play in Mary Lincoln’s
marital melodrama, and how does Ann Rutledge figure into Abraham
Lincoln’s romantic life?

3. I am afraid both have been noticeably absent in recent public debates over these
issues. See for example, panel discussion, “The Intimate Lincoln,” in Lincoln in the 21st
Century: A Scholarly Conference Marking the Opening of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential
Museum, session 2, 17 April 2005, DVD video in the Lincoln Collection, Abraham Lincoln
Presidential Library, Springfield, Illinois.

4. Barbara Hambly, The Emancipator’s Wife: A Novel of Mary Todd Lincoln (New York:
What “really happened” between Abraham and Mary during those early years in Springfield? I think it is possible to embrace contradictory indicators and conclude that however littered the road to matrimony was with obstacles, both internal and external, that once the gold ring was slipped on Mary’s finger during the ceremony, the two entwined their fates and mutually pledged to make a success of their union.

Clearly, the Lincolns may have had deep divides over how best to achieve success—divides that could have grown into chasms over time. Yet the Lincolns did have enough accord to remain together and striving toward a goal, which landed them in the White House by 1861. One political observer commented after the 1860 election: “She started with Mr. LINCOLN when he was a poor young man, and with no more idea of being called to the Presidency than of being a cannibal.” However, my educated guess is that Mary Lincoln would not have let a little thing like human sacrifice come between her and becoming first lady of the land.

Todd family folklore promoted the view that young Mary believed from an early age that she was destined to marry an American president. When this youthful ambition manifested is a matter of great interest, for no contemporary documentation—only memoirs—supports the claim. Regardless, it is a ruthless bit of folklore, which is underpinned by Mary Lincoln’s close ties to three of the four presidential candidates in the 1860 election.

Evidence before the election indicates that Mary firmly believed she had married a man destined to become president. In 1858 Lincoln confided to journalist Henry Villard that his wife “insisted” that he would eventually hold this high office, a pronouncement that Villard confessed sent Abraham Lincoln into gales of laughter. Abraham Lincoln was humble and modest on this point in 1858, yet he was still relating such confidences to a journalist.

Even Mary’s critics give her credit for playing a crucial role in the rise of Lincoln’s political fortunes during the 1850s. No one could

8. See, for example, “Mary Todd Lincoln, fiercely political, played a role, certainly in urging Lincoln on to higher political achievement . . .” Ibid., 13.
doubt that her coaching and scheming helped Lincoln attain his nomination as a presidential candidate. Again, her husband confirmed the primacy of Mary’s role when, upon learning the results of the 1860 election, he begged off from well-wishers at the telegraph office to take home the good news, confessing, “Well gentlemen there is a little woman at our house who is probably more interested in this dispatch than I am.” “More interested in this dispatch” betrays his wife’s special contribution to Lincoln’s political ascension, if we recognize the rarity of Mary’s role.

For example, although we know that Sarah Polk served unofficially as her husband’s campaign manager, few wives of presidential contenders played anything like the central position Mary Lincoln enjoyed. President Franklin Pierce’s wife was mortified considerably by her husband’s elevation. During the fall of 1848, candidate Zachary Taylor’s wife reputedly prayed for her husband’s defeat and, following his election, was miserable during her husband’s brief time in office. In contrast, Mary Lincoln was her husband’s sounding board for every speech. She was deeply partisan, blindly loyal, and held fierce grudges. Advice flowed freely as the couple daily read the papers aloud to one another. She was jubilant upon Abraham’s election and perhaps felt a share of the victory. She was rightly perceived as a new breed of presidential wife, which is perhaps why the term first lady came into usage during her tenure as mistress of the White House.

Lincoln’s reputation was enhanced following his death, and his popularity skyrocketed following the 1909 centennial of his birth. The centennial initiated an outpouring of laudatory literature. Polls in the second decade of the twentieth century demonstrated Lincoln’s remarkable eclipse of George Washington as the most popular president. Lincoln has reigned relatively unchallenged ever since. His literary revival owes much to Ida Tarbell’s The Life of Abraham Lincoln (1895), which outshone and outsold William Herndon’s three-volume work published in 1889. Tarbell capitalized on Lincoln’s rising reputation

9. Sandburg’s assessment is matched by most biographers, before and after: “Nearly always between these two there was a moving undertow of their mutual ambitions.” Carl Sandburg, Mary Lincoln: Wife and Widow (1932; reprint, Bedford, Mass.: Applewood Books, 1995).
11. When Samuel S. McClure commissioned Tarbell to research Lincoln’s youth and character, he perhaps hoped to boost his readership, but even he was surprised when McClure’s gained 100,000 new readers after Tarbell’s pieces appeared in his magazine.
and her biographical prowess with her 1924 bestseller, *In the Footsteps of Lincoln*. Carl Sandburg’s *The Prairie Years*—in many ways the literary equivalent of Eastman Johnson’s 1868 painting *The Boyhood of Lincoln*—appeared in 1926. With the work of J. G. Randall, among others, the next generation of Lincoln experts launched a fleet of distinguished studies, ensuring that the field would become both scholarly and popular. A steady flow of scholarship and debate continues to flourish without any promise of slowing down.

During the fertile decade of the 1920s, while Lincoln biographers gathered momentum, Honore Willsie Morrow claimed, “It began to look as if there were a conspiracy of silence about Lincoln’s wife.”¹² When Morrow began research on Lincoln’s wife for a novel, the author was alarmed to discover “Mary Todd Lincoln to be one of the most lied about women in the world.”¹³ Morrow’s fictionalized biography of the maligned first lady appeared in 1928, the same year as *The True Story of Mary: Wife of Lincoln*, a study by Katherine Helm, Mary’s niece. These volumes were intended to contradict the harsh, unsympathetic portrayals of earlier works.¹⁴

In many ways, these studies took direct aim at negative images projected by William Herndon. Certainly for the nineteenth century, this Lincoln biographer proved the most persistent and damning critic of Mary Lincoln. The reverberations from Herndon’s harsh charges are still with us. The personal antipathy between the two has been well documented. Her first encounters with Herndon were reportedly unpleasant; rivalry and disdain grew exponentially. Following Lincoln’s death, Mary consented to an interview with Herndon, but she later denounced him as a liar, and years of enmity flowed.¹⁵

Open hostilities broke out a little more than a year after Herndon began collecting information, when he gave a series of lectures to capitalize on his research and interviews. His most infamous speech, “Abraham Lincoln. Miss Ann Rutledge. New Salem. Pioneering and The Poem,” was delivered on November 16, 1866, and appeared as a broadside.¹⁶ Launching the Rutledge industry was perhaps Herndon’s

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¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ A review of Helm’s book suggested: “It is intended to clear Mrs. Lincoln’s memory of the clouds of spiteful legend which had gathered about it . . .” *Times Literary Supplement* (London) 7 March 1929.

¹⁵ Especially on the volatile subject of Lincoln’s spiritual and religious beliefs, which became a hotbed of continuing contention.

¹⁶ *Herndon’s Informants*, xvi.
most enduring legacy. In the wake of Lincoln’s death, he tracked down neighbors and friends of the Lincolns to collect testimony about the early life of the slain president. During his digging, Herndon solicited evidence to demonstrate his case that the Lincoln marriage was a loveless mismatch, full of unhappiness and strife. His suggestion that Ann Rutledge was the one and only love of Lincoln’s life has had remarkable durability in America’s popular culture. Yet more balanced and sympathetic accounts of Mary Lincoln would counter those charges. Besides the Morrow and Helm volumes, there are valuable studies by William Evans and Carl Sandburg (1932), Ruth Painter Randall (1953), Justin and Linda Turner (1972), Ishbel Ross (1973), and Jean Baker (1987).

However, during the late twentieth century, Michael Burlingame rejected those revisionist interpretations, and he replaced Herndon as Mary Lincoln’s harshest critic. Burlingame clearly places blame for the marriage’s failure (a given in his estimation) on Mary. In his thoughtful and important work on Lincoln, Burlingame frequently introduces Mary Lincoln’s shortcomings and their disastrous effects on her husband beyond the confines of marital relations. In his analysis of the Lincoln sons, Burlingame suggests: “In order to avoid conflict with his difficult wife, he [Lincoln] spent an inordinate amount of time away from home. Such a tactic may have made his unfortunate marriage tolerable, but it deprived the children of much contact with their father.”

There are, of course, other ways of interpreting Lincoln’s long spells away from home during this period. What were the consequences for a lawyer—a man of little means with a growing family and no prospect of inheritance—who spent a lot of time on the circuit? Would he not likely seize every opportunity to make himself known in the hinterlands? A lawyer interested in local politics might canvass the state, making frequent visits to acquaint the electorate with his talents and abilities. Lincoln’s absenteeism may seem striking, but it may have led

17. With Herndon’s Informants, Wilson and Davis have worked hard to expand and rehabilitate our appreciation of Herndon’s contributions. As David Donald has suggested, Herndon remains “the basic source for Abraham Lincoln’s early years.” See David Herbert Donald, Lincoln (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
19. Michael Burlingame, The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 60. These statements are made without any reference to any evidence, although Burlingame makes claims and cites examples in a later essay in the volume.
to his success. And perhaps it was more of the norm than we realize; the absence of any context leads to face-value conclusions.20

Burlingame’s one-sided perspective is showcased in his imaginative volume of collected essays, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln*, which includes “The Lincolns’ Marriage: ‘A Fountain of Misery, of a Quality Absolutely Infernal.’”21 In fairness, Burlingame works to create a counterargument, even as he frames his arguments within the context of revisionist literature. In his epilogue, Burlingame directly challenges the work of biographers Baker and Randall, accusing them of “cherrypicking” the evidence about the Lincoln marriage, selectively providing quotes to support their theses. I would suggest that this is essentially what all scholars might be accused of—but some do it more skillfully than others.

Burlingame declares that “the few surviving letters between the Lincolns do not suggest a deep love on either side” and then goes on to state “the most remarkable feature of that correspondence is its sparseness.” However few, letters between the Lincolns do offer rich material for producing layered and multiple interpretations. On April 16, 1848, Abraham wrote to his wife in Kentucky from his boardinghouse in Washington with some poignancy: “When you were here I thought you hindered me some in attending to business; but now, having nothing but business—no variety—it has grown exceedingly tasteless to me... I hate to stay in this old room by myself.”22 This would seem to be pretty straightforward. Congressman-elect Lincoln was harried upon arrival in the District with his wife and two sons in tow. He threw himself into his work and had little leisure time for his family, which was trapped in a boardinghouse. The Lincolns felt increasingly confined by Mary’s growing discontentment. She left for Kentucky, taking the boys with her while she visited family, where she missed him as well.

Mary penned letters full of gossip about her Kentucky home and their sons, Robert and Eddie, on whom they both doted. She conveyed with some relief that she was not suffering from her familiar complaint of migraines. Lincoln wrote back: “You are entirely free from

20. Also, whether it was exceptional or normative, what would be the effect on a wife if she were left alone for weeks on end to manage her household and family? And, as reports suggest, when Lincoln was at home he often remained in a state of extreme distraction; preoccupied with business and neglectful of his role as domestic helpmeet.
headache? That is good—good—considering it is the first spring you have been free from it since we were acquainted.” He continued with some joviality: “I am afraid you will get so well and fat and young as to be wanting to marry again . . .” This kind of banter suggests an easy and comfortable relationship, built upon a solid foundation.

Following this jest, Lincoln’s next comment seems positively amazing: “Get weighed and write how much you weigh.” This demonstration of confident intimacy—on an issue unlikely to be met with amusement by women today—reminds historians that we need to provide full and adequate context.

The letters preserved may be few, but Burlingame might have added that it is well known that the Lincolns burned much of their personal correspondence before leaving Springfield for the White House. Even more to the point, Robert Todd Lincoln—so painfully reticent about family matters that he sealed his father’s papers until twenty-five years after his own death—confessed that he sought out and collected his mother’s letters. Was this a protective measure, perhaps even gallant? There wasn’t any grand opening of the Mary Lincoln correspondence during or after Robert Lincoln’s lifetime of scarfing up his mother’s letters. Perhaps we might venture a guess that he destroyed pages and pages of Mary Lincoln’s personal documents to prevent them from making their way into the public eye—and especially into print. Keeping Mary Lincoln’s letters out of print was not just a priority for Robert but a preoccupation for his widow, Mary Harlan Lincoln, as a forthcoming book by Jason Emerson demonstrates.24

In the twenty-first century, C. A. Tripp, the author of The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln (2005), has surpassed Burlingame to become Mary Lincoln’s most rabid detractor.25 As Jean Baker argues in her preface for this volume, “Tripp [uses] the familiar rants of previous historians [and] employs selective evidence to eviscerate Mary Lincoln as someone who literally can do no right. . . . Tripp compares [her] to psychopaths like Hitler.” Baker suggests this is unfair, which shows considerable restraint in that his work not only ignores but attempts to nullify the findings of Baker’s own 1987 study of Mary Lincoln. Tripp goes on to proclaim that the marriage of Abraham and Mary [ranks] as “one of the worst marital misfortunes in recorded history”

23. Ibid.
and further suggests his wife was “[Lincoln’s] cross to bear.” Tripp’s flair for hyperbole presents as much of a problem as does his recent death. Both his work and his legacy polarize discussions of Lincoln’s private life.

Mary Lincoln as her husband’s “cross to bear” is a popular refrain echoing down through the generations of Lincoln scholars, as excerpts from recent books reflect. Of Mrs. Lincoln during her White House years, scholars have written:

“the grief-stricken . . . wife who demanded more emotional support than she returned.”

Richard Carwardine, 2003

. . . by the time of the Civil War, the passion in the Lincoln marriage had long since faded. Although Mary Todd Lincoln has generally been blamed for the problems in the marriage it should be remembered that the pressures of the presidency, in addition to Lincoln’s often abstracted and withdrawn nature, contributed to the couple’s marital difficulties. . . . Nonetheless, his neglect and the demands and tensions created by the war do not seem to justify Mary’s irrational and hurtful outbursts, her personal extravagance and, on occasion, her unseemly selfish behavior. . . .

William C. Davis, 2004

Whatever her youthful virtues had been, by the time she became First Lady she was vain, jealous, profligate and given to heroic tantrums. . . . By 1863, when Mary Lincoln was not tormenting her husband, she was neglecting him.

Daniel Mark Epstein, 2004

Not unexpectedly, the majority of scholars writing on Lincoln focus on his presidency, a period during which we know Mary Lincoln lost considerable influence over her husband in the competition with a team of rivals for his attention.

The last leg of her geographical journey to the White House foreshadowed for Mary Lincoln the bittersweet to come. Although feted along the way east from Springfield, the family was frightened by

disruptions and dire fears for Lincoln’s safety. The Lincolns traveled together for much of Lincoln’s journey, which began on February 11, 1861, but the family separated for the final segment of travel to Washington because General Winfield Scott reported that the danger of assassination lurked, most definitely while passing through Baltimore. The president-elect was persuaded to travel alone and in disguise during the last few miles to his destination.

Mary Lincoln had been greeted by dignitaries and lavishly entertained at several stops along the way, but she not only sustained “the fatigue and continual pressure of attention” during this train trip, but also the trauma of death threats to her husband. Once they were safely ensconced in Willard’s Hotel, Lincoln was preoccupied with the business of organizing a government in the face of the secession crisis. Mary Lincoln began her new career in the capital hosting diplomats and politicians, and visiting with family and friends.

Harriet Lane, President James Buchanan’s niece and White House hostess, arranged a meal for the Lincolns following the inauguration ceremony. However, only the doorkeeper remained in the employ of the White House. When Buchanan departed that day, no domestic staff remained, even to take care of the dishes from the farewell meal. That rather rude initiation sent Mary Lincoln into a tizzy. Finding a dressmaker resolved one major problem for the rattled first lady. She secured a famed couture seamstress, Elizabeth Keckly, in hopes that a modiste would help her build on her smashing success during her Washington social debut, and Keckly later would become a dresser and confidante for her. The Inaugural Ball was held in a large tent, dubbed the White Muslin Palace of Aladdin, where five thousand were on hand to rub shoulders with the First Couple and their entourage. A Lincoln secretary complained that the White House was overcrowded with Todds and Edwardses (Mary’s visiting relatives).

29. Not all of Lincoln’s enemies were as specific as the anonymous “Vindex” who sent the president-elect in Springfield this letter from Washington: “Dear Sir: Caesar had his Brutus, Charles, the First his Cromwell And the President may profit from their example From one of a sworn band of 10 who have resolved to shoot you in the inaugural procession on the 4th of March 1861.” Ernest G. Ferguson, Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 59.
Mary Lincoln entered the tent in blue silk, bedecked with pearls, gold, and diamonds. Though Lincoln left at midnight, his wife and her party stayed on—dancing polkas and schottisches into the night. Elizabeth Ellet, an influential social arbiter, commented that Mary’s “exquisite toilet, and admirable ease and grace, won compliments from thousands.” The New York Herald observed: “She is more self-possessed than Lincoln and has accommodated more readily than her taller half to the exalted station to which she has been so strangely advanced from the simple social life of the little inland capital of Illinois.” Despite the boycott of the event by southern partisans, Mrs. Lincoln surprised Washington snobs to become the belle of the ball.

Gifts to presidents were common and lavish during the nineteenth century, and without legal restrictions and with few moral reservations. Thus a New York newspaper announced on February 25, 1861, without any hint of impropriety: “A few gentlemen of this city have presented to Mr. Lincoln an elegant carriage, made to order by Messrs. Brewster & Co. of Broome street. It is a full-dress coach, with maroon hammer-cloth front and handsome carved stands behind. The lining is of crimson brocatel. It is provided with steps which open with the door, and are concealed when it is closed. It has also a speaking-tube, and all the conveniences of a modern carriage, and was made at a cost of about $1,500. It was forwarded to Washington on Saturday.”

Yet Mary was snubbed by Washington women. Once her husband was installed as president, Mary struggled to establish a domestic routine for her family while learning the ropes of her new residence and town. Invited to a White House reception during the last week of March, British journalist William Howard Russell found: “It was rather late before I could get to the White House and there were only two or three ladies in the drawing room when I arrived. I was informed afterwards that the attendance was very scanty. The Washington ladies have not yet made up their minds that Mrs. Lincoln is the fashion. They miss their Southern friends, and constantly draw comparisons between them and the vulgar Yankee women and men who are now in power.”

33. Ross, President’s Wife, 102.
36. Representing her Todd half-sisters, Margaret Kellogg of Cincinnati attended the inaugural festivities, but southern women who might have embraced Mary as symbolic kin, readily and repeatedly turned their backs.
Following the attack on Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call to arms, the first lady was drawn into an even more dangerous whirlwind. Mrs. Lincoln was put at severe disadvantage when her new home became the nerve center for a divided nation. She shared her house with soldiers, as local recruits were marched into the East Room where “under the gorgeous gas chandeliers, they disposed themselves in picturesque bivouac on the brilliant patterned velvet carpet.” A remarkable vortex of events kept the Lincoln White House both under the microscope and within dangerous crosshairs. The military advised Lincoln to evacuate his family, but Mary Lincoln stubbornly refused. This resolve appeared a good one for the first lady’s public relations, but not all of her decisions had such happy outcomes. The outbreak of war was a particularly turbulent event for Mrs. Lincoln, and many times she set herself on an unfortunate course.

Mary Lincoln did not read incoming mail until it had been filtered through a censor. That protected her from exposure to the vicious hate mail flowing into the White House. And, after Lincoln assembled his massive army, with her mail being read in advance, no one could accuse Mary of carrying on clandestine correspondence with Confederate relatives—including half-brothers serving in the Confederate army and half-sisters married to Confederate loyalists.

Her decision to concentrate on domesticity (after having been cut off from issues of patronage and politics within the wartime White House) did not appear to be the glaring error it became in hindsight. Mary Lincoln was not mistaken in wanting to improve the shabby, run-down residence of the president. Yes, the furnishings in the Red Room, which the Lincolns claimed for private callers, had furniture leftover from the Madison era. There were only ten matching place settings in the White House china collection. Her Springfield friends and relations thought the place resembled a second-rate hotel with its threadbare carpets and chopped-up drapes (as citizens at levees would regularly cut off pieces of the curtains as souvenirs). But, no, it was not a good time to restock and renovate, and perhaps she should have cut back on her elaborate plans to redecorate. For all we know, maybe she did. Nevertheless, there were significant cost overruns to the budget she was given, and creditors came knocking—and nasty rumors about her extravagance rumbled all over town.

Mary resorted to the White House shuffle, passing the buck and hiding the invoice, common during wartime. She had to stall and deceive,

whatever it took, to try to prevent her husband from discovering her inability to pay her household bills. What she resorted to in order to either remedy or cover up her mistakes may have been defined as criminal. Yet sensibilities about such matters differed in the nineteenth century. For example, the salaries for Lincoln’s secretaries were sent for payment to another department, a simple and practical solution to budgetary shortfall. The first lady may indeed have committed errors in judgment at best, and crimes at worst—with lots of shame and sin in between. But unlike mistakes made by Lincoln’s generals, those faults did not cost lives. The indictments many historians have leveled against her seem decidedly overkill.

But many of the charges are leveled by employing the distorted lens of hindsight. For example, when a scholar laments Mary’s shopping spree “in the months leading up to Lincoln’s assassination,” he (and in the most egregious cases, it has been a he) is being unfair to his subject—as the language betrays. Mary had no inkling that Abraham would soon die by an assassin’s bullet when she indulged her passion for finery. (Still, her serial and multiple glove purchases were nothing short of mania.)

There are suggestions that, early in her White House career, Mary Lincoln might have had parsimonious tendencies. Elizabeth Cady Stanton confided: “They say Abraham’s shriveled appearance & poor health is owing to be underfed. Madame is an economist & the supplies at the White House are limited.” When she tried to impose strict economy, her schemes (such as selling milk from the White House cows) backfired.

Some of the earliest press reports of the new first lady described her as a woman “of the West” and portrayed Mrs. Lincoln as incapable of measuring up to society among the eastern aristocracy. Since she had been born into one of the first families of Lexington, Kentucky, and had received an extensive education (with over a decade more formal schooling than her husband—and more than many elected official of the day), Mrs. Lincoln was naturally offended by such parochialism. She was fluent in French and attuned to European politics and philosophy, so these kinds of reservations were likely exasperating to someone with her sense of privilege and entitlement.

Perhaps because she was so particular about her appearance, Mary Todd became an accomplished seamstress, the only one among her

40. Ross, President’s Wife, 216.
41. “She brought shame upon the President’s House by petty economies, which had never disgraced it before.” Sandburg, Mary Lincoln, 119.
nine sisters to learn fine sewing. She clearly knew what she liked and from an early age copied the latest styles. Her stepsisters envied her flair for fashion, as Emilie Todd was “struck with her exquisite taste in dress. One gown, I remember, was a lovely lavender brocade which she had made herself.” On January 24, 1861, the Chicago Tribune described a lavish sewing machine “destined as a present to the lady of the President-elect:” “It is richly silver plated and ornamented with inlaid pearl and enamel. It is worthy the possession of a duchess, and indeed the very companions of this superb sewing machine have actually been finished and sent to the English Duchess of Sutherland, and the Russian Duchess of Constantine.” We know it was delivered and became a prized possession that Mrs. Lincoln took with her when she left the White House. Again her removal of personal goods may appear inappropriate, but it was quite in keeping with what was done at the time, and there was no protocol to prevent the president or his wife from accepting gifts.

Being under scrutiny as a fashion symbol, the first lady’s popularity was as precarious as a roller-coaster ride—sometimes up and often down, with change in the blink of an eye. Her fastidious attention to matters of dress at first impressed and recommended her to the press. But soon, like so many first ladies, the bloom faded quickly under the spotlight, and her appearance attracted unwanted attention. The rumored costs of her attire became the subject of Washington gossip and prompted bitter critiques by journalists, especially as Union soldiers fell by the thousands, maimed and wounded, dying in camp and on the battlefield.

It must be remembered that Mary Lincoln began her Washington career trying to counter her image as a country bumpkin. For the first

42. Helm, True Story of Mary, 30.
43. With a famous story about being punished by her stepmother for trying to wear some homemade hoops to church when she was too young for such attire.
44. Helm, True Story of Mary, 106.
46. “Mrs. Lincoln had her bosom on exhibition, and a flower pot on her head, while there was a train of silk, or satin, dragging on the floor behind her of several yards length.” Ross, President’s Wife, 108.
47. As Mary Anne Clemmer complained in her memoir in 1876: “While her sister women scraped lint, sewed bandages, and put on nurses caps, and gave their all to country and to death, the wife of the President spent her time in rolling to and fro between Washington and New York, intent on extravagant purchases for herself and the White House. Mrs. Lincoln seemed to have nothing to do but to ‘shop,’ and the reports of her lavish bargains, in the newspapers, were vulgar and sensational in the extreme.” Sandburg, Mary Lincoln, 117.
time in her adult life, she was given an extensive line of credit by emporiums from Boston to Philadelphia to Washington itself. Merchants were at her beck and call, currying favor. Her husband’s $25,000 salary must have given her a false sense of unlimited possibilities. She became increasingly isolated within her new community, even though many of her troubles, and especially social feuds, she may have brought on herself. Increasingly on the outside looking in—even within her own household—she became more and more adrift, but still placed the highest value on her husband’s good opinion. He once confided at a White House reception where Mary’s penchant for floral headdress and plunging necklines was on display, that “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.” He clearly did not resent her partiality for expensive jewelry because in April 1862 Lincoln ordered a set of seed pearl bracelets and a necklace from Tiffany (for $530) to lift the spirits of his grieving wife, after she lost both her child and her half-brother Sam within a six-week period. Mourning plagued the Lincoln White House, most intensely following the death of Willie in February 1862. That loss was followed by announcements of the demise of a parade of Todd Confederate relatives—including the death of Ben Helm, which caused Lincoln to break down with grief. These personal losses compounded the devastating death toll of soldiers, which increased the lines and hollows of the president’s somber visage.

And thus it must have seemed miraculous to Lincoln after his tour of the conquered Confederate capital of Richmond, after surrender at Appomattox, after the fireworks and cheering, that a dream could come true and the Union was saved. On the afternoon of April 14, 1865, Lincoln took a lovely carriage ride with his wife to the Naval Yard and was reported saying: “We must both be more cheerful in the future—between the war and the loss of our darling Willie—we have both been very miserable.” But they made plans to travel and promises to cheat the gloom which had settled upon them. Later that night, when the Lincolns attended the theater the evening of Good Friday, Mary clung to her husband during the play, and whispered to him: “What will Miss Harris [their companion in the presidential box] think of my hanging on to you so?” Then his final words to his wife, indeed his last words to anyone were, “She won’t think anything about it.”

49. Packard, Lincoln’s in the White House, 123.
50. Sandburg, Mary Lincoln, 120.
What if Booth had been a bad shot and Mary Lincoln had died instead of her husband? There is no guarantee that we would ever have known about this final intimacy. It would be out of character for Abraham Lincoln to have confided his wife’s last words. But what might have been the outcome? How would the nation cope with the wanton death of a southern-born woman, the daughter of a slaveholder, and the sister of several fallen Confederate generals?

Would there not have been an amazing wave of reconciliation? Would the sacrifice of Mary Lincoln’s life have bound up the wounds of the divided nation more easily? But more importantly, if Mary Lincoln had died in April 1865, how would we evaluate her marriage to Abraham Lincoln and her role in his legacy? Since we cannot know what Lincoln’s newly invented legacy would have become, it would be prudent to try to imagine what her legacy would have been had they both died—in one another’s arms. It is my firm conviction that after filtering out all the comments about her from hindsight and retrospective, Mary Lincoln’s reputation would be extremely elevated. She would definitely have achieved a status higher than any other presidential wife—and not just by virtue of her assassination. She would have been shrouded with the fame she so craved rather than the infamy that hounded her during her years as a widow. Mrs. Lincoln felt persecuted in the extreme, and wrote to her sister: “If I had committed murder in every city in this blessed Union, I could not be more traduced.”

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Lincolns had a loving marriage with the usual bumps and pitfalls. The bad news is that this evidence comes from the same batch of posthumous material where characterizations also paint their marriage as unhappy and Mary’s character as shrewish and vile. We are stuck with these sources. All we can do is to wade in and try to assemble a coherent, convincing narrative. If the source is not tainted (as in the case of the Mariah Vance “memoir”), we continue to carefully select quotes, trying to string together pearls. Which ones to pick is part of the educated guessing we as writers and historians must perform.

If Mary Lincoln had also died in 1865—if not by an assassin’s bullet, but quietly in Chicago in the summer of 1865—what might this have

51. Ibid., *Mary Lincoln*, 134.
52. Which is why some critics pointedly suggest that portraits of the Lincolns’ marriage reflect the marital views of the scholar who portrays them as much as they do the Lincolns, because of the diverse and contradictory evidence available. Personal conversations with the author in 2004, 2005, 2006.
wrought? No “Old Clothes Scandal,” no pension battles with debates on the congressional floor, no spiritualist photograph of herself with her husband, no confinement to Bellevue (the private mental hospital in Batavia, Illinois, where her son sent her to be a patient, against her will). So what would have been our estimation of her role, even in the shadow of the assassinated president? Sterling, I would suggest, and moving up the ladder to platinum with each passing anniversary. She would have achieved the honor and glory she never dared dream of once her husband departed and the realities of widowhood hit full force.

If she had fallen victim to a death by grief, fulfilling her initial wish to die with her husband, then I would suggest today that the Lincoln marriage, far from Tripp’s ungenerous estimation as “one of the worst marital misfortunes in recorded history,” would instead be interpreted as one of the great American marriages—perhaps one of the most successful political unions of all time—to take a page from Tripp’s school of overstatement.

Our fascination with Lincoln’s incredible journey from log cabin to the White House could be enhanced by our appreciation of the contributions Mary Lincoln made to her husband’s career. This is not to take anything away from Lincoln’s singular accomplishments. He was a self-made man whose enormous reserves of empathy, ambition, and emotional intelligence blended with his abundant talents and abilities. His poetic soul and dark psyche was balanced by his easygoing wit and earthy sense of humor. He was a political genius, to which much new scholarship attests.

Perhaps Mary’s greatest legacy is that she was the first to be able to see beyond the rough patches and raggedy edges of the Springfield lawyer with whom she fell in love. When she looked into his future, Mary Todd was clearly enthralled, and despite the initial obstacles to the smooth course of their union, she felt emboldened to plan a future together. She not only hitched her wagon to his star, she polished and burnished it and went along for the ride.

For a nineteenth-century woman, this took incredible imagination and a leap of faith. Betrothal was a far more serious consideration for a woman, as one southern bride-to-be called her trip to the altar “the day to fix my fate.” The man that she married would become the defining element of her life, as well as lifelong companion, for the majority of nineteenth-century women, whatever their status.

In Springfield, Illinois, where Abraham Lincoln spent his most formative years, where Mary Todd redefined herself as Mrs. Lincoln, we
should take a moment to remember her courage and resolve. Mary may have traveled only a short distance geographically from her sister’s big house on the hill to a single room in the Globe Tavern, but it symbolized an enormous leap of faith. Mary Lincoln’s path to marriage was considerably uncommon for her day, but her marriage proved to be her most enduring legacy.