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“Dear Mrs. Lincoln,” a Comic/Sonic Essay

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This comic/sonic essay takes up questions of Mary Todd Lincoln through a disability lens. Remembered as America's most prolific "crazy bitch," she rivals perhaps only Abigail Adams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Hillary Clinton when it comes to research and public interest about First Ladies. However, biographies of her husband cast her as another chaotic obstacle, with her gender and her disability both serving to position Mr. Lincoln as innately benevolent, patient, and an iron boat treading stormy waters. Not only was his political universe demanding, his home, the social construction of Victorian American domesticity, was likewise turbulent, historians would have us believe. Furthermore, specific discourse into Mrs. Lincoln focuses disproportionately on diagnosis of her mental illness. While she was institutionalized and over-prescribed opium-based medicine for much of her adult life, diagnosing her mental health almost a century and a half after her death is not especially generative. What is generative, however, is parsing through the methods in which her son Robert and Illinois courts declared her legally insane (a legal category in late 19th century America rather than a medical one) and institutionalized. Grief certainly played a part in it. She was a woman familiar with loss. Out of her husband and four children, her death only antedated Robert's, her estranged son. Her grief after her son Willie's death was public, severe, and, by her husband's estimation, excessive enough for him to threaten her with the madhouse at least once.

This essay uses pictures and sound to study these constructions and critically evaluate the role Mrs. Lincoln plays in cultural memory. Deliberately sparse on words, it relies on music, medical soundscape, and black-and-white pictures to invite the reader to consider their own perceptions of not only Mrs. Lincoln, but the lingering impact of Victorian conceptions of gender and mental health.



Dear Mrs Lincoln: Grief, Madness, and the Constructio...



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