Sarah Miriam Peale's *Mary Leypold Griffith* and the Staging of Republican Motherhood

Sarah Leary

In 1841, Sarah Miriam Peale painted a portrait of a young Mary Leypold Griffith (Figure 1). Mary sits on the floor. Her left leg is gracefully crossed over the right. Her vibrant, red dress stands out against the nondescript background. She holds a white ribbon that she cuts to form a jagged pattern, and yet looks up from this activity to the viewers. But her mature expression and poise seem incommensurate with her age. Without the benefit of the object label, a viewer would assume that Mary is four or five – old enough to wield scissors and to understand the educational materials that surround her. But in point of fact, Mary Griffith died of Scarlet Fever at the age of two and a half in 1841 – the same year in which Peale painted this portrait. Much of Sarah Miriam Peale's work was done from observation – from life which begs the question: why would Peale depict Mary so very much alive and so mature when she had in fact passed away that year? This essay analyzes Peale's portrait in relation to period ideas about gender, education, and death to argue that Peale aged and animated Mary in order to represent her as a young patriot. Thereby, the portrait aided her mother Priscilla's mourning process, but also served as proof that—despite Mary's premature death—Priscilla had fulfilled her maternal duties. In serving this function for Priscilla, the portrait served it for Sarah Miriam Peale, too. Although Peale had no children of her own, painting young patriots enabled the artist to contribute to the health of the Republic and thereby fulfill her maternal duties as well.

Mary's passing had not been a surprise to the Griffith family. The young girl had been sick for several weeks before finally succumbing to her illness on January 26. Upon her passing, in keeping with upper class practice at the time, the Griffith family commissioned Peale to create a portrait to honor their lost daughter. Two days after Mary's death, Sarah Miriam Peale arrived at the Griffith household to cast a death mask as well as take notes and sketches of Mary's belongings.[1] Unfortunately, Peale's death mask of Mary Griffith doesn't survive, but it would have looked somewhat like the life mask taken a few months prior to Lincoln's assassination (Figure 2). Such masks developed from the tradition of death masks and offer insight into what Peale's mask of Mary may have looked like. The Griffith family also lent Peale a miniature of Mary (also lost) to aid in her representation of their daughter. These aids were supposed to help Peale represent Mary as she appeared and lived in the days before she died, but Peale took several liberties with Mary's appearance that aged her beyond her years and introduced books and symbols that allude to the future role Mary never fulfilled.

Mary's eyes seem disproportionally large, and her nose is sizable and sharply pointed for a child her age. She is graceful and still in a manner beyond her two and a half years. Further, the books and primers around Mary suggest she could read them on her own, but, as Priscilla Griffith notes in her diary, at the time of her death Mary was still learning the alphabet.[2] Additionally, according to scholar of American art Christina Michelon, it was Peale's decision to include educational materials in the portrait.[3] Purchased by Priscilla Griffith as a second birthday gift for Mary, the pamphlets and primer would have prepared the young girl for adulthood. Directly next to Mary rests the book *Dame Trott and Her Comical Cat* and in the lower right corner of the composition laying open is *The History of Dame-Crump and Her Little White Pig*. These books are about a cat and a pig who disrupt their female owners as they perform their household duties. The act of reading these books represents "industrial play," a term Michelon coined to describe children's activities that develop "their morality and their goodness" and help them mature out of the natural mischievousness of childhood.[4] Through industrial play, children engaged in positive activities that contributed to their own personal growth, but also learned to maintain the household.

Various symbols throughout the portrait provide further insight into the qualities a mature Mary would grow to possess. Before Mary lays an alphabet book, whose final pages

My sincere thanks to Florida State University for the opportunity to present this paper and for all the constructive feedback I received; to Christina Michelon for her generosity in sharing the transcript of her lecture on Peale's *Mary Leypold Griffith* with me; and to Dr. Nika Elder whose insight and advice has been invaluable throughout this process.

1 Christina Michelon, "Capturing a Likeness: Labor, Loss, and Recuperation in Antebellum Maryland," May 4, 2017, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

are visible to the viewer. On the page for the letter "y," a yellow canary is depicted. While most period representations of birds with young girls depict live birds trapped in a cage indoors, Peale represents an illustrated bird that is pictured outdoors. Such live birds trapped in cages spoke to the domestic roles that young women would grow to fulfill.[5] The alphabet book introduces the canary to Mary by proxy, and thereby, attests to an even earlier moment of indoctrination. The formal parallel between Mary and the blue curtain furthers underscores the way in which she was destined for a life lived indoors. Echoing the shape of Mary's body, the curtain speaks to her future stalwart role within the home, and the floral pattern upon it signals the qualities she was to exhibit there. The rich blue curtain is covered with roses in a soft muted red. The rose was one of the most important floral symbols in nineteenth-century paintings of girls. Art historian Claire Perry notes that "the rose represented purity and grace, attributes thought to be essential in the nation's young womanhood."[6] While roses symbolized purity and grace, flowers in general (like those on the rug on which Mary sits) can also represent fertility and children, signifying women's expected roles as mothers and wives in the early Republic. Taken together, the educational materials and emblems around Mary attest to her own intellectual development (imagined as it may be), but also to her future responsibility to birth and raise the next generation of noble citizens and statesmen. In this way, Peale's portrait posits and represents Mary as a "daughter of liberty."

Perry defines a daughter of liberty as a young girl born into privilege who—through education—was versed in republican values and raised to impart these values to her anticipated offspring.[7] Popular lithographs (Figures 3 & 4) printed by Currier & Ives demonstrate how American men were expected to participate in the military, politics or business while women were expected to have and raise children. In *The Life and Age of Man: Stages of Man's Life From Cradle to Grave,* a man goes through the stages of life, and his changing dress indicates his military and civilian roles. Women pictured at the start and end of the man's life serve as his caretakers. Similarly, in the female version of the print, the woman's life revolves around her roles in the family. A well-educated daughter of liberty would mature into a "republican mother" who would then bear her sons who could participate in civic life and/or daughters who could bear sons to serve this role.

Thus, by representing Mary as engaged in, or on a break from, her own educational development, Peale's portrait testified to Mary's mother Priscilla's status as a republican mother. Prior to the nineteenth century, the maternal ideal was the "Spartan mother." Spartan mothers would raise their sons with the knowledge that they need to sacrifice their lives for the good and the future of the nation.[8] As the son sacrificed his life on the battlefield, so the mother sacrificed her son to this fate. At the time of the American Revolution, the role of both mother and son was to prepare for this eventuality. By the nineteenth century, however, maternal sacrifice would no longer center on the potential death of her son in war. Instead, she prepared both her sons and her daughters to dedicate their lives to the health of the Republic.[9] We see such a republican mother on view in Charles Willson Peale's *Mrs. James Smith and Her Grandson* (Figure 5). Demonstrating the broad nature of republican motherhood, the work depicts a grandmother reading with her grandson. Together, they read *The Art of Speaking*. In addition to moral guidance, then, the republican mother would also provide the oratory training a boy would need to grow up to become an ideal American. By depicting the grandson as a corporeal extension of the grandmother, the portrait thus underscores her role in instilling in her grandson the necessary tools to become a patriot and politician.

While scholars, like historian Linda Kerber, stress the republican mother's role in educating young boys to grow up into morally guided American citizens, a daughter's education was essential too. It was understood that young girls like Mary would grow up to guide her future husband in the direction of virtue and raise the next generation of moral citizens. To ensure the stability of the Republic for future generations, a republican mother, like Priscilla, had to teach her daughter to become like herself. Although Priscilla was not able to fulfill this responsibility with Mary, Peale's portrait suggests the mother's commitment to this goal—to her daughter's education and, so, to the Republic.

But as much as the portrait spoke to the future republican mother that Priscilla would have raised, it also helped Priscilla negotiate her daughter's premature death. Nineteenth-century viewers would have seen several allusions to death within the portrait. Objects such as the over-turned chair and the scissors signal a lively, playful young girl, but in this work, they have a second meaning, too. The fallen chair speaks to a life cut short, as does the cutting action in which Mary herself engages, which alludes to classical notions of the fates. Further, curator Anne Sue Hirshorn recognizes red as a symbol of death and mourning.[10] In this respect, the vivid red dress Mary wears might mark her as dead, but—given that she passed from Scarlet Fever—also the cause of her death. Indeed, the notches Mary cuts into the ribbon could attest to her battle with scarlet fever and the multiple times that she seemed to get better and then quickly become ill again.

Yet, despite these allusions to Mary's death, the painting of course animates her and, in this way, enabled Priscilla to keep her memory alive. In the early nineteenth century,

5 For more information on the symbolism of birds in relation to young girls, see Claire Perry, *Young America: Childhood in the 19th-Century Art and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 60-63.

6 Ibid, 47.

7 Perry, *Young America,* 38-40.

8 Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 188.

9 Ibid, 202.

10 Anne Sue Hirshorn, "Sarah Miriam Peale (1800-1885)," in *American Women Artists, 1819-1947: The Neville-Strass Collection* (Maryland: The Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, 2003), 34-35.

Americans clung to a terminal idea of death in which the presence of the corpse signified the absence of the soul.[11] *Mrs. Peale Lamenting the Death of Her Child (Rachel Weeping)* (Figure 6), which pictures Sarah Miriam Peale's aunt as portrayed by the artist's famous uncle, exhibits this understanding of death. The artist's young daughter lays deceased upon her bed as her mother, Rachel, looks up to the heavens. Peale depicts his daughter's corpse in accordance to period ideas about death, when it was believed that the soul immediately exited the body for an abstruse afterlife leaving the corpse to decay in its wake. The young infant's skin blends into the white bedding as its yellow tint signals the onset of rigor mortis and contrasts with the flushed, lively skin of the deceased girl's mother.

At the time of Mary Griffith's passing in 1841, theological systems of beliefs changed as puritan ideas on the loss of the soul after death waned out of favor. Subsequently mourning practices changed as well.[12] Instead of accepting a deceased person's absence, Americans attempted to keep his or her memory alive and present. This change was evident in the rise of consolation literature that attempted to restore one's connection to the deceased and resolve anxieties about the body's decay. By the mid-nineteenth century, the afterlife served as a place of hope for grieving survivors where they would eventually join their lost loved ones.[13] In her diary, Priscilla speaks of her husband reading such consolation literature to her. Additionally, she made many trips to her daughter Mary's grave.[14] We can understand her commissioning of Peale's portrait as part of this enterprise. The work served as a visual proxy for her daughter herself. Indeed, such efforts were part of a republican mother's responsibility, too. When a mother lost a child, she had to mourn the death for up to a year, during which time she was expected to wear specific black clothing and accessories and to limit her social activities.[15] In keeping with developing approaches to mourning, Peale's portrait enabled Priscilla to mourn her daughter and fulfill this responsibility in perpetuity.

Sarah Miriam Peale would have recognized that her portrait of Mary would need to serve this role. She was among the most popular portrait painters in mid-19th century Baltimore. However, the majority of Peale's portraits are of male politicians and public figures in the Mid-Atlantic region as well as pendant portraits of these men's wives.[16] The couple, Isaac and Susan Avery of Philadelphia (Figures 7 & 8), is a quintessential example. Isaac Avery was a prominent businessman that manufactured luxury items such as combs—an example of which his wife wears as a sign of her husband's success. As seen in the Currier & Ives lithograph depicting the life of the American man, success was defined in political, economic, and military terms. Susan Avery, by contrast, is in large part defined by her husband—her support of his wares and his wealth, which is represented by the jewelry and shawl she dons. By placing Mary Leypold Griffiths in a comparable setting as the Averys inhabit, despite the notes she took on the girl's actual room, Peale further suggested Mary's preparation for republican motherhood.

By picturing Mary as a daughter of liberty and, thereby, a future republican mother, Sarah Miriam Peale, who was childless, thus compensated for her own potential "failure" to serve as a republican mother in her own life. In the early 19th century, it was not common for white male painters to depict children and when they took up the subject, they typically depicted young boys in the country or preparing for their future roles in the military, business, or politics.[17] For female artists, the subject of children reaffirmed the agency and significance of republican motherhood in priming young Americans for their future roles.

Sarah Miriam Peale grew up in an extended family of artists with strong national ties and values and would have been subject to the same social expectations as the children she depicted. Peale's father, James Peale, fought in the American Revolution as a captain. Her famous uncle Charles Willson Peale, who produced *Mrs. Peale Lamenting the Death of Her Child (Rachel Weeping)*, was known for his enlightenment philosophy and dedication to national principles. In the 1840s, Sarah herself began attending sessions of Congress when she visited Washington, D.C., thus demonstrating a significant interest in the political culture of her time.[18] Given this upbringing, she would have been indoctrinated into American social mores and acutely aware of her not having lived up to them. Thus, as Peale's portrait of *Mary Leopold Griffith* served as a proxy child for Priscilla Griffith, so, too, did it serve this role for Peale. It demonstrated the artist's own attempt to serve as a republican mother. She develops the painting, building it up, similar to a republican mother raising her child and molding her or him into a virtuous citizen.

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11 For more information on period ideas surrounding death, see Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Towards Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 52.

12 Ibid, 55.

13 Ibid, 59-61.

14 Michelon, "Capturing a Likeness."

15 Further information on mourning practices can be found in Barbara Dodd Hillerman, "Chrysallis of Gloom: Nineteenth Century American Mourning Costume," in *A Time to Mourn: Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth Century America*, ed. Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong (New York: The Museums at Stony Brook, 1980), 95-101.

16 Hunter, Wilbur H., and John Mahey, *Miss Sarah Miriam Peale, 1800-1885: Portraits and Still Life*, (Baltimore: The Peale Museum, 1967), 10.

17 Perry, *Young America,* 38.

18 Anne Sue Hirshorn, "Anna Claypoole, Margaretta, and Sarah Miriam Peale: Modes Of Accomplishment and Fortune," in *The Peale Family: Creation of a Legacy, 1770-1870*, edited by Lillian B. Miller, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996), 240.

Figure 1. Sarah Miriam Peale, *Mary Leypold Griffith (1838-1841)*, 1841, oil on canvas, 35 1/2 × 30 3/4 in. (90.2 × 78.1 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the American Art Forum, the Catherine Walden Myer Endowment, the Julia D. Strong Endowment, and the Pauline Edwards Bequest.

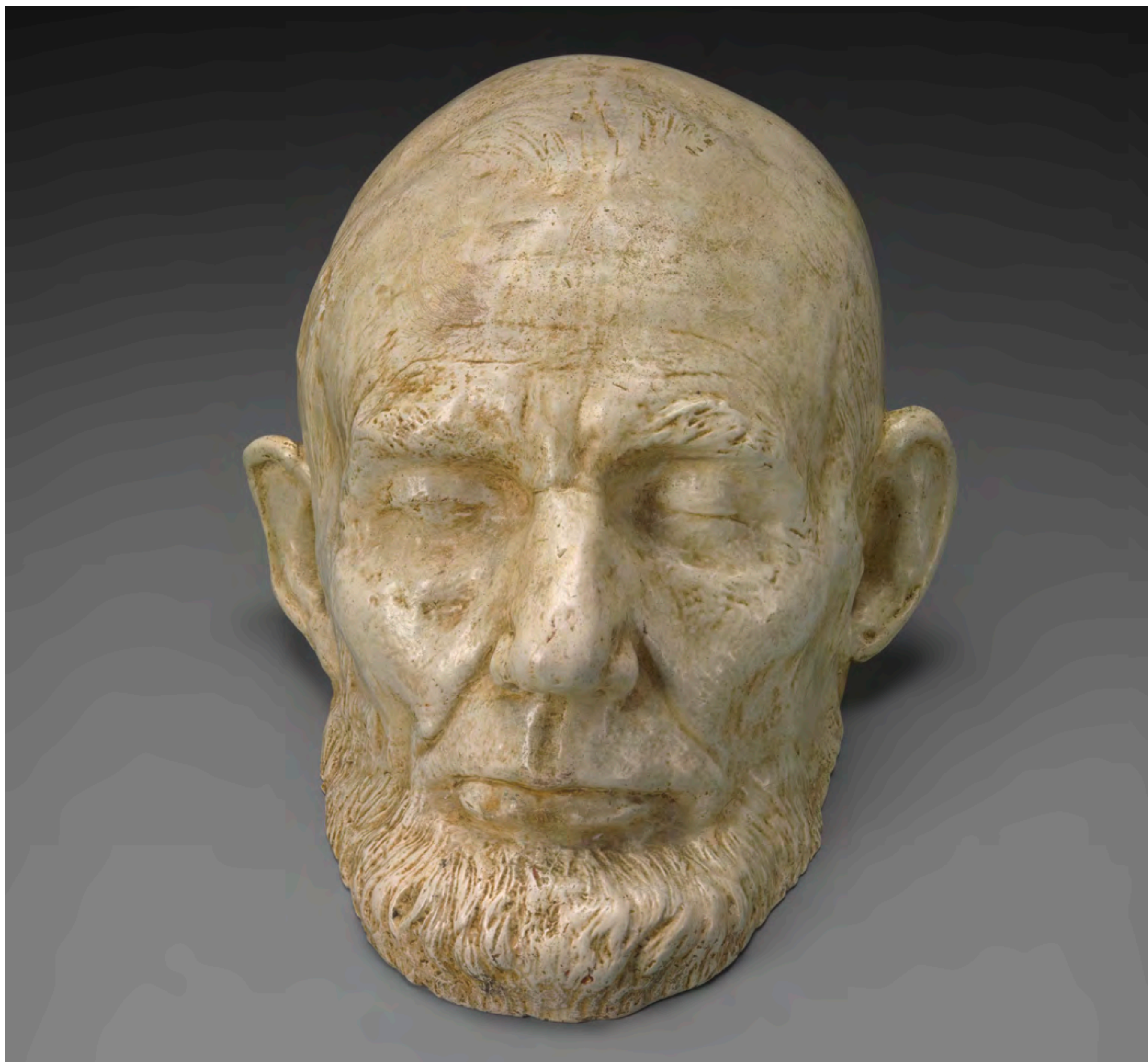

Figure 2. Clark Mills, *Abraham Lincoln*, c. 1917 after 1865 original, plaster, 6 3/4 x 8 x 11 ¾ in. (17.1 x 20.3 x 29.8cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Figure 3. Currier & Ives, publisher, *Life and Age of Man: Stages of Man's Life From the Cradle to the Grave*, c. 1856-1907, lithograph, hand-colored. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-pga-09292.

Figure 4. James Baillie, Life and Age of Woman: *Stages of Woman's Life From the Cradle to the Grave*, lithograph, hand-colored. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-12817.

Figure 5. Charles Willson Peale, *Mrs. James Smith and Her Grandson*, 1776, oil on canvas, 36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in. (92.4 x 74.3 cm.). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Levering Smith, Jr. and museum purchase.

Figure 6. Charles Willson Peale, *Mrs. Peale Lamenting the Death of Her Child* (Rachel Weeping), 1772, enlarged 1776; retouched 1818, oil on canvas, 36 13/16 x 32 1/16 inches (93.5 x 81.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of The Barra Foundation, Inc., 1977-34-1.

Figure 7. Sarah Miriam Peale, *Susan Avery*, 1821, oil on canvas, 35 1/4 x 27 1/2 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Museum Purchase: The Louis Pollard Price Acquisition Fund.

Figure 8. Sarah Miriam Peale, *Isaac Avery*, 1821, oil on canvas, 35 1/4 x 27 1/2 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Museum Purchase: The Louis Pollard Price Acquisition Fund.