

Aaron Burr: Villain to Hero Upgrade

Barbara Pralat

Honors Thesis

Advisors: Susan Lewis and Lou Roper

Abstract: The research project explores the historiography surrounding Aaron Burr. For most of United States history, he has been vilified as a traitor to the nation and the murderer of Alexander Hamilton. However, Aaron Burr's reputation has been questioned through Gore Vidal's novel: *Burr*, published in 1973, which humanizes Burr without taking away from his notorious reputation. Nancy Isenberg's historical biography: *Fallen Founder* published in 2007, which explores Burr as a feminist and looking at the accusations against Burr in the political world. More recently the musical *Hamilton* by Lin Manuel Miranda, explores Burr as Hamilton's first friend and someone who is sympathetic and wants to get ahead in life. Using both primary and secondary sources to trace the history of Burr's reputation and to show if Aaron Burr is really a villain, based on his character and career. Included in the research is highlights of Aaron Burr's life and events that led to his reputation being portrayed as negative. The paper explores how one of America's most notorious founding fathers gained such a bad reputation and if he deserves this reputation or if he deserves a better reputation and belongs with the other founding fathers.

Key Words: History, Aaron Burr, Founding Fathers, American History, Alexander Hamilton.

Intro:

Aaron Burr has been known for many things: being a vice president, a war hero, a murderer, a traitor, a lawyer, and a feminist. In 1804, Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel, thus destroying his chances of a further political career in America. In 1807, Burr was tried for treason for the Burr conspiracy in which Burr was accused of trying to secede land from the United States. Burr then led a self-imposed exile abroad in Europe, eventually returning to America where he would die in 1834. These are just many of the interesting things Aaron Burr's life was full of that make him seem like a bad guy. If you were to tell the story of Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson, Burr seems like the villain. However, Aaron Burr was a complex character who does not deserve such a negative image.

Burr's character is unique in the sense his views are different than those of other founding fathers and hard to condense into only one word. All of these things led to him being loved or being hated in his time period and in the narratives and historiography that took place after. When it comes to Burr, it seemed as if there was no in between; he was a complicated man. In popular culture and in American History, Burr has often been seen as the villain. Aaron Burr has been portrayed in plays, novels, musicals, and even commercials. However, most of these refer to his duel with Alexander Hamilton. Shooting another founding father has given Burr the negative reputation because dueling was illegal and Hamilton is viewed as an American hero. While this is an important defining part of his story, because the duel and Burr's behavior surrounding it say a lot about his character, it should not be the only thing contributing to Burr's place in American history.

Attitudes toward Aaron Burr's character have changed over time in both popular culture and scholarly sources. Historians today are still conflicted about Burr's character and image.

Many sources present different images of this founding father. This includes a musical, novels, and a historical biography.

The sources examined to get a rounded opinion of Burr's character are Gore Vidal's novel *Burr* and the sources critiquing the book, Nancy Isenberg's biography, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr*, Lin Manuel Miranda's Musical, *Hamilton*, the historical novel *My Theodosia* by Anya Seton and the best-selling biography *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow. Seton's novel published in 1941 portrayed Burr as a loving father figure but also as a 'Charming scoundrel'. Vidal's novel published in 1973 humanized Burr but kept his notorious reputation. Isenberg's biography published in 2007 explored Burr as a feminist, his political role and the accusations against him, and argued that his character is complicated and misunderstood in previous literature and historiography written about him. Miranda's musical of 2015 brings Burr to the stage and we see Burr as someone who is politically motivated, indecisive, a loving father figure, and someone who cares about their legacy and reputation. Chernow's biography published in 2004 talks about Aaron Burr only in the light of Alexander Hamilton and makes him out to be a bad guy.

Hamilton-Chernow

Ron Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton* published in 2004 is a critically acclaimed biography. It was the inspiration behind the musical *Hamilton* and does not give Aaron Burr a good image. Chernow portrays Hamilton as a man of honor and says the feud was started over nothing. Hamilton spent years denouncing Burr as corrupt. He ruined Burr's run for governor of New York in 1804 and ruined any political chances for Aaron Burr. However, Chernow says this feud started from nothing and was based on nothing. That everything

Hamilton said was justifiable. He accuses Burr of acting irrational, while historians and authors who have studied Burr do not agree. Burr's reason for challenging Hamilton to a duel was because Hamilton had spread lies and accused Burr of having incestuous relations with his daughter. Chernow also calls a Burr an Assassin and that he shot to kill, however, despite the fact that there is evidence that contradicts this. Especially since most witnesses say Hamilton shot first. Burr was also tried for treason, but by time he finished his term for vice presidency, he was found to be given immunity from prosecution. This source shows us how "Pro-Hamiltons" feel about Aaron Burr and it is never a positive image.

My Theodosia

My Theodosia published in 1941 by Anya Seton is a novel that portrays Aaron Burr as a devoted father who only wants the best for his child. The actual Aaron Burr's attitude when raising Theodosia was for her to be well educated and a proper lady. Burr encouraged his daughter to read Mary Wollstonecraft, someone who is now considered to have one of the earliest ideals of feminism by writing books on women's rights, and the leading Enlightenment advocate of women's rights. Hamilton actually attacked Burr for having these ideals, the idea that women were intellectually equal to men was a radical idea, and Burr received a lot of criticism for having these ideas. Aaron Burr was arguably a feminist. He gave his daughter the same education he would have given a son. He believed that men and women were of the same intelligence level. While the novel creates some tension between Theodosia and Aaron Burr due to her marriage prospects, it fully expressed the devotion and love this father and daughter had for each other. The novel is interesting though because despite the fact of their devotion to each other, Seton portrays Burr as manipulative to everyone, including his daughter, and a charming

scoundrel. This could actually be seen as true because Burr emphasized the importance of money matters to in her marriage to Joseph Alston, a wealthy plantation owner from South Carolina. Sadly, Burr's daughter died in 1813. This novel showed that Burr was willing to betray people including his own daughter for money and power. However, the novel does not match up with his actual image, which portrays him as greedy but not when it came to his daughter.

Burr

Gore Vidal's novel *Burr* was published in 1973 and took away from the previous image of Aaron Burr being a traitor. Vidal's novel is meant for people to question everything they know about the founding fathers and their characters. The novel expresses this through the later life of Aaron Burr. This novel portrays Charles Schuyler, the main character, who is intrigued by Burr, an unheroic figure in a time of heroics in America. Charles finds out that Burr is witty, sophisticated, and well-traveled.

Burr was based on ten years of research and the character of Aaron Burr is similar to the real Aaron Burr. Growing up, young Burr would educate himself on the proper way to be a gentleman, he would learn from his peers at the College of New Jersey. Young Aaron Burr had a desire to succeed in life and was seen as intelligent. As for sophistication, Burr was raised to follow in his father's footsteps; Nancy Isenberg said: "One chose the church, the other the bar, but both honed their manners and skills of persuasion so as to maintain their standing among the elite of society."¹

While Vidal's novel got a lot about Aaron Burr's character right, there are still a lot of issues with Vidal's interpretation. *Writing The Republic* by Anthony Hutchison ~~we are~~ exposes

¹ Isenberg, Nancy. 2007. *Fallen Founder*. New York, N.Y.: Viking. P. 7

some of these issues. Hutchison argues that the novel creates tensions that were not there between Jefferson and Burr. The novel was also criticized for bringing down other founding fathers to build Burr up. This is an issue because the author should not have to degrade other influential people in this country to build up someone else. Aaron Burr should be able to stand on his own. While there were great tensions between Burr and Jefferson, the novel over exaggerates the feud between the two men. However, when looking at primary sources it is important to remember that much of Burr's negative public image came from Jefferson and Hamilton. They published smears against him in newspapers, accused him of false actions such as having incest relations with his daughter and destroyed his political career. This is relevant because it brings to question if many things Burr was accused of was true.

Isenberg

Nancy Isenberg's biography, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* published in 2008 brings Aaron Burr into a new light. It talks about Burr in such a positive light and argues against previous negative rumors. She regards young Burr as someone who wants to get ahead in life, and the loss he suffered in his early childhood contributed to that, this explains a lot of his characteristics. Burr wrote nothing of his parents whom he never knew (they died when he was a very young child) and his views of the world would come from the family members he grew up around, this included his more 'liberal' views. He was raised to follow in his father's footsteps and be a minister; however, he chose law in the end due to the influence at college. Burr's college years would follow him throughout his whole life: "From his Revolutionary exploits to his quest for national office, Aaron Burr would always be associated with intense fraternal bonds, and his name linked to a kind of hypersexuality that conveniently explained his appeal to

young and politically aggressive men.”² However, his college years gave Burr the ideals to be a hero, leadership skills, and produced a young man of twenty who was driven and ready to prove himself to the world. Burr’s time in the army, is really a basis for the proof that he is a hero. He was there when General Montgomery took a bullet and supposedly tried to save his life. It was said that Burr had courage under fire and was recognized by congress for this. Isenberg does a good job explaining the role of Burr in politics and how his early childhood has shaped him and the ideals he will have for the rest of his life. Burr was someone who initially regarded politics as fun and that was why he got involved with them.

Burr has been called indecisive. However, as Isenberg points out: “The evidence shows the opposite to be true. Burr displayed time and again, during the years of his rise in New York political circles, that he did not automatically take one side over another.”³ This is important because Burr was always dragged through the mud and called indecisive, during his life time by Alexander Hamilton and in the musical; *Hamilton*. However, he just wanted to take a step back and view all sides before making his final choice.

Lin Manuel Miranda’s musical portrays Burr as the narrator, a friend turned foe of Alexander Hamilton, and a devoted father. Miranda does touch on Burr’s childhood briefly and uses it to compare his childhood to Alexander Hamilton’s. The musical touches on quite a few similarities between the two young men, one being that they were both orphans and both had ambition to get ahead in life. So in the musical, Burr’s character is a very upper-class driven minded individual, who wants to do things that protect his parents’ legacy and his status in society. This is exposed through several songs and scenes. In the song *Wait For It*, Aaron Burr

² Isenberg, P. 14

³ Isenberg P. 27

says: “When they died they left no instructions Just a legacy to protect.”⁴ This was a mirror of the real Burr, younger Burr wanted to live up to his family's legacy and be a prominent man in history.

However, according to Isenberg, his college years are what shaped him that they gave him the heroic ideals that he would hold in the back of his mind. Some of Burr’s political issues came with the election of 1800, an election that is full of scandal, disputes, and rivalry. During the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson ran for president against John Adams. Jefferson chose Burr as his running mate and because of the politics of the election, it came out that Burr had a chance at the presidency. Aaron Burr had two choices, he could run for president or he could turn it down. He decided to do nothing and this led to him having the reputation of being indecisive. In the end this led to Alexander Hamilton uniting with Thomas Jefferson and continuing the smear campaign being waged against Burr by both Hamilton and Jefferson.

After the election near fiasco of 1800, Burr had a rough time as Vice President. Jefferson was upset with Burr not stepping down from the presidential race, and cut off many of the Vice President’s duties, while Alexander Hamilton kept up the campaign against Burr in newspapers. Once Burr realized he would be dropped from the ballot of 1804, he became increasingly upset. He wanted apologies for the things said against him such as the incest accusations and rightfully so. His political career seemed to be ruined. Isenberg says this after the duel: ““Once he had killed Hamilton, Burr could do nothing right.”⁵ Newspapers reported that he was trying to start his own country west of the Mississippi, and in 1807, charged with treason, he was brought to trial in Virginia. Acquitted, he went into exile. Jefferson would later reappear in Burr’s life in the

⁴ Miranda, Lin-Manuel. “Hamilton: An American Musical.” In *Hamilton: The Revolution*. Edited by Jeremy McCarter. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016. *Wait For It*

⁵ Isenberg P.

Burr conspiracy, where Burr was taken to trial for treason. The treason trial was designed to find Burr guilty, something Jefferson wanted. However, there was no substantial evidence found in the court case and he was found not guilty to the annoyance of Jefferson. Nancy Isenberg says: “Burr was not guilty of treason, nor was he ever convicted, because there was no evidence, not one credible piece of testimony, and the star witness for the prosecution had to admit that he had doctored a letter implicating Burr.”⁶ Burr’s political career is something that was discussed through many sources but a good portrayal of a negative side of Burr’s political career is the musical *Hamilton*.

Hamilton

Hamilton the musical written by Lin Manuel Miranda portrays Burr in many different lights. According to Miranda, Burr is someone who wants to live up to the legacy of his parents, get ahead of Hamilton in life, and make a name for himself in the political world. The importance of Burr in this play is unique, because while he is an antagonist to Alexander Hamilton, he is also very human. He has regrets. One of the things that makes Burr unique in this musical is he regrets killing Hamilton almost immediately. In real life it was stated that Burr went home, had his breakfast, and answered some letters and had no remorse till later in life. This was conflicting with Isenberg’s biography and documentaries on the duel, these all portray Burr as going home and continuing his life after the duel. Hamilton did ruin Burr’s political career and Aaron Burr just snapped. He had already lost everything, he had nothing to lose by challenging Hamilton to a duel. The musical also portrays Burr as a devoted father to his daughter and makes him a conflicted character, while the other character’s are already set in

⁶ Isenberg P. 113

their own views the other characters portrayed such as Alexander Hamilton, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson who all have their own goals in the musical. However, one of the most important lines in the musical is: “History obliterates, In every picture it paints, It paints me and all my mistakes...I survived but I paid for it, now I’m the villain in your history.”⁷ This lyric really portrays Burr, if you had to pick something to describe him. Due to the duel, Burr is now our villain in history, his life became “a trial of errors” after the duel and we seem to only remember the bad things Aaron Burr has done. When in fact, he has done so much more for America, and deserves just as much credit as every other founding father. The musical is important because Burr should not be defined as totally evil or totally good. Every person in our history has flaws and because of his duel with Hamilton, Burr is now the villain in our history books.

Conclusion

Nancy Isenberg says: “Hamilton and Jefferson have always had their defenders. Burr did not have a protective posterity to project his “greatness” through the ages.”⁸ Burr had no one to defend him, even early works like Seton’s borderline accuse Burr of having incest relationships with his daughter, without straight up saying it. It is time for Aaron Burr’s image to change. Burr’s image is taken from the attacks by his enemies and fiction, it time his image is rescued from the ‘tabloids’ of history and given the proper credit he deserves. In the musical, *Hamilton*, they say this about Alexander Hamilton: “Every other founding father’s story gets told.”⁹ Well, in terms of Aaron Burr, it is time to continue this positive image that Isenberg has started to rescue from the negative images of history, it is time to tell Burr’s story in a positive light.

⁷ *Hamilton*, “The World was Wide Enough.”

⁸ Isenberg P. 405

⁹ *Hamilton Musical*; “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who tells your story.”

A Hero is something that is difficult to define, because it personally comes down to personal preferences. When asked some people say their parents or a famous singer or actor, some people name historical figures such as George Washington or even Alexander Hamilton. However, when thinking of founding fathers, Aaron Burr could be considered the most liberal and the most open to changing ideas. He was an advocate for freedom of the press, a feminist, a man who loved his daughter, someone who wanted to make a legacy for himself. He is not just a villain but also someone who has done a lot for America. He was in the interest of democracy and wanted to make sure people had a say, he wanted elections, and the U.S. senate to be more fair. He changed rules for politics and the vice presidency. He fought for the outsider, the average person, despite having an elite status in society, he believed anyone who contributed to society should be a citizen. Maybe this was because he was an outsider because of his views, he never stopped to the level of publicly shaming his political enemies. He founded the Manhattan Bank Company, the first one not at the control of federalists. Aaron Burr has done a lot for America, and like every other person he made mistakes, mistakes that have given him a negative image. However, just like the other founding fathers he deserves to be looked at from all sides, the good and the bad. He deserves a hero status for the amount of things he has accomplished. People should spend more time getting to know this “villain” whose reputation deserves to be rescued from the negative images that were formed in history

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