

The Death of Alexander Hamilton:
Constructing Meaning and Narrative from Chronicle

Hayden White tells us in *Tropics of Discourse* that “our knowledge of the past may increase incrementally, but our understanding of it does not.”¹ In this seemingly paradoxical statement, White is making a clear distinction between the bricks we use to build our narratives (e.g. the primary sources stored in archives) and the form we choose to arrange them in; the historian digging diligently in the archives may well unearth a new artifact (perhaps a previously unknown correspondence), but its ability to engender a new “understanding” of a given historical topic is dependent on the historian’s capacity to construct a narrative that endows the facts with new meaning. Furthermore, new types of narratives, that assign new meanings to historical topics, need not be preceded by the discovery of new facts at all.

The story of Alexander Hamilton’s untimely demise at the hands of Aaron Burr on July 11th 1804 serves as a particularly useful instance for illustrating this point. Our “knowledge” of the events that led to Hamilton’s death on the dueling grounds of Weehawken, New Jersey has not increased appreciably in recent times; however, the meaning that historians draw from the established chronicle has not reached a similar state of stagnation—and, very likely, it never will. Hamilton and Burr’s famous, and infamous, duel is part of American mythology; consequently, historians are as likely to tire of debating its meaning as the storytellers of ancient Greece were likely to grow weary of varying tales concerned with the exploits of Hercules or Zeus. The form and content of the narrative that gives it meaning was from the earliest recounting wrought in archetypal form: the newspaper articles and memorial services that immediately followed Hamilton’s death uniformly cast Hamilton in the role of self-sacrificing martyr and Burr in the role of blood thirsty villain. Historians looking back from the perspective of the late-20th/early 21st century must self-consciously engage this mythology; it is their task to

¹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 89

penetrate the smoke-screen thrown up by the initial recountings (narratives inevitably flawed, from the modern perspective, by the political biases and self-interested behavior of the story-tellers, many of which relished the chance to destroy Burr politically and saw no harm in lionizing a man whom praise could not possibly benefit beyond the grave) to find the potentially different meanings that can be derived from the chronicle of events.

However, these narratives not only tear through the fabric of American mythology, they also inevitably construct their own fictions—which is not to suggest that they falsify the historical record. As Hayden White argues, “events are *made* into a [recognizable] story by the suppression or subordination of certain” story elements “and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play.”² Therefore, historians constructing new narratives of, and assigning new meanings to, Hamilton’s death inevitably find themselves at odds with one another—not in terms of specific facts, but in the sense that the stories they tell reflect their own particular poetic visions.

Two such examples are Arnold A. Rogow’s *A Fatal Friendship*³ and Thomas Fleming’s *Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr and the Future of America*⁴. In both cases, the meaning these historians assign to their topic is encapsulated succinctly in the titles of their monographs. Rogow finds in the record evidence of a fundamental similarity in the characters of Hamilton and Burr—thus they were “friends” in the sense, as Aristotle noted in his *Ethics*, that a friend is “another self.” Consequently, Hamilton’s death is emploted as somewhat of a tragedy: it was his own character flaws, those that he could not admit to himself but could revile in the person of Burr, that led to his downfall. Fleming, while certainly not denying certain similarities of character between the two, invests the reasons for, and the significance of, their encounter with considerably greater scope—as Fleming’s title suggests, the very “future of America” was at stake in their

² White, p. 84

³ Arnold A. Rogow, *A Fatal Friendship*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1998

⁴ Thomas Fleming, *Duel: Alexander Hamilton: Aaron Burr and the Future of America*, New York: Basic Books, 1999

duel. As such, Fleming's tale is much more of a romance, defined as a tale of heroes and extraordinary events.

The different meanings that these respective historians intend their narratives to convey are reflected in the emphasis that they place on certain story elements. Fleming identifies his key motif, reiterated throughout, very early on in his narrative: for Fleming, understanding Hamilton requires an appreciation for the nuances of "a powerful word that explains much of Hamilton's life: fame."⁵ According to Fleming, the course of Hamilton's political career and the core of his political philosophy was informed to a great extent by his intense study of Francis Bacon's *Essays* as a youth. In this book, Hamilton encountered a five-stage classification of fame that placed the founders of empires, such as Cyrus of Persia and Julius Caesar of Rome at the very highest level. It was his admiration for this type of fame that led Hamilton to revile politicians who chose personal gain over the strength of the American commonwealth, and it was his glorious vision of the United States as a world power—in terms of economic strength (as reflected in Hamilton's instrumental role in the creation of the federal banking system) and military vigor (as reflected in Hamilton's insistence on constant preparedness for war and his own self-satisfaction at achieving the rank of General)—that guided his political maneuverings.

Furthermore, in Fleming's analysis, it was this quest for empire that put Hamilton on a collision course with Burr. First, it created the background atmosphere of animosity between the two by compelling Hamilton to sabotage Burr's political aspirations over a fifteen year period prior to the duel on the grounds that Burr was both the type of self-interested individual to use his position for personal gain in lieu of serving the common good of a strong state (as demonstrated by Burr's instrumental role in the creation of the Chase Manhattan Bank, a competitor with Hamilton's Bank of New York) and a politician allied with forces committed to weakening the strong federal government Hamilton advocated (e.g. anti-Federalists and Democrats). Second, the quest for empire and Hamilton's self styled identity as a consummate soldier nominated Hamilton in the eyes of Burr as a particularly desirable adversary to challenge and best in the public arena.

⁵ Fleming, p. 18

Fleming sets the stage for the series of indignant letters between Burr and Hamilton that led to the duel by describing Burr as a man nursing his wounds after his defeat in the 1804 New York State gubernatorial election (a defeat in which Hamilton's slanders played a role), the political windfall that accompanied Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase (an event which rendered Burr's value to Jefferson as a second term vice president or political ally of any kind virtually nonexistent), and being inflicted with a facial ague. However, he was also a man whose ambitions had recently been rekindled with a vengeance: according to Fleming, not only did Burr entertain hopes that "Jefferson was going to fall on his face eventually or New England would secede"—thus causing the nation to collapse "into disunion and chaos"⁶—he also had his head filled with "General Wilkinson's vision of Bonapartean fame in the southwest and Charles Williamson's confident assurance of English support for the venture."⁷

In Fleming's version of the story, this frame of mind shaped Burr's reaction to the April 24th *Albany Register*, in which a letter from the earnest young Dr. Charles D. Cooper to Philip Shuyler appeared in print. This letter related Cooper's recounting of the usual Hamiltonian slanders to Burr's character along with the statement that, in addition to the already numerous political shortcomings of Burr, Cooper could supply Shuyler "with a 'still more despicable opinion' that General Hamilton had expressed of Aaron Burr."⁸ Upon reading this letter:

In a scarifying flash, Aaron Burr saw a way to exit from New York and head for the future, not as a beaten politician, or a patient litigant, humbly interviewing fellow politicians for the next year to prove he was not a traitor to his party, but as a soldier, with a reputation restored on a soldier's terms.⁹

Thus, the series of letters between Burr and Hamilton—in which Burr would repeatedly demand a general disavowal and Hamilton would repeatedly attempt artful evasion—that led to the duel was fundamentally rooted in the ambition of each for glory as a father of empire.

⁶ Fleming, p. 278

⁷ Fleming, p. 281

⁸ Fleming, p. 281

⁹ Fleming, p. 281

In stark contrast, Rogow omits Burr's dreams of empire in the southwest almost entirely; it is only in the epilogue that Rogow addresses the conspiracy that Fleming assigns such key importance for understanding the events that led to the duel—a choice made “since the ‘Conspiracy,’ which has been the subject of two books and has been dealt with at length by Burr's biographers” is “beyond the scope of this book”¹⁰ and, consequently, need only be discussed briefly. Certainly, this is a strange claim when seen in light of Fleming's argument; after all, the unfolding of Burr's “Conspiracy” and his trial for treason took place only a few years after his duel with Hamilton. Surely what took place then had its seeds planted during the period of escalating tension between Hamilton and Burr and, consequently, must have had some bearing on Burr's decision making.

However, the omission of this key story element makes perfect sense if we remember that Rogow is emplotting (consciously or not) the story of Hamilton's death as a tragedy; by definition, the cause of Hamilton's death must be rooted in his own nature. His choice is less an example of gross negligence than it is a stylistic preference; indeed, Rogow offers us evidence neglected by Fleming that is also compelling. For Rogow, the opinion of Noah Webster (among other contemporaries of Hamilton) assumes a heightened importance. In a letter to Hamilton, Webster “wondered aloud whether Federalists as well as Anti-Federalists would believe henceforth that ‘your ambition, pride, and overbearing temper have destined you to be the evil genius of this country’” and concluded by stating flatly that “‘your conduct on this occasion will be deemed little short of insanity’.”¹¹ While stopping short of assigning Hamilton a clinical diagnosis, Rogow does suggest that Hamilton suffered from symptoms common to both manic-depressives and paranoids. For Rogow, Hamilton's psychological make-up predisposed him to a fixation on Burr as the embodiment of his anxieties: contributing factors involved in Hamilton's fixation on Burr included Burr's striking physical similarities to Hamilton, his awareness “that Burr possessed skills as a lawyer the equal of his own, and political talents and aspirations” of a similar nature,” as well as the fact that “Burr

¹⁰ Rogow, p. 276

¹¹ Rogow, p. 205

enjoyed advantages he had been denied.”¹² Consequently, Rogow asserts that Hamilton’s “hatred of Burr, which was obsessive, was not entirely or even mainly a result of political rivalry.”¹³

Significantly, this leads Rogow to interpret the key factor that led to Burr taking exception to Cooper’s letter, and led him to initiate the bellicose exchange that ultimately ended with Hamilton’s death, in a completely different way. For Fleming, Burr self-consciously brought himself into confrontation with Hamilton in order to establish his status as a soldier and invigorate his political career: it was a calculated move, motivated by factors in the public sphere. In contrast, Rogow’s Burr is a remarkably restrained individual who had sustained years of political slander from Hamilton with nary a complaint; he was “never someone whose self-esteem and sense of achievement depended upon political office.”¹⁴ Certainly, this is a different Burr from the one Fleming paints; but, it is also one supportable by the “facts.” Rogow and Fleming (by virtue of omission) would both agree, “that Burr was never heard, at any time, to make a derogatory remark about Hamilton.” But, where Fleming believes that sudden blind ambition prompted Burr to break his vow of silence, Rogow believes that there must have been an issue of a personal nature that Burr took umbrage with. In Rogow’s formula, Hamilton must have incited the chain of events that led to his demise with an indiscretion stemming from his own increasingly erratic psyche. Thus, Rogow concludes that the “still more despicable” comment referenced by Cooper “must have gone beyond an expression of ‘resentment’ or remarks merely critical of Burr’s politics.”¹⁵

Although Rogow is unable to supply exactly what that piece of information was (alas that “brick” is still missing) he does offer a lengthy series of speculations—the majority of which nominate Burr’s profligate relationships with women (perhaps, even his own daughter) as likely candidates. However, his inability to definitively fill in this piece of the puzzle does not detract from his certainty that it must have existed in some form. Given the same discrete set of building blocks Rogow and Fleming have constructed completely different structures, but both are equally as valid because both

¹² Rogow, p. 262

¹³ Rogow, p. 228

¹⁴ Rogow, p. 230

¹⁵ Rogow, p. 231

arrange them in a manner that is a recognizable story to its audience: one is a tragedy, the other is a romance. Neither is the “truth” in an absolute sense, nor could they possibly be, because the meaning of Hamilton’s death is a human creation—the only hard fact in it being that a bullet entered Hamilton’s body on July 11th 1804 and a short time thereafter his heart stopped. Furthermore, if we accept their factual consistency, both of these monographs can be seen as attempts at producing classics in the field. They are classics in the sense that “they can neither be disconfirmed or negated, in the way that the principle conceptual schema of the sciences are.”¹⁶ This is a characteristic that attests to both their essentially literary nature, and their function as contributions to our historical “understanding” rather than our “knowledge.”

¹⁶ White, p. 89