

Aaron Burr

By John Neal¹

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To speak of the Dead as they deserve, is to bring the whole world about your ears. It is the greatest of hardships—for neither the living nor the dead will bear the truth. Pigmies become giants, harnessed in “golden panoply complete,” and carrying spears like weaver’s beams in the exaggerating atmosphere of that Other-World. Vices change to Virtues, and Folly to warm-hearted Weakness, under the transforming power of the grave. The Departed, who were nobodies while they lived, loom like ships at sea after death; until the great over-peopled Past is thronged with dwarfed and stunted apparitions, toiling and stretching and crowding and jostling one another for a niche where they may rest themselves—mere standing room for a few days at most, is all they ask—who, but for their biographers and their booksellers, and the hope *they* have to be remembered yet a little while after death, or at least paid for their labor, would have been forgotten forever before the turf had flowered once upon their graves.

To overpraise the dead is reckoned a virtue by men who always underrate the living. We flatter the dead that we may be flattered after death. We are lavish in this world, that we may reap a golden harvest in the next. Truth is mighty, nevertheless; and there may be found here and there one, a “faithful few”² at most, not unwilling to hear the truth even of the departed; a sermon preached, even among the tombs.

Aaron Burr³ was one of the most remarkable men of his day. Alive or dead, there is no speaking of him without a shudder. Beyond the every-day acceptance of the word, he was a *great* man; for wiser and better men were afraid of him, and he made himself felt, and heard himself acknowledged whithersoever he bent his way. If he but lifted his finger in earnest, or breathed aloud, in the day of his strength, all the political and social and moral elements of society about him were disturbed. He carried a truncheon, like a thunderbolt, whose authority, from first to last, during a period of thirty years, it was death to question. While yet a youth, his elder brethren did obeisance to him, and as he waxed older, they prostrated themselves in his path, and he trampled upon them, and spurned them.

¹ John Neal, a contributor to *The Pioneer* and other journals, was a Yankee editor who “furnished several readable sketches,” although this article is considered of particular interest (Robertson 1921). This piece does not try to paint an unbiased picture of Aaron Burr, following a long established tradition of claiming the man to have an “evil reputation” (Peterson 1998). Neal wrote several other works about both Burr and Jeremy Bentham, which will be elaborated in further notes.

² This could refer to William Hamilton of Bangour’s poem “The Faithful Few: An Ode,” which honored the “lovers of their country” (Watson 1971) or to the religious poem “The Judgment Day” (Garland 1834). It could also be an adapted allusion to Matthew 25:21, which has many different translations including “faithful” and “few” in the passage.

³ Aaron Burr (1756-1836) served as the third vice president under Thomas Jefferson. He had a successful career in the military, the law, and politics, but he is most well-known for killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804 (“Aaron Burr” 2015).

And yet—notwithstanding all this, and notwithstanding the profound impression he appears to have made upon all who associated with him, or made war upon him, during the busiest part of a long and eventful life; in the camp and in the cabinet, in the senate chamber, in the forum and at the fire-side; whether he appeared among them as a soldier, as a politician, as a man of the world, or as a lawyer—by turns the betrayer and the betrayed—and whether doubted or trusted, denounced or worshipped—now glorying in his own ruthless treachery, and now standing at bay against the treachery of others—what has he left behind him to tell that he ever lived? Nothing—absolutely nothing! A name like a shadow—vast, unwieldy and portentous—but after all, a shadow, and nothing but a shadow!

With no monument, no record, no history! leaving neither brother nor sister, neither wife nor child! no drop of his blood running in the veins of a single human creature, unless by stealth—what is there to make people remember him?⁴ Like the unhappy Lear, he lived to “confess that he was old;” to acknowledge with a trembling voice and a quenched eye, that “age was unnecessary;” that he was “fourscore and upwards, and *mightily abused;*”⁵ and to look about him, as he drew near to the antichamber of Death, for some one to take charge of the kingly wreck, and “vouchsafe him food and raiment.” And this was the end of Aaron Burr!

He died in his eighty-first year.⁶ His whole life was a drama—and though he was blasted in the fourth act, as with fire from heaven, and lay upon the cold earth naked and houseless and hopeless, yet, in obedience to the great laws of the drama, the awful catastrophe was reserved for the fifth act. From first to last, having no faith in Man, no hope for himself beyond that which lurks in the bosom of a cool and crafty gambler, who depends upon overreaching all who may happen to think better of him than he deserves, he played, whatever might be the stake, as if playing for his own soul with the Enemy of man; without sympathy, remorse or compunction; heedless of all consequences either to himself or to those whom he pretended most to love on earth. His eye never quailed—his hand never shook—“his feet were swift to shed blood.”⁷

What shall be said of such a man? Is he to pass away untouched by earthly retribution? an example rather than a warning to others? Are the ambitious and the unprincipled to believe that they have nothing to fear from the judgments of men? Is there to be no profit in dealing justly with these disturbers of the peace, after death? Or shall his name be suffered to perish forever, lest in troubling the dead we may trouble the quick? Or shall it be remembered as a nightmare that weighed upon our fathers, awake or asleep; and haunted them alike in the battle-field and the senate-chamber?

Is it enough to say of such men—*they are no more!* Will society breathe freer? will the great pulses of human life carry on their “healthful music,”⁸ as if nothing strange had happened, when such men depart from among us? What if, by summoning them to reappear upon earth, to stand up in their grave-clothes, before the Future they defied and scoffed at; before the children of those whom they have so mightily wronged, we may oblige them to declare the truth, to uncover their

⁴ After he retired from the military in 1779, Burr met his first wife, Theodosia Prevost, and had four children by her. Unfortunately, only his daughter (also named Theodosia) survived into adulthood. Burr’s wife died in 1794, and his daughter was lost at sea in 1813, leaving him with no immediate family. Three years before he died, he married and quickly divorced a widow named Eliza Jumel (“The Duel: Aaron Burr” 2000).

⁵ Although these lines are put in quotations, they are not actually direct quotations of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Neal is instead changing the tense and combining lines to work within the article. The original lines are as follows: “Dear daughter, I confess that I am old” (*King Lear* act 2, scene 4), “age is unnecessary” (Act 2, scene 4), and “I am mightily abused... fourscore and upward” (Act 4, scene 7).

⁶ Burr was 80 years old at the time of his death, but it was during the year going towards his 81st birthday that he died (“Aaron Burr” 2015).

⁷ Romans 3:15

⁸ This is also written by Shakespeare, but this time from the play *Hamlet* (Act 3, scene 4).

festering hearts before all the world, to lay bare the secrets that were buried with them? What should restrain us—and who would venture to rebuke us?

Do the Living owe so much to the dead, and the Dead nothing to them? Are we never to know of a truth, and to judge for ourselves, who the great men of this world are? Must we take everything upon hearsay, all we so earnestly desire to know, upon trust? In that dread charnel-house, the buried human heart, once alive and sweltering with unholy fire, the living who are alike selfish, unsparing and resolute, and who, while they stop at nothing to effect their purposes, are not altogether beyond the reach of hope, may find somewhat to alarm their consciences, to teach them worldly wisdom, if nothing better, and to make them doubt and parley with the Destroyer, if nothing more, when they find themselves beset on every side by the sensual and the loathsome; when their very spirits fail them before the harlotry of the imagination; and the bale-fires that kindle of themselves at the approach of unhallowed appetite, or “the last infirmity of noble minds,” are like lions in their path.

For the encouragement of those who are toiling for mastery over themselves, before they venture to push for dominion over others; and who are neither afraid nor ashamed because of the “world’s dread laugh,”⁹ to say, when they are sorely buffeted, “Get behind me Satan!”¹⁰ And as a warning to all who, whatever else they may have done, have not yet surrendered body and soul to the blandishments of Ambition, nor been swallowed up quick among the whirlpools of the hour, it may be worth while to look into the history of Aaron Burr’s life.

What an epitaph to begin with! He cumbered the earth for eighty years; troubling the spirits of men with a visible awe; warring with usages and with principles as with nations; overthrowing all that opposed him, till his foot rested upon the very threshold of empire—tumbled headlong to the earth, at the very moment of his final triumph—and dying at last, friendless, and homeless, and childless, without sympathy or fellowship—and literally forgotten, years before the earth had closed over him!

“Leaving an OUTLAW’s name to other times,
Linked with *one* virtue and a thousand crimes.”¹¹

And what was that one virtue? We shall see. It was the virtue of endurance. Up to the very day of his death, you find him, like Hannibal, and like Napoleon, *self-sustained*, amid the wreck and ruin of all his cherished hopes; in desolation and bereavement and weariness of life, beyond the power of language to describe—thunder-blasted and alone—yet self-sustained!

The overthrow of all his mighty schemes; the utter ebbing of that faithless and fathomless ocean, which had borne him onward so long and so triumphantly; the sudden and total eclipse of all the splendors that had so long beset his path—of all the blazing trophies he had heaped together at so much cost of labor, and sacrifice of principle—the noon-day shipwreck of every earthly hope—all these things he withstood, as if they were the idle drifting phantoms of sleep, instead of being what they were—overwhelming, dread and vast realities.

He bore them all, if not submissively, and with humble resignation, at least in silence and with dignity—manfully and uncomplainingly; and all this, without the consolations of religious faith; without the consciousness of a well-spent life; without friendship, without sympathy, and without hope. Like imperial Cæsar, he gathered his robe about him, and covered his face, fell, —and in the very midst of those who but the other day were his obedient slaves. The moment he had

⁹ From Thomas Henry Marshal’s *The Irish Necromancer* on page 78 (1821).

¹⁰ Matthew 16:23

¹¹ “He left a Corsair’s name to other times, // Link’d with one virtue, and a thousand crimes” (Byron 95).

overstepped the fiery circle that held them in awe, the spirits he had conjured up, turned upon him and tore him in their wrath. And still, unlike Hannibal and Cato, and the mighty of other days, and unlike him, “from whose reluctant hand the thunderbolt was wrung,”¹² the Unconquerable of our day, he forebore to life his hand against *Himself*—the Lord’s anointed—but stood still, and waited the coming of Death, as a monarch would the approach of an ambassador laden with kingly gifts.

If Aaron Burr was not a great man, what was he? If with his *one* virtue, standing up alone in its gigantic proportions, unhelped and unsustained, yet steadfast as the living rock, he could endure life, with all its disappointments and trials and emptiness, when he knew he had nothing to hope on this side the grave, and not much on the other: when he felt he had lived in vain, and that he was already forgotten; and this, year after year, when he longed for death and was not afraid to die—what kind of a man must he have been, if that one single virtue had gathered to itself other virtues, alike serene and lofty, and their fellowship had continued on earth for eighty years? Would not this whole country have been the happier—whole ages, better and wiser—that Aaron Burr had lived?

Would his enemies have been able to write upon his grave then, aught to compare in awful significance with what his best friends are obliged to write now—Aaron Burr is no more. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum.*¹³

Let us look into his life. Up to the last, and even upon his death-bed, if we may believe his biographer, “he was far more tenacious of his military, than of his professional, political or *moral* character.”¹⁴ And well he might be!

In obedience to his death-bed injunction, therefore, let us try to understand *first* his military character.

He joins the revolutionary armies without experience or preparation, while he is yet in his twentieth year, feeble and effeminate, small of stature, and so youthful in appearance, that when he come to be distinguished, as Colonel Burr, he is mistaken for Colonel Burr’s son, and goes by that name for a long while in the army. Having heard of Arnold’s design upon Quebec, the Gibraltar of the New World, he volunteers as a private, shoulders his musket, straps on his knapsack, and marches afoot from Cambridge to Newburyport; baffling the best concerted schemes of his guardian to thwart the enterprise. And the next time we hear of him, he is on his way to the Canadas, charged by Arnold himself with a confidential despatch for Montgomery; stealing through our great northern wilderness, in the depth of winter, afoot and almost alone; and after enduring hardships more trying than those which regenerated the effeminate Cæsar, narrowly escaping death by freezing and by drowning, by starvation and by the halter, he reaches Montgomery, is appointed his aid-de-camp, volunteers to lead a forlorn hope, is with him in the midnight attack upon the citadel, in a heavy snowstorm, and is almost the only survivor among the steadfast few that led the assault—Montgomery and McPherson and Cheesman being swept down at his side, by the accidental discharge of that single cannon which saved Quebec—and the whole party being obliged to retreat, with all their foremost men either dead or dying—shattered to pieces, or bleeding to death upon the snow.

Soon after this, we find him in Washington’s family by special invitation; and while he is yet under age, appointed aid-de-camp to Major-General Putnam, and bringing off a whole brigade in safety from a position of exceeding peril, contrary to the opinion of General Knox himself, who

¹² From “Speech of John Randolph on The Tariff Bill” to the House of Representatives in 1824: “No, sir, the Jupiter from whose reluctant hand the thunderbolt is wrung, is not the one at whose shrine I worship...” (1845).

¹³ Translate from Latin into “of the dead (say) nothing but good” (“De mortuis nil nisi bonum” 2015).

¹⁴ Burr’s biographer was Matthew L. Davis, otherwise known as Matthew Livingston, who claimed that he knew the man intimately over the course of forty years (Davis 1836). Davis and Neal’s representations are rather different; Neal thought that Davis’s view of Burr was clouded by his friendship with the man (—)

regarded the project as altogether hopeless. That his character as a *soldier*, not as a *man*, stood high with the Commander-in-chief, may be safely inferred from the fact that he was appointed Lieutenant-Colonel by Washington himself, in his twenty-second year; that he was immediately employed in the important and arduous duty of establishing and maintaining a line of communication along the seaboard, and that soon after this, all the senior officers were withdrawn, so as to give him entire control of the militia posted for the defense of Valley Forge; and this, when Burr was known to be opposed to the Commander-in-chief, and to belong to a party, with Lee, and Gates, and Cadwalláder for ring-leaders, who were plotting to drive Washington from the army, by moving an inquiry in Congress into the causes of the failure of the preceding campaign, and passing a vote of censure, which it was believed would provoke the high-spirited Virginian to withdraw; a plan which smacks marvellously of the temper, and craft, and courtesy which always character the intrigues of Aaron Burr. *Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*,¹⁵ was the motto he wore blazoned, not only upon his banner and shield, but upon his forehead. Inexorable as death and smooth as oil, is but a fair translation of the legend.

Throughout his military career, you find him full of resource and courage, energetic, prompt and wary; watchful to a proverb; never taken by surprise, never losing his self-possession, never sparing himself, nor ever faltering in his self-reliance for a single moment; now marching a body of three hundred men against a marauding party of the enemy three thousand strong—surprising their sentinels, destroying their picket-guard, breaking up their camp, and returning in safety, after being two days and nights without sleep, and marching thirty miles in less than ten hours; now parading a corps of mutineers by moonlight, and going out single-banded against them, and cutting down the ringleader at the very instant of a preconcerted attack; now planning enterprise after enterprise, alike remarkable for boldness and generalship—enterprises which others were left to undertake and fail in, lest he should become conceited perhaps; and now establishing such a character with the Commander-in-chief, that he ‘cannot be spared,’ even at the urgent solicitation of General Gates himself; now halting his brigade and under a heavy fire at the battle of Monmouth, and offering up himself and his men, a willing sacrifice to a soldier’s first duty—obedience; now broken down in health, demanding a furlough, and refusing it when offered, because it came with a letter from the Commander-in-chief, continuing his pay; and now leaping from a sick bed at the blast of a trumpet, and taking command of the students at College-green, throwing himself headlong upon a body of British, and staying their march; and always, from first to last, during the whole of his military career, manifesting a firmness, a readiness, a coolness and a quickness, which on a wider theatre, and in schools of Europe, would have made him one of the first captains of the age—perhaps of any age.

And yet we are called upon to believe that this extraordinary man, this great soldier, in the maturity of his strength, and with all his abundant resources gathered about him for the very purpose, undertook the conquest of Mexico with less than one hundred and thirty men, all told! Not a tenth part of the strength of Cortes, employed three hundred years ago upon the very same enterprise, when Mexico was peopled with naked barbarians. Instead of five hundred and eight men in armor, sixteen horses, one hundred and nine priests and supernumeraries, with artillery and ships in proportion, the armament of Fernando Cortes, Aaron Burr is ready to overthrow the same vast empire, after it has become rich and powerful, with one hundred and thirty backwoodsmen—a few flat-bottomed boats—the resources of Blannerhasset—and the verbal promises of General Wilkinson! Was the man mad? or was this only a *fetch*, preparatory to driving the President and both houses of Congress into the Potomac, as he had threatened?

So much for the military character of Aaron Burr, that on which he so prided himself upon his death-bed. Let us now look at him in his *professional* character, as a lawyer.

¹⁵ Means “gently in manner, strongly in deed” in Latin (“suaviter in modo, fortiter in re” 2015).

He was admitted at the age of twenty-six, after a severe examination by the oldest and ablest of the New York bar, who had opposed his admission with all their strength. At the age of thirty-three, he was appointed Attorney-general of the state, and soon after a judge of the supreme court of New York, which office he declined.

That he was bold, acute, keen, wary and unprincipled, as great lawyers are exceedingly apt to be, their lives being a game of chess, and victory their whole object; and as the more abominable and hopeless their cases, the more creditable to them it is to prevail, not only in the opinion of their brother lawyers, the bar and the bench, but in the opinion of those who pay the piper—the people—no professional man would ever think of denying. Certain his great cases were gained in the very teeth of established law, and against the opinion of the whole New York bar. In one at least, he prevailed against the written opinions of such men as Alexander Hamilton, and those who trod with him in the foremost rank of the profession, although settlements and purchases had been made, and buildings erected on the faith of those opinions. The steamboat case, the Eden cases, and his own trial for high treason¹⁶ would be enough, were there nothing else, to show that Aaron Burr was a great lawyer—one of the greatest, all things considered, which this country, so fruitful in great lawyers, has yet produced. Still he was not a learned lawyer, nor by any means remarkable for comprehensiveness. Principles he extracted with great ease and acuteness; but with what lawyers call the philosophy of the law—with its vastness and its wholeness—he was not familiar. He was neither a Hale nor a Mansfield, nor a Parsons, neither a Pinkney nor a Martin, neither a Kent nor a Story—but he was something between a Coke and a Saunders; full of resource and stratagem, ingenious, crafty and unrelenting; learned, for the occasion, and more anxious to triumph by overreaching or out-tricking his adversary, than to succeed upon the merits. In a word, he was a capital special pleader, and could have cleared up the mystery between a traverse *upon* and a traverse *after* a traverse, to your heart's content, after you had got puzzled over the “books.” He was a man to whom Shepard's Touchstone, or Fearn's Contingent Remainders and Executory Devises, upon a pinch, would outrank a whole library of such books as Beccaria, Montesquieu, Sir William Jones on Bailments, or Jeremy Bentham on Punishments and Rewards, or on Morals and Legislation, the latter of which works he acknowledged to Albert Gallatin, in 1793, was “*too dry for him.*”

With regard to his eloquence, that chief element of high professional character, it is enough to say, that he was brief, clear, impressive, and wholly destitute of imagination; that notwithstanding all this, he could not be followed by a note-taker—and that, on bidding farewell to the United States Senate, over which he had presided with astonishing dignity and impartiality, he left the whole body in tears.

And now—as to the man's political character. It was undoubtedly as much owing to the intrigues and address of Aaron Burr—to his getting possession of Hamilton's letter and publishing it in the North before it had done its office at the South; and to his management with regard to the leading measure and leading men of the day; as to any, and perhaps all other circumstances and combinations, that the old federal party was overthrown. He was in the legislature at an early period of his political career; was run for governor—and then for the first office in the gift of the American people; and after no less than thirty-six ballotings¹⁷ was, if not actually swindled *out* of the presidential

¹⁶ Burr was arrested on February 19, 1807 for treason for allegedly plotting “to annex Spanish territory in Louisiana and Mexico to be used toward the establishment on an independent republic.” He was acquitted in September of that same year since he had not committed an “overt act” of treason, which is required to be convicted according to the United States Constitution (“Aaron Burr arrested for treason” 2010).

¹⁷ It was not “no less than” 36 ballots, but actually 36 ballots. Since Jefferson won, Burr automatically became his vice president; at that time, the Twelfth Amendment of the Constitution was not yet in place (“Aaron Burr” 2015).

chair, so cunningly overreached by Jefferson, in his management of the informal Georgia votes, that Jefferson was swindled *in*.

Had Burr triumphed, and Jefferson failed, how different would have been the history of this Republic for the last thirty years! and how different the life, and death, and history of these two men!

Burr would have been a great man—the practical man—the statesman: Jefferson the philosopher, the visionary and the book-worm; remarkable, not so much for the salt mountains¹⁸, horned frogs¹⁹, red push breeches²⁰, or Black Sally,²¹ as for having written the Declaration of Independence and the Notes on Virginia; and for having counselled the unconstitutional purchase of Louisiana. Nothing could be more profitable—nothing more unjust, answered Aristides, and the Athenian people said *no*.²² Nothing could be more unjust—nothing more profitable, said Thomas Jefferson, and Louisiana was purchased by the American Senate, and the American people said *yes*.

And now for the *moral* character of Aaron Burr. Washington knew him well, thought highly of him as a soldier, but had *no confidence in his integrity*. Hence he refused to send him to France instead of Gouverneur Morris, when the latter was recalled at the urgent solicitation of the democratic power, although its organs, Madison and Munroe, waited upon him twice with the whole strength of their party, to persuade or drive him into the measure. No, said Washington—I have no confidence in the man's integrity; but I will nominate you, sir (to Mr. Madison.)

Jefferson had no confidence in Burr—which, to be sure, is only saying that Burr and Jefferson were too much alike, ever to think well of each other. They were children of the same father—chips of the same block; and how *could* either trust the other?

Alexander Hamilton had no confidence in Burr; for with all his delicacy and caution and his anxiety to avoid a duel, which was alike repugnant to his nature and to his religious faith, he could not bring himself to deny that he had spoken of Burr as he *deserved*; and on the day before the meeting, with the solemnity to be looked for on such an occasion, he records the following for whomsoever it might concern after the morrow.

“He (Col. Burr,) doubtless has heard of animadversions of mine *which bore very hard upon him*. I trust at the same time that the world will do me the justice to believe that *I have not censured him on light grounds*, nor from unworthy inducements. *I certainly have had strong reasons for what I have said*, though it is *possible* that in some particulars, I have been influenced by misconstruction or misinformation. It is also my ardent wish *that I may have been more mistaken than I think I have been.*”

Such was the testimony of Alexander Hamilton—at the near approach of death—concerning the *moral* character of Aaron Burr.

The importance of that testimony in view of Burr himself, may be inferred from the fact, that all he asked of Hamilton was a general denial of a general charge—in other words, a *certificate of character*: and failing to obtain that from the scrupulous and tried soldier, the accomplished gentleman, and the conscientious christian, he put him to death.

That Hamilton was a doomed man, years before he fell by the hand of Burr, appears to be certain; that Burr sought the quarrel, and meant to kill Hamilton at all hazards, is proved by the

¹⁸ One of Jefferson's reasons for the Louisiana Purchase was that he claimed there was a mountain of salt in the territory, which would have been an extraordinary find since salt was so valuable at the time. Eventually, it was discovered that his information had been slightly mistranslated from French and Native American dialects; the Great Salt Plains indeed had a large amount of the mineral (Allen 2003).

¹⁹ Part of William Cullen Bryant's poem “The Embargo,” which is an attack on Thomas Jefferson (1809).

²⁰ Jefferson was known to wear red clothing frequently, most notably red breeches (“Jefferson's Clothing”).

²¹ This most likely refers to Sally Hemings, the black slave believed to have had several children with Thomas Jefferson (“Sally Hemings” 2015).

²² Aristides the Just, an Athenian statesmen (“Aristides The Just” 2015) in reference to his rivalry with Themistocles (“Themistocles” 2015). In the end, Aristides was exiled.

correspondence itself—for he refused to specify anything capable of denial, and insisted upon Hamilton’s denying the *inference* made by another (Dr. Cooper) from the political conversation of Hamilton! And, as if this were not enough, we have Burr’s self-complacency abroad, and up to the last hour of his life on that particular, and his declarations to Bentham, that he intended to kill Hamilton—for which that great and good man looked upon him to this dying day with horror and detestation, calling him a cold-blooded and atrocious ruffian.²³

Judge Kent²⁴ pronounced Burr—and so did many others best able to judge of him in the day of his strength, a *dangerous* man. But why *dangerous*, if he was not unprincipled? And Jeremy Bentham refused to put faith in him—regarding him as a professed “*man-catcher*,”—notwithstanding all that Burr had been doing for a twelvemonth, to secure the great man’s confidence, by subscribing so far to his opinions, even respecting marriage, as to pretend that he had a daughter at Bentham’s service, without the formality of marriage—though he had only one in the world, and she a true-hearted woman, pure and faithful—a wife and a mother.²⁵

But of this, the most damning stain that rests upon the moral character of Aaron Burr, what proof is to be had?

First, there are the declarations of Bentham, made while he and Burr were both alive, and actually published to the world, in as plain languages as the subject would bear, thirteen years ago. In the memoirs alluded to, the charge stands thus. ‘I might refer also to the proposition made by Mr. B.—a father—touching the daughter he sent for, and who was no long afterwards, I believe, lost at sea—but I forbear.’²⁶

Next we have the evidence furnished by the biographer and friend of Aaron Burr, proving that for some reason or other, the daughter in question *was* sent for by her father while he was under Bentham’s roof; that arrangements were made to receive her *there*; and the rooms actually assigned for her by Bentham himself; and that for some reason or other, these arrangements were broken up, just when all the preparations had been completed.

Be it remembered also, that from first to last, there is no evidence in life of Aaron Burr to show that his daughter was ever known by Bentham to be either a married woman or a mother; while, on the contrary, it appears that he was encouraged by Burr, who lends him her picture, and sends Bentham’s bust to her along with a box of other “combustibles,” to call her a “*dear little creature*,” “*my dear Theodosia*,” &c., &c., and to enter into correspondence with her.²⁷

²³ Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was an English philosopher and economist that is most famous for his expounding of the theory of utilitarianism. Bentham and Burr got along very well when they met in England in the aftermath of Burr’s trial for treason in 1807 (Stewart 2010). Burr was a fan of Bentham’s work before they even met, and Bentham returned the sentiment, once saying the man “was better qualified to pursue my ideas, as well as better disposed for it than any man I have yet met with, or ever expect to meet with” (Isenberg 373). The former vice president often stayed with Bentham at his home, and was even deemed trustworthy enough to stay there alone for a few weeks (Isenberg 373).

²⁴ James Kent (1763-1847) was not the judge that presided over Burr’s trial for treason, but was the chancellor for the state of New York (Latting 1873). Since Kent, Burr, and Alexander Hamilton were part of the New York bar after the Revolutionary War, it makes sense that they were part of the same social circle (“Kent, James” 1997).

²⁵ See Notes 26-27.

²⁶ This quotation is an account of a conversation with Jeremy Bentham from M. Dumont’s work *Principles of Legislation: From the Ms. of Jeremy Bentham; Bencher of Lincoln’s Inn*. This was published in 1830 with a biographical note from John Neal, the author of this article; the above quotation is from said biographical note, not Dumont’s actual work (Dumont 1830). However, in an article titled “Down-East Notions.—No. II” in *The New-Yorker* in 1839, written in response to Matthew L. Davis’ publication *Private Journal of Aaron Burr*, Neal points out that both Bentham and Burr were alive at the book’s publication in 1830. Neal reportedly invited both men to challenge what was written there on numerous occasions. Allegedly neither man responded to the invitation, neither to Neal directly nor the publisher (Neal 1839).

²⁷ “Down-East Notions.—No. III,” again written by John Neal, includes these quotations from correspondence written by Burr. Modern writers have seen these letters and the bust not as evidence towards Burr’s lack of moral character, but signs of his affection for Bentham (Isenberg 373). Burr indeed is very open with writing about his sex life to his

Long after the publication of the memoirs referred to, and three or four years after a review of the life of Aaron Burr, in the *New Yorker*, where all the evidence touching this point is detailed, the following strange corroboration turned up. In a copy of the memoirs, and on the margin of a leaf on which appears the original charge, the following entry in pencil, was made by the Rev. Mr. Pierpont,²⁸ at the request of the other, who had just heard him state the fact in conversation. “This reminds me that colonel William Alston, the father of Joseph, who married Miss Burr, once told me at his own table, that soon after the marriage of his son to Miss B., her father, colonel Burr, had told him, (Col. Alston) that rather than have had his daughter marry otherwise that to *his* mind, he would have made her the *mistress* of some gentleman of rank or fortune, who would have placed her in the station in society for which *he had educated her.*” But, adds Mr. Pierpont, in another note at the bottom of the page, “I believe, however, that not even parental authority or influence, could ever had brought the beautiful and accomplished Theodosia Burr thus to prostitute herself to her father’s ambitious purposes.”

Well then—thus far we have the evidence that Burr had no principle to restrain him; that he sent for his daughter to come and live in Bentham’s house, after the birth of her child, and that he had avowed a purpose corresponding somewhat in its infamous nature, with that charged upon him by the biographer of Bentham, on Bentham’s authority; although it is *certain* that the daughter knew nothing of the father’s plans, and by no means probable that the father himself ever meant anything more than to cheat Bentham into a belief in *him* he had at least one thoroughgoing disciple, among his ten thousand flatterers.

The next piece of evidence is out of Burr’s own mouth—fortified by the testimony of his biographer. Burr changes his *plan*, on finding his daughter in earnest about coming, and the project is abandoned. Let it be borne in mind, that Burr declares from the first, that he would educate a daughter precisely as he would a son, or to use his own words, that “*female education* should in *no respect* differ from that of young men.” But how would he educate young men? Look at his private journal, where he brags of his reputation for *gallantry*, and keeps a record of his pitiful intrigues—for the amusement of a beloved daughter on his return. How he would have educated a son may be inferred in fact from his whole life, abroad and at home, by precept and example. From Miss Moncrief to the Duchess of Gordon,²⁹ and through all the intermediate stages of the vulgar and the dissolute, he was always the same Aaron Burr, more anxious to be thought successful with women of *character*, good or bad, than for anything else under heaven.

But it is high time to hear the testimony of his biographer and *friend*. “On this point”—his *bonnes fortunes*³⁰—“he was excessively vain, and regardless of all ties which ought to control an honorable mind. *She that listened was lost.*” This reminds one of Rousseau, always a favorite with Burr. She who reads my books, says the Frenchman, is *une fille perdue*.³¹ “For more than half a century,” continues the biographer of Aaron Burr, “the women seemed to absorb his whole thoughts. His

daughter, also writing a journal of almost 1000 pages on various subjects, including such exploits: “we must understand that sexuality was neither sinful nor savage for men of the Enlightenment; instead sexual enjoyment was acceptable and refined, a ‘rational’ pleasure” (Isenberg 377). Neal, a part of the next generation, likely believed Burr “appears indiscreet, if not immoral” (Isenberg 377).

²⁸ John Neal wrote a chapter on Jeremy Bentham in *The Atlantic Monthly* giving more details on this alleged incident (1865).

²⁹ Margaret Moncrief was one of the reasons Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr did not get along; both were in love with her, making them rivals in romance and in politics (“Jackson, Washington, Burr” 1870). Jane Maxwell, the wife of the Scottish Duke of Gordon, was the envy of many despite her lack of education, modest upbringing, and inconspicuous beauty. She was strong of mind and will, making her way up the social ladder to become the preeminent duchess of her age (“Female Biography: Life of a Duchess” 1843).

³⁰ Translates from French to “good fortune.”

³¹ Translates from French to “a lost girl.”

intrigues were without number; his conduct *most licentious*. *The sacred bonds of friendship were unhesitatingly violated*, when they operated as barriers to the indulgence of his passions.” Nor is this all. “For a long period of time, he seemed to be gathering and *carefully preserving* every line written to him *by any female*, whether with or without reputation; and when afterwards they were cast into one common receptacle, *the profligate and corrupt by the side of the thoughtless and betrayed victim*—all were esteemed alike valuable.”³²

Need one waste another word upon the man’s *moral* character, after this? What were these letters kept for? And would not the man who was capable of playing with so many priceless reputations at such tremendous hazard to the peace of families, be capable of any other wickedness or baseness, even that of falsehood and forgery, for the gratification of his abominable vanity? What should stay him? For “in matters of *gallantry* he was excessively vain, and often made himself the laughing-stock of his best friends.” But how—*how*? By showing the letters of the poor trusting fools that believed in his manliness? or by boasting of their favors? What should prevent a man of this character from lying, or from forging letters from anybody—like Don Mathias de Silva in *Gil Blas*³³—even from the admirable woman, afterwards the wife of one of our presidents, who he declared to have been his mistress before marriage;³⁴ when he was talking with a stranger too, over sea, about other and very different matters; and that stranger, the man whom he pretended most to revere among all the great men he had ever seen, or heard, or read of—Jeremy Bentham!

To be guilty of such things in the flush of youth is bad enough; but to keep the damning records always open for the inspection of the world—to leave names and families to the mercy of accident—to commit them both to the calculating forbearance, of a biographer and a bookseller—and this upon a man’s death-bed—to keep a profit-and-loss account with abandoned women—to huddle them together with the trusting and the betrayed; to tell of their frailties in the presence of strangers; to boast of them at the dinner-table; to hoard up the evidence for old age, and to gloat over it, up to the last hour of a long and profligate and hopeless life—is it not ten thousand times worse? Garnered thus for the grave, and full of rottenness, what are they but loathsome and filthy abominations, of themselves enough to render *probable* anything told the prejudice of such a man’s *moral* character? But enough—Aaron Burr is *no more*.

³² See Note 27.

³³ Don Matthias de Silva is a character in the novel *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane*. He dies during a duel “for having taken a fancy to reading supposititious love-letters unseasonably” (Lesage 1715-35).

³⁴ From John Neal’s biography of Jeremy Bentham in Dumont’s *Principles of Legislation: From the Ms. of Jeremy Bentham; Bench of Lincoln’s Inn* (1830). She is identified in *The Atlantic Monthly* article as Mrs. Madison, wife of James Madison (Neal 1865).

Editor's Note

The historical information included in this article about these topics are historically accurate as far as the editor could find, but it is advised to take a more in depth look into the little details included, such as the exact military movements during Aaron Burr's different campaigns. Since many of the periodical works about Burr and Bentham are edited, written by, or based on John Neal's work, one must be careful in assessing the validity of the claims Neal makes about the men. However, Neal was not the only one espousing Burr's evil reputation, lending him some credibility (Peterson 1998). Modern scholars believe Burr and Bentham supported equal rights for women in all facets of society: "infanticide and homosexuality were also topics of conversation" (Isenberg 373). This liberal view could have tainted Neal's perspective of the letters, as seen above in Note 27. Access to the original letters often referenced as evidence towards Burr's amorality was unavailable at the time this article was written; Neal only included small snippets of the letters, taking them out of the context needed for a closer analysis.

Outside of the literal topic of Aaron Burr, this article touches upon some interesting views of the time period. It makes the reader wonder if a man can be "great" if they do not fit within society's moral construct, and questions the roles of both the living and the dead. Ancient epics center on heroes fighting for honor and glory, fine with death as long as their names will be sung for generations. Many people believe that a person is not really gone until they are forgotten—yet is it worth being remembered by strangers with fear if you have no family to look upon you fondly? Neal shows the complications associated with answering this question.

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