

TRANSFORMING HISTORY INTO A PLAY: THE CASE OF ALEXANDER HAMILTON & AARON BURR

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When I had known my husband for at least five years, I found myself being surprised by how many facts he knew about so many different periods of history. After finishing my library science degree, I began to question his “facts,” and found many to be “not so accurate.” As a consumer of movies from a very early age, he made the logical assumption that portrayal of real people in film must be true. After all, why would someone lie when the facts are there for the finding? Well, writers do it all the time to tell a good story, and to keep their audience engaged. Facts frequently fall out in the drive to make a story more dramatic.

The story leading up to Hamilton & Burr’s duel is contained in the first play I wrote, *The Brightest Light*. After coming across an historical marker near the dueling spot in Weehawken. I could not imagine why I had ill feelings about Aaron Burr. I knew nothing of him other than what was on that marker: “Vice President of the United States.” It took me twelve years to get a play on paper that I thought was both a truthful and an emotional journey for these two men. The 1998 audience reacted much as they are today to Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton, an American Musical*: “This is exciting! It’s not the history that I thought I knew—I’m going to read up on this as soon as I get home.”

When I write historical plays, I’m both trying to figure out what really happened “back then,” and looking for the emotional truth for the individuals who were involved. I also try to present the historical situation as their contemporaries viewed it, not as we might see it today. We really can’t escape today’s filters in portraying history—they will be there no matter what we do, but we can make an attempt to be as true as possible to the period these individuals were living in.

I have not had the opportunity to see Miranda’s portrayal of Hamilton *et al* on stage, but I have listened closely to the music, while reading the script. The words and attitudes of many of the characters seem to present this “founding period” as we perceive it today, looking back on it centuries later, which turns a very important time into something of a not-so-factual fantasy.

Hamilton’s story and Burr’s are very complicated ones to decipher today. Several factors conspired after the duel to reshape the public images of these two men:

- Immediately following Hamilton’s death, his associates made a concerted effort to improve their friend’s reputation in hopes of encouraging generous gifts to a fund for the widow and family.
- Burr’s political enemies (mainly Jefferson and Clinton) quickly realized that they too would reap benefits from a lionization of Hamilton, as it would have an adverse effect on Burr’s reputation. They added their false voices of grief over

Hamilton, calling him a hero killed by a villain.

- Furthering the myth, Hamilton's widow would not allow the official biography of him to be written until thirty years after his death. In the interim, the stories about Hamilton grew more and more laudatory while those about Burr became more vicious, enhanced by additional rumors from the three treason trials President Jefferson dealt him in 1807. (Burr was found innocent in all three.)

These factors had an impact on the written record for almost 200 years, as erroneous comments were repeated over and over again. And, adding to the problem of the historical record, little from Burr's own copious hand survives while much of Hamilton's does. In reconstructing their lives and times, biographers have been given very little from Burr that might counter Hamilton's views of the events they share; i.e., the paper trail does not present a balanced picture.

Hamilton's reputation today was not what his contemporaries thought of him prior to his death. His eulogist and longtime friend, Gouverneur Morris, sums it up best:

"I am asked to pronounce a funeral oration [for Alexander Hamilton] . . .

- *He was indiscreet, vain, and opinionated; these things must be told, or the character will be incomplete, and yet they must be told in such manner as not to destroy the interest.*
- *He was in principle opposed to republican and attached to monarchical government, and then his opinions were generally known and have been long and loudly proclaimed.*
- *His share in forming our Constitution must be mentioned, and his unfavorable opinion of it cannot therefore be concealed.*
- *The most important part of his life was his administration of the finances. The system he proposed was in one respect radically wrong; moreover, it has been the subject of some just and much unjust criticism. Many are still hostile to it, though on improper ground . . .*
- *All this must be reconciled. Something must be said to excite public pity for his family, which he has left in indigent circumstances . . . a family of seven young children."*

It was not until the publication of *Interview in Weehawken* (Syrett & Cooke, 1960) and Mary-Jo Kline's microfilm organization of *The Papers of Aaron Burr* (1977) that scholars started really looking into the accepted history of these two individuals, and particularly at Burr. Thomas Flexner's *The Young Hamilton* (1978) and Nancy Isenberg's *Fallen Founder* (2008) have focused on many of the new sources available to them.

If you take a look at my play *The Brightest Light*, you will find a fairly truthful following of the various encounters between these two brilliant men. Of their many shared experiences, their last destroyed both of them, a fact their contemporaries could have never predicted.