

“My Friend Hamilton—Whom I Shot”
A Historiographical Discussion of the Duel Between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton

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The duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton holds a significant relevance in American history and should be examined within the context of early American culture and politics. The recent historiography of the incident provides us with a complex, evolving web of conflicting interpretations. Since the day of this tragic duel, contemporaries and historians have puzzled over why these two prominent American statesmen confronted each other on the Plains of Weehawken. What circumstances or events could have motivated two of the most brilliant political minds in America to endanger their lives and reputations by taking aim at each other on that dismal day?

The recent historiography of the event can be divided into two schools which I shall denote as the “contextual” school and the “psycho-historical” school. These differing “schools” demonstrate the complexity of history and the extent to which a variety of factors, including bias and changing frames of reference can influence interpretive study and conclusions. It is the object of this discussion, therefore, to examine the heretofore mentioned interpretations, and to critically analyze the differing ideas concerning the Burr-Hamilton duel.

The most succinct version of the event, as told by Joseph J. Ellis reads

On the morning of July 11, 1804, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton were rowed across the Hudson River in separate boats to a secluded spot near Weehawken, New Jersey. There, in accord with the customs of the *code duello*, they exchanged pistol shots at ten paces. Hamilton was struck on his right side and died the following day. Though unhurt, Burr found that his

reputation suffered an equally fatal wound. In this, the most famous duel in American history, both participants were casualties.¹

Almost every American is familiar with this most famous—and deadly—of American duels. Hamilton was celebrated and hailed as a martyr, and Burr was labeled a murderer and went on to undertake many strange adventures in the American west, eventually tried for treason for his purported conspiratorial intentions. Before engaging further in this discussion, one must first differentiate between what I have denoted as “contextual” history and “psycho-historical” history. I contend that “contextual” theses are steeped in disciplined research based on contemporary and secondary sources. Anthony Brundage wrote that “psycho-historical” arguments “attempt to apply to historical study the methods and insights developed by Sigmund Freud and other psychological theorists during the past hundred years or so.”² This idea of highlighting and differentiating between “contextual” and “psycho-historical” studies provides this discussion with a centrality that will allow a further understanding the forthcoming analysis.

J. Lee and Conalee Levine-Schneidman argued “it was not Burr who was the instrument, but rather Hamilton himself—or rather Hamilton’s distorted perception of Burr as his evil self” that promulgated the duel.³ This article entitled “Suicide or Murder? The Burr-Hamilton Duel,” published in a 1980 edition of the *Journal of Psychohistory*, represents the first example of “psycho-history” to be discussed in this paper. The authors presented Aaron Burr as introverted and self-absorbed, a man forever compared to the saintliness of his namesake. His father was a reverend and President of the College of New Jersey and his mother was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards. Therefore, the Schneidmans argued, Burr had quite the reputation to uphold,

¹ Joseph J. Ellis, “The Duel,” in *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2000), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ J. Lee and Conalee Levine-Schneidman, “Suicide or Murder? The Burr-Hamilton Duel.” *Journal of Psychohistory* 8, no. 2 (1980), 160.

writing that “throughout Burr’s life, the saintliness of his family was thrust upon him. His cousin, Timothy Dwight, constantly upbraided him for not following the light of their mutual grandfather. [Therefore] the conflict raged within Burr.”⁴

The Schneidmans argued Hamilton felt Burr to be his “vile self,” for they argued that “Hamilton had no ill-will toward Burr. It was himself that Hamilton hated.”⁵ Thus, it was the authors’ conclusion that Hamilton wished himself to be dead, for his political, personal, and psychological future did not justify his continued existence. Thus Burr, Hamilton’s “evil alter-ego,” pulled the trigger on July 11th, 1804 in Weehawken, New Jersey, and ended the life of *America’s most brilliant bastard*. Their conclusion, which has been regarded as fantastical by historian W.J. Rorabaugh, stated that “Hamilton had no future in Jeffersonian America. Suicide had never been far from his mind. The warning signs were there. The Good Christian Hamilton could neither kill himself, nor Burr, who was also himself, albeit an evil rendition. The evil Hamilton, which was Burr, could kill.”⁶

Arnold A. Rogow was influenced by the article we just discussed, for his book, *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr*, was a psycho-historical analysis. Rogow facilitated discussion concerning the historical reputation of Hamilton by examining the workings of his psyche, not his political or legal reputation. He contended the “deeper causes of the duel are to be found in the dark recesses of their relationship and in the personal histories that

⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 173. This conclusion, as one might suspect, has received criticism from historians. W.J. Rorabaugh, whose argument will be examined later, disagreed with the said conclusion. “Henry Adams believed that Hamilton dueled to commit suicide. This view is argued rather fantastically by J. Lee Schneidman and Conalee Levine-Schneidman. It is true that Dr. David Hosack (the Hamilton family doctor) noted that Hamilton’s health had been poor. There are, however, easier and more certain ways of suicide than dueling.” Cf. Rorabaugh, *The Political Duel in the Early Republic*, *The Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Spring 1995), 3, note 5.

shaped both their characters and that relationship.”⁷ Rogow argued Hamilton was a self-defeating man whose “character structure was *more* impaired than Burr’s, and that as a consequence he was more at fault in bringing their relationship to a violent end.”⁸

Rogow asserted that “Hamilton knowingly embarked on a suicidal mission, a mission that would also have a suicidal consequence for Burr in the sense that he would suffer a self-imposed life sentence of political oblivion.”⁹ Furthermore, he wrote “there is evidence of mood swings, particularly after 1800, which are characteristic of manic depression, the manic phase more or less describing his behavior as the Presidential election approached, and the depressive phase more or less typical during the years that followed.”¹⁰ Rogow argued that Hamilton—in a phase of mania—actively sought to prevent Republicans from gaining power in the New York legislature and then tried to prevent Burr from gaining the presidency in 1800; his depression came in the years following his meteoric fall from prominence, thus prompting him to contemplate suicide.

Perhaps the most outlandish aspect of *A Fatal Friendship* was Rogow’s notion that somehow Hamilton was sexually attracted to his counterpart, arguing that “in all such identifications of one man with another, especially those rooted in affection, there are underlying homoerotic elements, and in the case of some men, a compelling need to defend against an attraction that is experienced as unacceptable in terms of prevailing social and introjected models of masculinity.”¹¹ Therefore, according to Rogow, Hamilton instigated the duel not only in a

⁷ Arnold A. Rogow, *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1998), xii. As we have already seen with the Schneidman article, psychohistory exists on the fringes, for it is extremely difficult to assess the psychological state of mind held by these men who have been dead for over two hundred years.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 266.

manic-depressive suicidal state, but also because of a pseudo-homosexual attraction for Burr that would not be accepted by society. Needless to say the “projective identification” model has been characterized by Thomas H. Ogden as “one of the most loosely defined and incompletely understood of psychoanalytic conceptualizations.”¹² Obviously, Rogow wished to impress readers with loaded arguments and impressive dialogue, when he in fact neglected to use reputable evidence in his citations and bibliography to solidify his suppositions.

Similar to the aforementioned psycho-historical studies, Roger G. Kennedy’s *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character* tended to be somewhat argumentative, reflecting the psycho-analyses of the Schneidmans and Rogow. Kennedy advocated what he called the “assisted suicide” and “evil twin argument,” writing that “Hamilton saw in Burr everything he feared most in himself. When he fired, he was consumed by his loathing of a projected person—as much himself as Burr. In the end he arranged to have Burr kill him.”¹³ To prove this “arrangement,” Kennedy boldly stated that the infamous “Cooper Letter” that enraged Aaron Burr, was in fact false, for Dr. Charles D. Cooper was “lying” about the “despicable” opinions that Hamilton had regarding Burr, for “all such inquiries begin by assuming that Cooper was speaking the truth—that Hamilton had, in fact, said of Burr something new, and worse, than what he had said of him often before. It is quite likely that Cooper was lying.”¹⁴

¹² Thomas H. Ogden, “On Projective Identifications,” in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (1979), 60, 357. Cf. Rogow, *A Fatal Friendship*, 327, note 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77. Given the dubious nature of Burr’s accusation from Dr. Cooper’s letter, historians have often questioned the merits of his motives. However, if one has had any study concerning the culture and political atmosphere of early American history, he or she will know that a man safe-guarded his honor with the greatest of weapons—the duel. Obviously Kennedy—along with Rogow—did not recognize the severity of Dr. Cooper’s letter, even though it was rather vague, it was nonetheless a printed statement of libel against the character of Aaron Burr, for “despicable opinion,” and Dr. Cooper’s purported self-restraint in his letter writing process should exemplify that Burr indeed acted honorably, and that Dr. Cooper was in fact, being truthful, for it was also dishonorable to portray falsities with pen and paper. See Greenberg, “The Nose,” Freeman, “Dueling as Politics,” and *Affairs of Honor*, as well as Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, and *Honor and Violence in the Old South*.

Furthermore, Kennedy asserted Hamilton was intentionally “provocative” on the dueling grounds in order to provoke Burr to fire. He wrote that “Hamilton performed a series of deliberately provocative actions to ensure a lethal outcome. As they were taking their places, he asked that the proceedings stop, adjusted his spectacles, and slowly, repeatedly, sighted along his pistol to test his aim. Strange, that gesture.”¹⁵ Obviously Kennedy felt Hamilton’s actions concerning his eyeglasses constituted his intentions to provoke Burr’s wrath, when indeed Hamilton may have just needed to put his eyeglasses to combat poor eyesight and the morning sun.

One must view the arguments made by Kennedy (as well as the Schneidmans and Rogow) with skepticism, for any attempt to analyze the psyche of men who have been dead for over two hundred years is a difficult task. However, Kennedy contended that “the best evidence that his unconscious imperative was toward assisted suicide is that every action he took on the field was provocative.”¹⁶ David Hackett Fisher would denote the theories promoted by Kennedy, as well as the Schneidmans and Rogow to be an inherently “closed deterministic

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83. Obviously, this is a serious case of an author trying to make an important argument from a simple fact through over-analysis. Rorabaugh made a plausible argument, writing that “his eyesight could have been so bad that he wanted the glasses in order to make certain that he missed.” Cf. Rorabaugh, “The Political Duel,” 10. Ellis did not pertain to make certain judgments without justifiable evidence, writing that “why he would on his eyeglasses if he did not plan to shoot at Burr remains a mystery.” Cf. Ellis, “The Duel,” 25.

“Because Hamilton had been challenged, he had the choice of weapons. He had selected a custom-made pair of highly decorated pistols owned by his wealthy brother-in-law, John Church. Apart from their ornate appearance, the weapons were distinctive for two reasons. First, they had been used in two previous duels involving the participants: once, in 1799, when Church had shot a button off Burr’s coat; then in 1801, when Hamilton’s eldest son, Philip, had been fatally wounded defending his father’s honor only a few yards from the site at Weehawken. Second, they also contained a concealed device that seat a hair-trigger. Without the hair-trigger, the weapon required twenty pounds of pressure to fire. With the hair-trigger, only one pound of pressure was needed. While Hamilton knew about the hair-triggers, Burr almost certainly did not.” Cf. Ellis, “The Duel,” 24. (Ellis cited this information from Lindsay, “Pistols,” 94-98).

¹⁶ Kennedy, *Burr*, 84.

system,” that advocates of psycho-history “have insisted that historians must take all or nothing. Many scholars have chosen the latter alternative, as the lesser evil.”¹⁷

W.J. Rorabaugh discussed in “The Political Duel in the Early Republic: Burr v. Hamilton,” published in *The Journal of the Early Republic*, the almost Hegelian idea of process and change in early American social, political, and cultural institutions steep in a *culture of honor*. However, according to this study, the honor culture declined considerably after Hamilton’s death, especially in the North. Rorabaugh argued that “the early republic partook of both ancient and modern forms. One cannot escape the realization that the duel was the glue that held together this system of honor.”¹⁸

Rorabaugh offered his own “contextual” interpretation of the duel, contending that Hamilton—as the challenged party—could not feasibly deny Burr’s demand for satisfaction without losing his personal honor. However, Rorabaugh argued, Hamilton was NOT suicidal nor did he have a blood feud he wished to settle. In fact, Rorabaugh wrote, Hamilton “hoped Burr would miss, notice that [he] had not fired at him, and be satisfied.”¹⁹

However, this culture of honor, according to Rorabaugh, was in a transitional period and was slowly fading away. The author wrote “the increasingly democratic, non-aristocratic North

¹⁷ David Hackett Fisher, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1970), 189.

¹⁸ W.J. Rorabaugh, “The Political Duel in the Early Republic,” *The Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Spring 1995), 17. For a discussion concerning early American honor, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991), 39-41; 344. Also, one could read the authoritative study on honor driven duels by referring to Joanne B. Freeman, “Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996): 289-318, a study that will be examined later. One could even go so far as to say Rorabaugh’s rudimentary study of an honor culture and dueling spawned Freeman’s comprehensive study, and later her book, *Affairs of Honor: Politics in the New Republic*, (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹⁹ Rorabaugh, “The Political Duel,” 3. Rorabaugh directly refuted all three pieces examined thus far—Burr, Lindsay, and the Schneidmans—in that Hamilton was a self-preservationist. He wanted to live and he did not wish to shed blood. He did not aim and miss his target (Burr), he did not see his alter-evil-ego in Aaron Burr and want to be killed (the Schneidmans), and he did not set the hair-triggers, thus suggesting his murderous intent. Rorabaugh argued that he simply hoped Burr would be satisfied with having one shot on him, for Hamilton probably knew how incredibly erratic the pistols were.

found duels a grotesque miscarriage of justice and a kind of outlaw behavior on the part of the wealthy and powerful.”²⁰ Rorabaugh concluded that an evolving society would not tolerate the practice of dueling, for it represented a uniqueness that was reminiscent of despotic European institutions, concluding that “the political duel assumed a more sinister form precisely because it threatened both to chill political discourse and to turn such discourse into a justification for assassination.”²¹

Joanne B. Freeman offered her interpretation of the Burr-Hamilton duel in an article entitled “Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel,” published in *The William and Mary Quarterly*. Freeman analyzed Alexander Hamilton’s “Statement on Impending Duel with Aaron Burr,” or *Apologia*, which requires some explanation at this time. Written sometime between 27 June and 4 July—just days before the duel—Hamilton outlined amongst other things his reservations against dueling and his justification of statements made regarding Burr. He also outlined his intentions to not fire his weapon, prompting psycho-historical analyses of purported suicide. Hamilton wrote “I have resolved, if our interview is conducted in the usual manner, and it pleases God to give me the opportunity, to *reserve* and *throw away* my first fire, and I *have thoughts* even of *reserving* my second fire—and thus giving a double opportunity to Col. Burr to pause and to reflect.”²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20. Rorabaugh discussed the various speeches and sermons that appeared after the Burr-Hamilton duel that denounced not only dueling, but ambitious politicians. He attributed this decline in honorific practices such as dueling to be somewhat effected by these sermons, such as the one delivered by Lyman Beecher, *The Remedy for Dueling*, (Sag Harbor, NY: 1807). Wayne C. Minnick, however, would argue against this “persuasive effect,” in that Lyman Beecher’s sermon probably did not have the profound effect he [Beecher] thought it had. See Wayne C. Minnick, “A Case Study in Persuasive Effect: Lyman Beecher on Dueling,” in *Speech Monographs* 38 (November 1971): 262-276.

²¹ Rorabaugh, “The Political Duel,” 21.

²² “Alexander Hamilton’s Remarks on his Impending Duel with Aaron Burr,” New York, June 27-July 4, 1804, Cf. Harold C. Syrett and Jean G. Cooke, eds., *Interview in Weehawken: The Burr-Hamilton Duel as Told in the Original Documents*, (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1960), 100, 101-102.

Before engaging in the discussion of Freeman's analysis of the duel, I would like to provide an example of Hamilton's hostility towards Burr to better illustrate the intensity of their dispute. Burr and Hamilton had been political rivals for over a decade—with Hamilton on several instances accusing Burr of having less-than-gentlemanly attributes. In this letter to Oliver Wolcott, Jr., Hamilton wrote

...As to BURR there is nothing in his favour. His private character is not defended by his most partial friends. He is bankrupt beyond redemption except by the plunder of his country. His public principles have no other spring or aim than his own aggrandizement. If he can, he will certainly disturb our institutions to secure to himself *permanent power* and with it *wealth*. He is truly the *Catiline* of America.²³

However, the *concrete* evidence Burr needed to challenge Hamilton came in the form of a letter written by Charles D. Cooper that appeared in the *Albany Register*, in which contained the infamous phrase, “for really sir, I could detail to you a still more despicable opinion which General HAMILTON has expressed of Mr. BURR.”²⁴ A Series of formal letters were exchanged in an attempt to repudiate the insult—as stipulated by the code of honor discussed by Freeman—and when Hamilton did not oblige, a formal challenge was issued, arrangements were made, and Hamilton was shot and killed.²⁵

Freeman argued that Burr had been insulted, and that he had documented proof of a libelous statement in the form of the aforementioned Cooper Letter, and when Hamilton refused

²³ Alexander Hamilton to Oliver Wolcott, Junior, 16 December 1800, in Harold C. Syrett, ed., vol. XXVI, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1977), 257-258. Lucius Sergius Catilina was feared by upper-class Romans as a “public nuisance” and “dangerous enemy.” His enemy was Cicero, who “did his best to whip up the fear that Catiline, if elected, would resort to violence and revolution.” “Upon losing the election, Catiline, frustrated and desperate, formed a conspiracy to overthrow the government, rumors of which reached Cicero.” Cicero denounced Catiline's plans and eventually had his five top lieutenants arrested and executed. Nevertheless, the disgruntled Catiline continued his cause and “died fighting in early 62 B.C.” Cf. Allen Mason Ward, et al., *A History of the Roman People*, 4th ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 195.

²⁴ Dr. Charles D. Cooper to Philip Schuyler, 23 April 1804, Cf. Harold C. Syrett and Jean G. Cooke, eds., *Interview in Weehawken: The Burr-Hamilton Duel as Told in the Original Documents*, (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1960), 44-48.

²⁵ “The conflict originated from insulting words or actions. Then followed a carefully worded exchange of letters in which each party tried to describe how he had been injured—how he had not been treated with the kind of

an apology, Burr demanded satisfaction. Hamilton, Freeman argued, had a heavier burden to deal with, and he dealt with these burdens in his *Apologia*, in which “the attorney Hamilton was defending his reputation before the tribunal of posterity, explaining his decision to duel.”²⁶

Freeman denoted dueling as an intricate aspect of the *culture of honor*, steeped in *political combat*, contending that “for politicians of the early republic, honor was thus much more than a vague sense of self-worth; it represented the ability to prove oneself a deserving political leader. Hamilton was trying to do as much in his final statement. Burr was compelled by the same logic when he challenged Hamilton. These conflicting urges joined to produce an ambiguous form of politics, fueled by public-minded personal disputes couched in the language of honor.”²⁷

Freeman concluded the politically tattered Burr—who lost both the presidential election of 1800 and the New York gubernatorial election of 1804—manipulated the code of honor NOT to kill Hamilton per se, but to redeem his *honor*, arguing that “Burr was a man with a wounded reputation, a leader who had suffered personal abuse and the public humiliation of a lost election. A duel with Hamilton would redeem his honor and possibly dishonor Hamilton.”²⁸ Hamilton, of course, accepted Burr’s challenge, for he had to do so in order to protect his honor, for not even the love of his wife and children could convince him to decline. He wrote in a letter to his wife, Elizabeth that “if it had been possible for me to have avoided the interview, my love for you and my precious children would have been alone a decisive motive. But it was not possible, without sacrifices which would have rendered me unworthy of your esteem.”²⁹

Therefore, Burr was driven to Weehawken to re-establish his good name, and Hamilton arrived

courtesy due to him as a social equal.” Cf. Kenneth S. Greenberg, “The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South,” in *The American Historical Review* 95 (1990), 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

²⁹ Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Hamilton, 4 July 1804, cf. Syrett, vol. XXVI, *PAH*, 293.

there because he could not honorably refuse the challenge. In Freeman's "contextual" culture of honor, politicians feared dueling, yet they detested public humiliation and losing their honor more than dying.

Joseph J. Ellis in his essay, "The Duel," which appeared in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* debated the particularities of the proceedings at Weehawken, attempting to clarify *what actually happened*. In the days following the duel, Nathaniel Pendleton and William P. Van Ness, associates of Hamilton and Burr, respectively, published a series of "accounts" of what actually happened, each claiming the other party to be the instigator of fire. Pendleton contended Burr fired mercilessly at Hamilton and the impact of the shot caused Hamilton to fire his weapon inadvertently into the trees above Burr's head. Van Ness concluded that Hamilton fired at Burr and missed, which then prompted Burr to take his aim and fire.³⁰ Ironically, neither version is entirely accurate, for Pendleton and Van Ness were required to stand facing away from the incident, as stipulated by the *code duello*. Ellis concluded that the Hamiltonian version—which has been largely accepted by scholars—was probably *not* what happened.³¹

Hamilton did fire his weapon intentionally, and he fired first. But he aimed to miss Burr, sending his ball into the tree above and behind Burr's location. In so doing, he did not withhold his shot, but he did waste it, thereby honoring his pre-duel pledge. Meanwhile, Burr, who did not know about the pledge, did know that a projectile from Hamilton's gun had whizzed past him and crashed into the tree to his rear. According to the principles of the *code duello*, Burr was perfectly justified in taking deadly aim at Hamilton and firing to kill.³²

³⁰ See the exchange of letters between Van Ness and Pendleton, then "Joint Statement," in Syrett, vol. XXVI, *PAH*, 329-336.

³¹ "The scholarly consensus accepts the Hamilton version of the duel, primarily because that version dominated the contemporary accounts in the press, and also because it is the only version that fits with Hamilton's purported remarks about the still-loaded pistol. While absolute certainty is not within our grasp, what we might call "the interval problem" strikes me as an insurmountable obstacle for the Hamiltonian version. For that reason, while the mystery must remain inherently unsolvable in any absolute sense of finality, the interpretation offered here seems most plausible and most compatible with what lawyers would call "the preponderance of the evidence." It also preserves what the Hamilton advocates care about most; namely, Hamilton's stated intention not to fire at Burr." Cf. Ellis, "The Duel," 252-253 n.16.

³² Ellis, "The Duel," 30.

Ellis also tried to answer the oft-asked question of why these men dueled, writing that “Burr challenged Hamilton, and Hamilton concluded he could not refuse the challenge without staining his honor.” This argument is of course similar to those proposed by Rorabaugh and Freeman. Furthermore, Ellis asked “but what had Hamilton done to so enrage Burr?”³³ As a consequence of the aforementioned Cooper letter that spoke of the “despicable opinion,” Ellis determined it was ambiguous, and that Hamilton justifiably denied Burr the satisfaction of an apology, a defiant act that cost him his life. Ellis concluded that “Burr went to Weehawken out of frustration, and Hamilton went out of a combination of ambition and insecurity.”³⁴

Perhaps a fitting way to conclude our discussion of the “contextual” school of interpretation would be to mention Freeman’s *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, a work that combined social, cultural, and political history to construct the aforementioned *culture of honor* in early American politics, and is an invaluable tool when reading about the Burr-Hamilton duel. This book began as a Ph.D. dissertation and contained a chapter on the duel, resembling the previously discussed article. She portrayed elite men wrestling with Catonian ideals of elitist government and the public outcry for excessive Caesarian demagoguery. A combination of both was held together by an ethical “code of honor” that each politician respected.

These two “schools” that we have heretofore discussed offer the opportunity to greatly appreciate the study of history, for each author illuminated their interpretation with prejudices, differing frames of reference and perceptions of early American society. The “contextual” historians focused primarily on early American life, presenting the foundation of the actual *society* and *culture* that would perhaps better answer some of the common questions historians

³³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

and contemporaries have asked since 11 July 1804. The “contextual” scholars based their interpretations on the culture of the time period, especially the so-called *culture of honor*. The studies by Rorabaugh, Freeman, and Ellis examined the duel within the contexts of the social, political, economic and cultural elements of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century America, thus providing understandable, comprehensive, and readable accounts that demonstrate the complexities and ambiguities of the early American milieu.

The Schneidmans, Rogow, and Kennedy merged Freudian theory with historical scholarship to interpret the Burr-Hamilton duel, resulting in muddled attempts to explain why these two men dueled on the Plains of Weehawken. First, one must note that with the exception of Conalee Levine-Schneidman, none of the aforementioned authors have an advanced degree in psychology. Furthermore, Rogow and Kennedy developed theses steeped with prejudices and biases, attempting to manipulate or entirely misuse primary and secondary sources to confirm their assumptions, without considering the contextual elements. This is exactly the criticism offered by Freeman concerning Rogow’s book.

A Fatal Friendship’s main problem is its tone-deafness to the subtleties and realities of early national politics and life. Psychological theorizing requires a light touch when dealing with personalities from the distant past who saw their world through a cultural lens quite different from our own. As eighteenth-century gentlemen and politicians, Hamilton and Burr acted according to a distinctive logic that must be acknowledged before their actions and character can be understood. It is impossible to understand what drove these rivals to their final, fatal encounter without a clear grasp of the precise combination of political events and cultural conventions that guided their decisions. Rogow, however, places character structures front and center, depicting the duel as a clash of personalities. In essence, he has written about America’s most famous political duel without seriously considering politics or culture.³⁵

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁵ Joanne B. Freeman, review of *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr*, by Arnold A. Rogow, *H-SHEAR, H-NET Reviews*, September, 2000.
<http://www.hnet.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=9270969565823>.

Ellis was just as critical, writing that “as for Rogow’s own style, it seems almost designed to offset his highly sensationalistic subject matter, as if a book devoted to gossip and titillating innuendo should deploy its message in a deliberately understood, earnestly qualified mode.”³⁶

As a consequence of his lack of “contextual” insight, Roger G. Kennedy was also criticized by scholars. Freeman wrote that “duels followed a distinctive and detailed logic that likewise governed the Burr-Hamilton duel. Only by taking this historical context into account can we get to the heart of that fatal conflict, moving beyond inferences about feelings based on anachronistic assumptions about dueling and Hamilton’s psychology. Kennedy, however, remained anchored on feelings and character. He attributes the duel to Hamilton’s extreme emotions.”³⁷ Todd Estes wrote that “to understand those times—or have any hope of comprehending these elusive figures—requires disciplined and systematic research. It cannot be achieved by a superficial dabbling or whimsical speculation.”³⁸

In conclusion, one should note these “psycho-historians,” especially Rogow and Kennedy—while obviously talented writers—are not trained in early American history, politics, culture, or life attempted to impress readers with manipulated and often farcical material, thus offering nothing more than fantastical diatribes; whereas the interpretations by Rorabaugh, Freeman, and Ellis were superior in their grasp of the primary and secondary sources, which reflected on their arguments, discussions, and conclusions.

Anthony Brundage wrote that “rather than simply presenting an unchanging view of the past, historians instead are constantly searching for fresh sources, approaches, methodological

³⁶ Joseph J. Ellis, review of *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr*, by Arnold A. Rogow, *Reviews in American History* 27 (March 1999), 43.

³⁷ Freeman, “Grappling with the Character Issue: A review of *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character*, by Roger G. Kennedy and *Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and the Future of America*, by Thomas Fleming,” *Reviews in American History* 28 (2000), 520

tools, and interpretations in an effort to offer an ever-new past to the present.”³⁹ History is more than just the rudimentary facts and dates, more than just a story: it is a constantly evolving world of variance and interpretation. “In other words,” Brundage wrote, “a vigorous, many-sided debate among scholars is not only unavoidable but essential to the discipline.” “Even when differences are subtle, they can be important.”⁴⁰

One could argue that by studying the Burr-Hamilton duel, a serious appreciation of history is attained, thus allowing the differences between “contextual” argumentation and psychological diatribe to be examined. There will, however, be constant revisions and differing opinions regarding any historical topic, especially concerning the Burr-Hamilton duel, for in all its mystery and excitement remains certain truths that will forever be chased by generations of historians. The only question is who will come closest to grasping these truths? Only time, and *history*, will tell.

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³⁸ Todd Estes, review of *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character*, by Roger G. Kennedy, *H-SHEAR, H-NET Reviews*, September 2000. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=23327970507828>.

³⁹ Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, 2nd ed., (Wheeling, ILL: Harland Davidson, 1997), 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

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