The Reynolds Affair, Party Politics and Sexuality in the Early Republic

Alexandra Marie Gross

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the Political Science Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-nxg4-h614

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
The Reynolds Affair, Party Politics, and Sexuality in the Early Republic

Alexandra Marie Gross
Fargo, North Dakota

Bachelor of Arts, New York University, 2010

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of History

The College of William and Mary January 2014
This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Alexandra Marie Gross

Approved by the Committee, December 2013

Committee Chair
Professor Karin Wulf, History
The College of William and Mary

Professor Christopher Grasso, History
The College of William and Mary

Professor Elizabeth Barnes, English
The College of William and Mary
This project analyzes the language and rhetoric used in the Jeffersonians’ attacks on Alexander Hamilton following the exposure of the Reynolds Affair in 1797; specifically, the Jeffersonian press invoked existing tropes of aristocratic male sexual privilege in their portrayal of the Reynolds Affair to transform the personal into the political and attack Hamilton and his associates’ fitness for public office. In their highly stylized, purposeful, and sensational presentation of the Reynolds Affair, the Jeffersonians attempted to define unacceptable behavior in terms of civic capacity in the new nation. Hamilton and the Federalists were often accused of aristocratic and monarchical leanings; consequently, the Jeffersonian press wrote of Hamilton’s conduct in such a way that readers would recognize his behavior as further proof of his true aristocratic nature and attachment to monarchy, nobility, and hereditary titles. To make their point, Jeffersonian writers relied on recognizable tropes from contemporary literature, such as the aristocratic libertine and the naïve ingénue in their reports of the Reynolds Affair.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii
Introduction 1
Chapter 1. The Reynolds Affair and Pamphlet 4
Chapter 2. Aristocrats and Ingénues 16
Chapter 3. Rational Men and Seductresses 32
Conclusion 38
Bibliography 42
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Karin Wulf, Christopher Grasso, and Liz Barnes for their patience, criticism, and guidance. I would also like to extend my thanks to the other members of my cohort – Kristen Beales, Lynch Bennett, and Amelia Butler – for the camaraderie and support.
Introduction

In a shocking move, Treasury Secretary and Federalist leader Alexander Hamilton confessed in detail to an adulterous affair in a 97-page pamphlet. Hamilton published the so-called “Reynolds Pamphlet” in 1797, almost immediately after a Jeffersonian journalist had accused him of having engaged in speculation, using Treasury funds, with his lover’s husband. Feeling compelled to extricate himself from these false charges, Hamilton explained that the story was wrong: he was guilty of making blackmail payments from his personal funds to his mistress’s husband in exchange for the man’s silence and for the privilege of sleeping with the man’s wife, but he had never misused Treasury money or speculated with anyone. Hamilton’s pamphlet proved a godsend to the Jeffersonian press, which immediately shifted its focus to Hamilton’s extramarital affair and his confession of it, quickly forgetting the seemingly more serious charges of financial wrongdoing.

The rhetoric and language used in the Jeffersonians’ attacks on Hamilton following the exposure of the Reynolds Affair in 1797 invoked existing tropes of aristocratic male sexual privilege, often employed in contemporary seduction narratives, to connect personal behavior with public policy and to attack Hamilton and his associates’ fitness for public office. Anything that smacked of aristocratic pretension was inherently loathsome to the Jeffersonians, who connected aristocracy with all that was anathema to
their version of America, including monarchy, elitism, hereditary titles, and mone
ed men of Europe. Political tensions in the new nation over the French Revolu
tion ran high, and many still feared that monarchy could reassert itself in America should the wrong men be trusted with the reins of government. To portray or condemn a public figure such as Hamilton as an aristocrat or a monarchist was in itself a powerful and salient criticism. From the beginning of their opposition to Federalist policy, Jeffersonians had attacked Hamilton and the Federalists on grounds of elitism, accusing them of an attachment to monarchy and aristocracy. The Reynolds Affair provided the Jeffersonians with an opportunity to solidify the Jeffersonian critique of Hamilton as a monarchy-loving aristocrat with familiar tropes of aristocracy and sexuality.

In their highly stylized, purposeful, and sensational presentation of the Reynolds Affair, the Jeffersonians attempted to define unacceptable behavior

in terms of civic capacity in the new nation. According to the Jeffersonians, Hamilton’s conduct in the Reynolds Affair rendered him and the Federalists unfit for public office for two main reasons. First, according to the Jeffersonians, the libertine Hamilton had acted as a sexual predator to an innocent and virtuous young woman. Not only had he seduced Maria Reynolds, thereby ruining her feminine virtue, but the very fact that he had brazenly ignored his marital obligations to his wife supposedly indicated that he thought he was entitled to the aristocratic privilege of keeping a mistress. Second and implicitly, Hamilton’s licentious ways and apparent inability to resist temptation meant that he, a man who held a public office at the time of the affair, was vulnerable to the influence of women. Hamilton’s protestations that the blackmail money he paid to James Reynolds was from his personal accounts and not Treasury funds could not silence these attacks, which were rooted in the trope of the oversexed aristocrat and a mistress’s corrupting influence.

Both critiques depended on the representation of Hamilton as an aristocrat. Although Hamilton was a self-made man, his politics often invited charges of aristocratic leanings. His financial policies generally favored the wealthy merchant class. He believed in consolidating power in the form of a strong national government with a powerful executive, which appeared too close to a monarch in the Jeffersonians’ eyes. He also believed this national government would be best supported by an elite class of men. Jeffersonian
attacks throughout the 1790s that accused Hamilton and the Federalists of aristocratic and monarchical tendencies were certainly hyperbolic but had a real basis in the Federalists’ programs. To the Jeffersonians, the Reynolds Affair was one more example of Hamilton’s aristocratic nature on display, and one they could easily fit into an already established polemical narrative of Hamilton and the Federalists as aristocrats and hopeful monarchs. Despite this, most of the landed wealth of the young nation actually aligned themselves with Jefferson’s party. This planter class found itself in an awkward marriage with poor white artisans and tradesmen to form the base of the Democratic-Republicans. Slaveholding Jeffersonians deflected potential charges of their own aristocratic tendencies through rhetoric that stressed the importance of white male egalitarianism, while Federalists did little to disprove Jeffersonians’ accusations of their aristocratic character.²

The Reynolds Affair and Pamphlet

According to Hamilton’s recollection of events in 1797, his affair with Maria Reynolds began during the summer of 1791, when Reynolds called upon Hamilton, then the Secretary of the Treasury, at his house in Philadelphia, the nation’s capital city at the time. She spun a sad tale of her

² For more on Hamiltonian/Federalist policy and Jeffersonian opposition in the 1790s, see the books cited in footnote 1. While historians may disagree on the extent to which the Anglophile Hamilton actually tried to replicate British systems in America, all agree that he favored a strong central government, his financial plans favored the merchant class, and he believed in political rule by the elite.
current situation, speaking to Hamilton with “a seeming air of affliction.”³ Reynolds claimed that her husband, James, had deserted her, and that she hoped to depart Philadelphia to live with some friends but did not have the means to do so. Hamilton was sympathetic to Reynolds’s apparent plight and agreed to deliver a small sum of money to Reynolds’s home later that night. After Hamilton delivered the money to Reynolds, they conversed about how she could repay him. When describing this scene for the readers of his “Reynolds Pamphlet,” Hamilton displayed a sense of wry wit in writing that “it was quickly apparent that other than pecuniary [i.e., monetary] consolation would be acceptable.”⁴ So began the first highly publicized sex scandal in America’s history.

According to Hamilton’s later account, James Reynolds entered the scene later that year, in December.⁵ Upon James’s supposed reappearance, Maria wrote to Hamilton, claiming that James had returned home and discovered her relationship with the Treasury Secretary. As a result, the situation quickly moved from adultery and prostitution to extortion; James now demanded blackmail payments in exchange for sexual access to Maria and

---

⁴ Ibid., 251.
⁵ As we will see, whether Maria Reynolds was aware that her husband would seemingly reappear and subsequently blackmail Hamilton a few months after she and Hamilton began their affair is unknown.
his silence. It is impossible to know whether James and Maria Reynolds concocted the blackmail scheme together or if James had indeed temporarily deserted Maria, returning only to find his wife in a relationship with the Secretary of the Treasury. “It was a matter of doubt with me whether there had been really a discovery by accident or whether the time for the catastrophe of the plot was arrived,” Hamilton later wrote. At any rate, Hamilton decided to continue the affair with Maria, making payments to James throughout its duration. According to the “Reynolds Pamphlet,” whenever Hamilton attempted to disentangle himself from the Reynoldses, Maria managed to pull him back into their affair; however, Hamilton finally decided to end it for good around August of 1792, when he made his final blackmail payment to James.

In December of the same year, James Monroe, then a Democratic-Republican senator from Virginia, along with two other politicians, Representatives Frederick Muhlenberg and Abraham Venable, heard from one of James Reynolds's friends that Hamilton had given money to him on multiple occasions. Suspecting Hamilton of using treasury funds to speculate with Reynolds, Monroe, Muhlenberg, and Venable approached Hamilton, demanding that he explain his monetary connection to the man. Hamilton

---


7 “Printed Version of the 'Reynolds Pamphlet,'” Hamilton Papers.

explained the situation to the trio, admitting that he had an affair with Maria, and that James had blackmailed him. All three promised to keep the entire ordeal under wraps, apparently believing Hamilton innocent of the accusations of speculation with James. Thus, the affair remained unknown to the public for more than four years.9

In the summer of 1797, Jeffersonian journalist James T. Callender, who had learned of Hamilton’s affair through the Jeffersonian gossip mill, exposed Hamilton’s dalliance with Maria Reynolds in a series of pamphlets, later bound together and published as a book entitled *The History of the United States for 1796*.10 Callender, a political essayist forced to flee from England in 1793 due to his venomous attacks on the wealthy of that country, wrote for a couple of Philadelphia-based Jeffersonian newspapers and published several anti-Federalist pamphlets. In the mid-to-late 1790s, he found an admirer in Thomas Jefferson, who also helped to support him financially. While Callender certainly hoped that his pamphlet would expose Hamilton’s licentiousness to the public, his primary aim was to accuse Hamilton of official wrongdoing through reviving the original rumor of Hamilton’s having used public funds to engage in financial speculation with

---

9 Chernow, 413-417.
10 Chernow, 529. For further details behind the affair’s 1797 exposure, see Chernow, Chapter 30. It is impossible to know exactly how Callender learned of the gossip surrounding Hamilton and the Reynoldses. One theory involves a friend of Monroe and James Madison’s, John Beckley, a fellow Virginian who was clerk of the House of Representatives (531-532). Likewise, we do not know exactly why Callender chose to write about it at this particular time, or who (if anyone) suggested that he should do this. Hamilton’s biographer speculates that since Washington was now out of office, the Jeffersonians wanted to prevent Hamilton from being able to exercise the same influence over President Adams that he had over Washington (530-531).
James Reynolds. Hamilton had long been the subject of attacks alleging that he had somehow misused public funds for his own personal gain. He faced numerous inquiries from Democratic-Republican congressmen in his time as Secretary of the Treasury. Callender’s allegations were intended to remind the public of these attacks.\textsuperscript{11}

By the summer of 1797, Hamilton was no longer Treasury Secretary and was instead working as a lawyer in New York City. Still, he was a permanent fixture in the Federalist Party and rightfully concerned about his reputation, as well as the reputation of the Federalists. Forced to address Callender’s accusations, Hamilton responded with the self-published “Reynolds Pamphlet.” Hamilton’s pamphlet followed the conventions of “defense pamphlets” of the time. Historian Joanne B. Freeman describes them as “signed public statements that begin with an explanation of the ‘truth’ and an attack on the accuser’s motives, followed by documentary evidence.”\textsuperscript{12} Defense pamphlets stood in contrast to many newspaper articles and essays, which were often published anonymously or under a pseudonym, as well as being much shorter in length. In his pamphlet, like all pamphlets in the defense genre, Hamilton went into painstaking detail in describing the true connection between him and the Reynoldses, firmly

\textsuperscript{11} Chernow, 530.
\textsuperscript{12} Joanne B. Freeman, \textit{Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 100. Freeman continues: “Most personal of all were defense pamphlets. Signed, structured character defenses brimming with hard evidence, they were legal briefs argued before a tribunal of one’s peers, the writer personally vouching for their veracity.... They demanded the greatest risk, the authority of the author’s name and reputation, but to the victim of a serious attack, this was a risk worth taking,” 119.
stating that the money he gave to James Reynolds was from his own pocket and intended to both pay for and conceal his affair with Maria, not for speculation. Hamilton even published the love letters from Maria in an attempt to prove that his only connection to the Reynoldses was of an “amorous” nature. The Reynolds Pamphlet totaled almost one hundred pages, and Hamilton presumably hoped that the overwhelming evidence he offered would convince readers of his innocence. “The bare perusal of the letters from Reynolds and his wife is sufficient to convince my greatest enemy that there is nothing worse in the affair than an irregular and indelicate amour,” wrote Hamilton. Using such language, Hamilton downplayed the importance of his affair with Maria in the world of politics. His matter-of-fact tone about his “indelicate amour” indicates that he assumed the American public and press would not care much about his affair after he disentangled himself from the charges of speculation. Hamilton likely hoped that such honesty and openness on his part would lead to the press (and the public) quickly forgetting about the ordeal. He would not be so lucky.

The political press of the early republic was a propaganda machine, rather than a source of unbiased news of the day. Networks of highly partisan newspapers appeared as a result of the emergence of the United States’ first political parties in the 1790s. Such newspapers acted as the propaganda arm of the party with which they were aligned. News, gossip,

---

13 "Printed Version of the ‘Reynolds Pamphlet,’” *Hamilton Papers.*
14 Ibid., 267.
and propaganda mixed together, resulting in stories which were often factually inaccurate but still a powerful weapon in political conflicts. The foremost goal of a partisan newspaper was to convince voters to side with the political party to which it was loyal. These newspapers functioned alongside partisan broadsides and pamphlets.\(^{15}\) The reports and reactions to Hamilton's affair with Reynolds in the Jeffersonian press were therefore fine-tuned to elicit a particular reaction – that is, disapproval of Hamilton and his party from their audience, comprised largely of white men. Of course, Federalist supporters opted to read newspapers that sympathized with the Federalist cause, while supporters of the Democratic-Republican cause read newspapers which likewise promoted their own party. Since essayists essentially wrote to their own supporters and no pretense of impartiality existed, writers employed heightened rhetoric to arouse the reader's enthusiasm and passion for his (or, sometimes, her) favored party. Not surprisingly, Hamilton's affair was likewise depicted in a very impassioned manner.

\(^{15}\) Jeffrey L. Pasley, “The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 1-7 and passim. Presses were especially prevalent mid-Atlantic urban environments, with Philadelphia acting as the center of the 1790s political presses (no doubt helped by the fact it was then the nation’s capital). This paper draws upon newspapers from all regions of the United States. The press coverage of the Reynolds Affair was not extensive enough to discern regional differences between their approach to the story.
Recent works of scholarship have situated the newspaper press at the center of the early republic's political system.\textsuperscript{16} Both Hamilton and Jefferson "believed newspapers were critical to their respective causes."\textsuperscript{17} Works such as Marcus Daniel's \textit{Scandal and Civility} and Jeffrey Pasley's \textit{The Tyranny of Printers} credit newspaper writers, editors, and printers with having played a "critical role in the creation and expansion of an American public sphere."\textsuperscript{18} They were "political activists," many of whom believed that a public figure's private life was fair game in political warfare.\textsuperscript{19} Newspapers were the most wide-reaching press weapon in the political wars of the early republic, thanks to the inter-connectedness of the partisan press. The same essay, after its original printing, would also appear in several regional papers, all aligned with the same party.\textsuperscript{20}

The exploration of print culture via newspaper is not only logistically convenient to the historian but also logical as an avenue of exploration due to the centrality and importance of newspapers to the political climate of the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 3-4. Also see Marcus Daniel, \textit{Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6-7: "At the center of this volatile and turbulent postrevolutionary world were the partisan newspaper editors who are the principal subjects of this book. During the 1790s, these editors and journalists, new men with a new sense of vocation as political authors and activists, helped to create a new public for politics and to impart to it new ideas about national and partisan identity... By the 1790s, newspapers had become critical forums for the discussion of public life and a crucial influence on the formation of public opinion." Also see: Freeman, 123-124. "Many Federalists blamed their loss of the presidency in 1800 on Republican skill with this powerful weapon." For more on print writ large as an effective political weapon in the early republic, see Freeman, 99.

\textsuperscript{17} Palsey, 60.
\textsuperscript{18} Daniel, 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Daniel, 5.
\textsuperscript{20} Freeman, 123.
early republic. In the approximately 20 press reports surveyed here, the conventions of the contemporary seduction narrative are pronounced. The Jeffersonian press coverage of the Reynolds Affair demonstrates the prevalence of several key themes.

First and foremost, the Jeffersonian press depicted Alexander Hamilton as an aristocrat who preyed upon women. Like aristocratic libertines in contemporary seduction novels, this man robbed the virtue of foolish young women (such as a Maria Reynolds) who fell victim to his charms. In these accounts, Reynolds's virtue was essentially America's virtue. Hamilton's allegedly aristocratic ways extended beyond his dalliance with Reynolds: Jeffersonians accused him and his party of leading the new nation into the hands of British bankers, having little concern for the common man. Furthermore, Hamilton and the Federalists vehemently opposed the French Revolution, adding to their reputation as closet monarchists with a distaste for democracy. In turn, Jeffersonian writers often wrote of the Reynolds Affair in explicit connection with Hamilton's supposed preference for

---

21 I used the search string "Hamilton" (the search engine is dependent on text recognition software that attempts to match a search string to old newspaper text) in the database of "America's Historical Newspapers," searching between the years of 1797 (the affair's exposure) to 1804 (Hamilton's death). After narrowing the results (many results were simply of an announcement that Hamilton's pamphlet was for sale, referring to a different person with the surname Hamilton, or otherwise irrelevant), I analyzed approximately 20 unique newspaper reports of the Reynolds Affair. My citations refer to the specific newspaper I quote. My citations may refer to a report that was actually originally published in another regional newspaper (i.e., my citation refers to a reprint). I also did not attempt to document the number of times a particular account was reprinted, in part because most regional newspapers are still not part of America's Historical Newspapers' database. Based on the usual patterns of contemporary partisan newspaper networks, it is safe to assume that when I quote, for example, an article from Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register, the same article probably also appeared in other contemporary newspapers.
an aristocratic or monarchist system of government. Finally, writers preferred a plot that involved two actors: Hamilton the libertine and Reynolds the ingénue. Not knowing how to fit the reality of James Reynolds and Hamilton’s wife, Eliza, into their simplistic story, they generally ignored them altogether, other than occasionally citing Eliza as a reason for why Hamilton should not have published his own immodest account of the affair.

Rather than accuse Hamilton of fabricating the Maria Reynolds story in an attempt to cover-up his financial wrongdoings, the Jeffersonian press moved at once to producing commentary on Hamilton’s affair with Maria, to which he had now openly admitted. Perhaps the press quickly realized that Hamilton’s affair could be just as much of a windfall to the Democratic-Republicans as a convoluted story of his supposed illegal financial speculation, or perhaps Hamilton’s apparent candor had convinced even most Jeffersonians of his innocence on those charges. At any rate, the Jeffersonian newspapers realized that Hamilton’s own narrative of the affair could be rewritten to paint him as a debauched aristocrat. This narrative fit, not coincidentally, with oft-repeated Jeffersonian attacks on the Federalists and especially Hamilton, who had long been the target of accusations of monarchism, elitism, and a predilection for hereditary titles. As historians Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick explain in *The Age of Federalism*, Jefferson and Madison established the Democratic-Republican press in order to combat “what they saw as the forces of monarchy, anti-republicanism, and
In the Jeffersonian press, Hamilton was, according to his biographer, “demonized as a slavish pawn of the British Crown, a closet monarchist, a Machiavellian intriguer, a would-be Caesar... [and] a snobbish tool of plutocrats.” For the Jeffersonians, Hamilton’s affair had simply confirmed the role which he was already playing in their minds; however, in order for them to shoehorn the affair into their established Hamilton narrative, they were forced to represent the affair and its cast of characters in a specific light – one which was often at odds with the version of the affair presented by Hamilton in his defense pamphlet. In other words, the Jeffersonians knew it would be less effective to simply write that a lack of fidelity in Hamilton’s private life meant that he and his political party could not be trusted when they could instead argue that Hamilton had an affair in a manner that essentially validated pre-existing concerns about him and his party.

Given the highly tense political environment of the late 1790s, the Jeffersonians’ line of attack was quite timely. The nation was still in its infancy, and the threat of a monarchical order reestablishing itself in the United States did not seem as absurd as it does to modern readers. Additionally, public fervor during the French Revolution was at its height in the latter half of the 1790s. Democratic-Republican politicians and their

---

22 Elkins and McKitrick, 239. Much like political soundbytes of today, the partisan press opted for hyperbole and buzzwords over a cogent narrative of the opponent’s faults. Accusations of a politician such as Hamilton having a penchant for both “monarchy” and “aristocracy” often appeared together without any additional parsing of the particulars of the words. See Elkins and McKitrick, 266, 267, 270, 354 (this combination “worked powerfully on the American imagination”), 404, 584.

23 Chernow, 179.
supporters generally supported the Revolution, believing that the French people had the right to overthrow the monarchy, while Federalists did not, judging the revolutionaries to be a dangerous mob which represented a threat to the public order. To the Federalists, the Jeffersonians were “Jacobins,” rabble rousers like the mob that instigated the French Revolution. To the Jeffersonians, the Federalists now represented a monarchy-in-waiting which, like the French monarchy, must be overthrown and eliminated as to ensure a secure and proper American society.

Hamilton began his own defense pamphlet by decrying the “spirit of Jacobinism” responsible for the attacks on him, which had recently culminated with the charges of speculation with treasury funds. He suggested that these American Jacobins and the writers who did their bidding “threaten[ed] the political and moral world with a complete overthrow” through their “invent[ion] and propagat[ion]” of “the most direct falsehoods,” represented by their fabrication and dissemination of the accusations of speculation. Hamilton’s direct attack on “Jacobin newspapers” – what he called a “system of defamation… artfully calculated to hold up the opponents of the FACTION [i.e., the Democratic-Republican Party] to the jealousy and distrust of the present generation” – only served to fan the flames of these Jeffersonian propagandists even more. Hamilton had directly attacked them, and he was most assuredly going to pay the price. The writers aimed

---

to show the purity of the “Jacobin” spirit in contrast to Hamilton’s attachment
to aristocracy, now perfectly exemplified through his affair with Maria.

Aristocrats and Ingénues

The trope of the seductive aristocrat and his victim was prominent in
Anglo print culture since the mid-to-late seventeenth century. *The Power of
Sympathy*, first published in 1789 and widely considered the first American
novel, examined this theme. Cathy Davidson, in the first major analysis of the
politics of the seduction novel, remarked that the writer used the act of
seduction to signify imbalances in “social power and social worth… that
should be corrected in a country purporting to be a republic.”

A rakish suitor proved the downfall of the eponymous heroine in Briton Samuel Richardson’s
1748 popular novel *Clarissa; or, the History of a Young Lady*. Elizabeth
Wharton, the central character of Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*
(1797), similarly met her demise due to her involvement with an aristocratic
“libertine” man. After Wharton’s death, her friends lamented her loss of virtue
due to her inability to resist the demands of her suitor, termed a “designing
libertine.” In Britain, political essayists in newspapers, magazines, and
pamphlets often employed the trope of an aristocratic libertine who preyed

---

York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 108. According to Davidson, the author also dwelled
on the “antirepublican popularity of British tastes” and linked an “aristocratiek temper” with
being “un-American and threaten[ing] the peace and unity of America” (109).
26 Sharon Block, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North
Carolina Press, 2006), 44.
27 Block, 45-46; Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns
upon women (who were subsequently left in ruin due to their loss of virtue) to
comment on the supposed corruption and overindulgence of wealthy
government leaders.  

In the case of the Reynolds Affair, the Jeffersonian writers argued that, in Hamilton’s America, moneyed aristocrats could
purchase, through their social status and sometimes (as in this case) literally
with money, sexual access to women, thus robbing them of their virtue. This
exchange rested upon the notion that the money and social standing of a man
afforded – again, often literally, but also symbolically – him the privilege of an
affair. It also echoed the notion that the aristocrat was above both law and
morality.

In portraying Hamilton as a predatory libertine and Maria as a preyed-upon ingénue, writers relied upon familiar stock characters of the traditional
seduction narrative popular throughout the eighteenth century. Not
coincidentally, the traits of the stock character of the male “libertine” seducer
in seduction narratives perfectly fit in line with what Jeffersonians saw as the
worst traits of the Federalists’ vision for America: moneyed, aristocratic,
altogether too European in nature. Maria Reynolds played the role of the

---

28 John Brewer, A Sentimental Murder (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 88-89. Brewer writes: “During the 1760s and 1770s [in Britain] these stories of moral depravity and misfortune were taken up by social satirists and politicians and shaped into an indictment of the aristocracy in general and government ministers in particular. Fears of corruption, vice and luxury were commonplace in social commentary throughout the eighteenth century, but they were now focused on the sexual conduct of high society and the nation’s political leaders.” Also see Clare Lyons, Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 137-139 for more on how contemporary tales of libertines and rakes often alluding to the “intrigues of English aristocrats” (137), and Goodbeer, 294, for more on political cartoons that characterized the British government as a hotbed of “absolute depravity.”
"ingénue" character – a naïve young woman who loses her virtue and falls upon hard times through her foolish choice to fall prey to the libertine's charms. Yet eliciting sympathy for Maria Reynolds herself was not the Jeffersonians' only or perhaps even primary goal. In a time when the young nation was often symbolized by a virtuous young woman, the newspapers argued, if metaphorically rather than explicitly, that the libertine Hamilton was guilty of both of seducing Reynolds and also the United States. Seduction novels were designed not only to titillate but also to teach; specifically, they served as reminders to young women to exercise good judgment with men. Seduction stories “gave the libertine public recognition and a place in the cultural landscape... as they warned against the quick gratification of passion the libertine pursued.”29 They “reflected and responded to [the] anxiety” of women being left “ruined” after "surrender[i]ng" their chastity to men who deserted them."30 Clearly, Jeffersonian writers employed this seduction narrative to not only accuse Hamilton of having led a young woman to ruin but also to warn readers that the nation could also be led to ruin if Hamilton’s party remained in power. As historian Richard Godbeer explicates: “Given

29 Lyons, 125.
30 Godbeer, 265. “Seduction literature reflected and responded to [this] anxiety," he continues. Godbeer attributes much of the popularity of cautionary seduction narratives to rising literacy rates: “As rising literacy rates among both women and men in eighteenth-century North America created a much broader reading public, and as the proliferation of lending libraries enabled less affluent readers to obtain publications that they could not have afforded to purchase, the wide-ranging discussion of courtship, sexual danger, and moral responsibility that now took place in printed matter could reach out and engage a new social class of readers, including a much enlarged constituency of women,” 265-266. Also see Lyons, 125-126 for more on the popularity of tales of seduction and their dual functions as both warnings to young women and titillating tales for public consumption.
widespread emphasis upon virtue as the cement that would hold the new republic together and the clear association of women with the guardianship of virtue, both personal and political, the threat of sexual degradation had significance above and beyond the personal welfare of victims and their families: seduction and abandonment debased those who represented and guaranteed the fledgling nation's moral integrity.  

If seduction narratives featuring fictional characters were designed to teach young women to resist rakish libertines for fear of losing their virtue, Jeffersonian writers employed tropes from these narratives to teach their readers that Hamilton did not only rob Reynolds of her virtue but threatened to corrupt America's virtuous character as well.  

In Hamilton's account of the affair, he preemptively rejected the power dynamic embedded in this seducer/victim trope, casting Maria Reynolds as a woman who not only initiated the relationship, but who also artfully manipulated him into continuing their affair whenever Hamilton had second thoughts. Writing years after the end of their affair, Hamilton was apparently still unable to fully understand the power she had held over him and his better judgment. Even after he began to suspect that she and her husband may

---

31 Godbeer, 267. He continues later on 297: “That brings us back to the seduction literature that flooded American households in the 1790s... it sought to prepare young women for the challenges of personal freedom and sexual temptation. That enterprise had clear political implications in the climate of the 1780s and 1790s, given the central roles allotted to virtue and to women in sustaining a health republic.” Also see Elizabeth Barnes, States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 8. “The successful assault on the woman's chastity [in a seduction narrative] would therefore be read by postrevolutionary audiences as a metaphor for the debasement of American character and the corruption of national integrity.”
have conspired together to purposely trap him in an extortion plot, Hamilton was unable to ignore Maria’s “appearances of a violent attachment, and of agonizing distress at the idea of a relinquishment” which were “played with a most imposing art.” Further reflecting upon Maria’s behavior, Hamilton wrote that his “sensibility, perhaps [his] vanity, admitted the possibility of a real fondness” which had induced him to continue the affair. Whenever Hamilton threatened to end their relationship, Maria would write to him, appealing to his ego and vanity in asking him to continue their affair. In one letter, Maria claimed to have “[risen] from [her] pilliow [sic] which [Hamilton’s] neglect” had “filled with the sharpest thorns” in order to inform him of how she neither ate nor slept in his absence. Adding that she was on the verge of “doing the moast [sic] horrid acts” if he did not comply with her request to visit her, she instructed him to “Call some time this night I no its late but any tim [sic] between this and twelve A Clock.” In another letter, Maria instructed Hamilton to visit as soon as he received her letter, and until then, her “breast [would] be the seate [sic] of pain and woe.”

Although Maria may well have felt some degree of fondness for Hamilton, her hyperbolic language combined with all of her letters ending with a pointed request to continue the affair, in addition to Hamilton’s own

skepticism about the genuineness of her emotions, indicate that Maria was likely exaggerating her affection for him in order to keep him in her and her husband’s clutches. According to Hamilton, Maria apparently rendered him powerless to resist her fervent cries of desire for him. In effect, Hamilton “feminized” himself as the naïve ingénue in his pamphlet. He portrayed himself as the duped victim of Maria’s emotional displays whose primary fault was being a “man of feeling,” especially in regard to the welfare of a young woman – perhaps in an appeal to contemporary notions of sensibility, sensitivity, and sympathy.\textsuperscript{35}

In direct contrast to Hamilton’s own account, Jeffersonian writers depicted Hamilton’s relationship with Maria Reynolds as one of an aristocratic, powerful, older predator (Hamilton) and an innocent, naïve, younger victim (Reynolds). One wrote that Hamilton had “seduced a weak woman, whom the hard hand of poverty, and the cruel treatment of a husband, had drove to extremities.” This writer, “Albert,” then noted that Hamilton “destroyed [Maria], who yielded herself to his ‘ardor’ and money.”\textsuperscript{36} Hamilton was judged “treacherous to the sacred and indisputable rights of the feeble sex, which men are bound to protect!”\textsuperscript{37} Yet another writer rhetorically asked, “Is a seducer who afterwards publishes the shame of his victim a

\textsuperscript{35} Contemporary writers explored what Sarah Knott calls the “tribulations of the man of feeling.” These men were often guilty, as Hamilton suggested he was, of feeling too much, losing sense of his masculine rationality, reason, and judgment in the process. See Sarah Knott, \textit{Sensibility and the American Revolution} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 52, 285-286.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Aurora}, August 30, 1797.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Greenleaf’s New York Journal and Patriotic Register}, September 20, 1797.
jacobin?” – a sarcastic reference to the pejorative term for Jeffersonians that Federalists so often employed. In an example which perhaps best showcases this trope on display, “One of the Public” wrote to the City Gazette and Daily Advertiser to narrate his own version of Hamilton’s “debaucheries with Mrs. Reynold’s [sic].” With a very telling choice of verb, the author described how Hamilton “hunt[ed] up his new acquaintance.” Hamilton, he wrote, found his prey “in an upstairs bed-room, and there he receive[d] at once the wages of his mercenary charity.” Finally, in 1801 – four years after the affair’s initial exposure – an essayist expressed his frustration that Hamilton remained a presence in the political world. According to the writer, Hamilton should have remained “obscure and inactive” as a result of his “illicit amours with his lovely Maria, on whose supposed chastity relied the happiness of her husband and family.”

Interestingly, James Reynolds, so prominent a figure in Hamilton’s own recollection of the affair, is almost entirely absent from the Jeffersonian press’s commentary. Part of Hamilton’s defense included an appeal to common sense on the matter of whether he would have chosen James Reynolds, of all people, with whom to engage in illegal speculation. Hamilton wrote that it would have been “impossible” for him to have employed “so vile an instrument as Reynolds for such insignificant ends.” Reynolds was an

38 *The Argus, or Greenleaf’s New Daily Advertiser*, September 11, 1797.
39 *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, December 8, 1797.
40 *Centinel of Freedom*, April 28, 1801.
“obscure, unimportant, and profligate man,” added Hamilton.\(^4\) In other words, Hamilton contended that if he was indeed guilty of criminal speculation, he would have at least been smart enough to pick a partner in crime who was on his level. In the letters from James Reynolds included in Hamilton’s pamphlet, James emerges as a man who played with the language of masculine entitlement to devoted wives in order to achieve his goal of blackmail. “You have deprived me of every thing that is near and dear to me,” wrote James, upon his apparent discovery of Maria’s affair. “You have acted the part of the most Cruelist man in existance. you have made a whole family miserable. She ses there is no other man that she Care for in this world. now Sir you have bin the Cause of Cooling her affections for me,” he continued. James was “determined to have satisfaction” and threatened that it “shant be onely one family thats miserable.”\(^4\) Within a few days, James demanded one thousand dollars from Hamilton. Hamilton paid, and James quickly declared that he now had “not the Least Objections to [Hamilton’s] Calling.”\(^4\) Just as Maria had done her part in convincing Hamilton to continue their affair whenever it looked as if Hamilton might disentangle himself from the Reynoldses, James would also implore Hamilton to prolong the affair.

According to James in March of 1792, Maria was much more “Chearful and

---

\(^4\) “Printed Version of the ‘Reynolds Pamphlet,’” Hamilton Papers.
kind” after her visits with Hamilton, and since James would “rather add to the happiness of all than distress any[one],” he importuned Hamilton to continue to see Maria. As in his earlier letter, he focused on Hamilton’s effect on Maria’s emotional state and her attitude toward James rather than the physical relationship between Hamilton and his wife – over which he apparently had much less objection.

While a few articles mentioned James Reynolds’s alleged poor treatment of Maria that supposedly spurred her initial contact with Hamilton, none of them took James to task for playing the part of a pimp. Perhaps the writers did not know how to negotiate the role that James could play in their overarching narrative. If they acknowledged James’s role as the potential master puppeteer behind the entire saga, Hamilton could no longer function as the predatory aristocrat who seduced James’s wife. In addition, the absence of James Reynolds from the Jeffersonians’ version of the tale spoke to their lack of real concern for the tawdry behavior of the lower classes, of which the Reynoldses were a part. Writers were unwilling to concentrate on the Reynoldses’ social class, not wanting to move the focal point of the narrative to what one historian has called the “rabble” of the lower class and their supposedly licentious behavior. In their discussion of Hamilton’s affair, the newspapers were not interested in the reality of lower-class lives or the

45 Lyons, 4. The licentiousness of this rabble of Philadelphia’s lower-class citizens existed in contrast to the “restraint” of the middle classes.
upward tick in prostitution which occurred in post-revolutionary Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{46}

The reality of many urban women who turned to casual prostitution as a method of “getting by [and] making the best of bad luck” was not relevant to their narrative.\textsuperscript{47} Hamilton must remain, they thought, the actor in chief.

It is quite possible that the Jeffersonian press misrepresented the power dynamic of the actual Hamilton-Maria Reynolds relationship, but the exchange of money for sexual access for Maria was a constant theme in both the Hamilton and Jeffersonian representations of the affair. The Jeffersonian writers were wise to emphasize this with comments such as the “wages of [Hamilton’s] mercenary charity,” as the exchange of money for sex characterized many cultural representations of affairs of aristocrats and their mistresses. In such stories, money often served the function of a bribe used by a wealthy man to seduce a young woman who otherwise would not have been interested in him, not wages paid to a prostitute. Since the Reynolds Affair certainly involved the exchange of money for sexual favors, Hamilton had effectively played into the hands of the Jeffersonians and their image of him. This money exchange was also an assertion of a man’s masculinity, indicating that he was willing and able to keep a lover.\textsuperscript{48} Although not highlighted in press accounts, perhaps Hamilton was conceiving of himself in these terms when paying James for sexual access to Maria and when, later,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 188-189.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Brewer, 143.
\end{itemize}
he repeatedly belittled the willingly cuckolded James Reynolds in his pamphlet. James, for his part, was only too happy to play the role of the outraged husband – until Hamilton paid up. Unsurprisingly, the newspapers did not consider that perhaps James had “yielded” himself to Hamilton’s money no less than had Maria.

Writers also afforded little a concern for the other female character in the saga, Mrs. Elizabeth Hamilton, through emphasizing the virtuous qualities they assumed she possessed and condemning Hamilton for his betrayal of her. The New York Journal & Patriotic Register wrote that Hamilton “violated the sacred promises – promises made at the holy altar, and debauched the house.” Another writer seized upon Mrs. Hamilton’s absence during much of the time Hamilton and Maria had the affair, noting that Hamilton carried on his affair in his “own house, when his wife and children had taken notion in their heads to visit her father?” The Aurora noted that Hamilton had “place[d] daggers in the breast of a virtuous wife” through his behavior. Interestingly, this article was an anomaly in its representation of Maria Reynolds. Since the intent of the piece was to explicitly emphasize Hamilton’s betrayal of his wife, the author wrote of Maria as an “unprincipled woman” whom Hamilton took to his bed. “Art thou a wife?”, asked the author. “See him, whom thou hast chosen for the partner of thy life, lolling in the lap of a harlot!!” the writer

49 Centinel of Freedom, September 27, 1797.
50 Greenleaf’s New York Journal and Patriotic Register, October 7, 1797.
In a blistering attack on Hamilton and his party spanning multiple columns in another newspaper, a writer devoted a lengthy paragraph to condemning debauched aristocrats and monarchs in Europe, writing that the populace of European countries “teem with every penury” against a backdrop of “dazzling of the Court, the pompous display of Monarchy, and the splendor [sic] of a debauched Nobility.” The author contended that the Federalists, calling them “the Aristocrats, or rather Monarchy men” embodied these monarchical and aristocratic ideals in the United States but assured readers that “the Jacobins, as the gentry [chose] to call them, are the great body of People of America” who were “fixedly and unalterably determined to maintain an elective Republic.” Explicitly connecting his condemnation of the Federalist Party to the Reynolds Affair and arguing for the connection between private and public virtue, the author castigated Hamilton:

“Oh my God! Are the People of America to be this insulted, by having one considered as their leader and counsellor [sic], who openly and impudently professes to disregard his marriage vow, to have no love for the reputation of his own tender offspring, and to hold in contempt the sacred precepts of morality forever taught in our country? Can he, who is an unchaste husband, the cruel disaffectionate parent, the defiler of his neighbour’s wife, be the Patriot, and the leader of our country’s councils?” He continued, “No wonder that those men hate the French republicans, for they have expressly declared in their Constitution of Government, that he who is not a good husband, a good father, a good son, or a good brother, is not a good citizen.”

Later, in 1802, a polemicist named James Cheetham told his readers that Hamilton had “rambled for 18 months in this scene of pollution, and

---

51 *Aurora*, September 19, 1797.
52 *Centinel of Freedom*, as reprinted from *The Boston Chronicle*, December 19, 1797.
squandered above $1,200 to conceal the intrigue from his loving spouse." In response to the idea that an affair is a privilege of the aristocracy, writers emphasized the need for republican men of the new nation to be satisfied with their family life. Faithfulness to one’s wife was a symbol of democracy and equality among men – even, perhaps, an agreement that good republican men would not interfere in the marriages of other men.

Some writers, drawing on themes of shame and modesty, purported to be just as outraged over Hamilton’s admission to his affair as they were about his having the affair. One author exclaimed that the “most wanton Libidian could not [have] betray[ed] the Bed-Chamber secret with more undaunted effrontery.” “What man… would betray the nocturnal scenes of cuckoldom and adultery?”, he continued. “You have only aggravated the crime against the common laws of society – you have widened the breach of dishonor by a confession of the fact,” concluded the author. In other words, Hamilton’s admission of his affair constituted a betrayal of both public decency and the people who were directly involved. Hamilton had “sacrafic[ed] [sic] the peace and happiness of an amiable wife and family” through his having “stoop[ed] to formal vindication” of the speculation charges. The Aurora, blurring the lines between private and public virtue, asked how Hamilton could believe that “a

---

53 James Cheetham, A Biography of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States; and of General Hamilton... (Denniston and Cheetham: New York, 1802), 60.
54 Barnes, 11. "Whereas seduction constitutes a breach of republican union and the subversion of national identity, the concept of marriage represents the ideal in social relations."
55 Greenleaf’s New York Journal and Patriotic Register, September 20, 1797,
56 Centinel of Freedom, September 27, 1797.
confession of [his] want of private virtue would prove the integrity of his public conduct.” The writer added that Hamilton’s pamphlet had been released that morning, and by six o’clock in the evening, it was the talk of the town. “The women cry out against him, as if its publication was high treason against the rights of women,” the writer contended. “In publishing it at all, HAMILTON is considered as indiscreet.”57 The Centinel of Freedom took a more humorous approach, portraying Hamilton as a laughingstock:

A few homespun Lines addressed to Mr. Hamilton
Dear Col’nel did you never hear,
(if you did not, I think ’tis queer)
That only fools do “kiss and tell,”
Ev’n tho’ they tell their story well;
You’re only laugh’d at for your folly,
By jack and Dick, and Molly.
JEMINA SPINNINGWHEEL.

The column continued:

[The following Lines are recommended to Alexander Hamilton, Esq. as a proper to grace the prefatory page of the second edition of his justification:]
“I leave you here a little book,
For you to look upon,
That you may see your father’s face,
When he is dead and gone.”58

With the “homespun Lines” having been supposedly penned by “Jemina Spinningwheel,” the Centinel suggested that Hamilton’s “kiss[ing] and tell[ing]” had made him a foolish object of ridicule for both men (Jack and Dick) and women (Molly and Jemina). With the second poem, apparently written from

57 Aurora, October 10, 1797.
58 Centinel of Freedom, October 18, 1797.
the point of view of Elizabeth Hamilton, the newspaper stressed the shame Hamilton had brought to his family with his admission of guilt. Hamilton had exercised his aristocratic privilege in having an extramarital affair, the press contended, but he could not even see it fit to adhere to the unspoken code that even if such dalliances were discreetly tolerated, they were not topics appropriate for public consumption. According to the press, not only had Hamilton further shamed Maria and Elizabeth Hamilton, but had embarrassed women writ large as well. If Hamilton had written his pamphlet with the intent to prove that he was guilty of only being too much of a man of feeling, his detractors responded by arguing that any true “feeling man” would not have publicly shamed his “victim.”

Hamilton likely did not subscribe to these same notions of modesty and shame in his conception of sexuality. The painstaking detail he provided in the Reynolds Pamphlet is evidence alone of that. While Hamilton admitted in the pamphlet that his “confession was not made without a blush,” his singular focus on extricating himself from the charges of speculation apparently had pushed any shame he had over his conduct with Maria to the side. Hamilton, raised in the Caribbean (on the islands of Nevis and St. Croix) and not subject to American norms of sexuality in his adolescence, probably did not view his dalliance with Maria as a situation which could be manipulated to such
explicitly political ends.\textsuperscript{59} Even by age 16, Hamilton had already published a poem in a St. Croix newspaper painting the portrait of a sexually manipulative woman named Celia, whom he described as an “artful little slut.” The poem ended with the lines: “She spits – her back up – prenez garde; Good faith she has you fast.”\textsuperscript{60} Apparently, sex was apparently already commonplace in Hamilton’s teenage life and a topic about which he was not necessarily ashamed to write.\textsuperscript{61} It is difficult to know whether the norms of Hamilton’s teenage world played a part in his decision to pen the lengthy Reynolds Pamphlet. Hamilton’s upbringing may have led him to miscalculate the

\textsuperscript{59}Hamilton’s island upbringing was well-known by his contemporaries. Hamilton’s political opponents occasionally tried to discredit him personally and politically by suggesting that he was part black or “Creole” (see Chernow 245, 522). To this day, some African-American and Caribbean communities believe that Hamilton was of mixed ancestry. In one example, a woman who identifies herself as a community leader from Harlem, New York asks Hamilton’s biographer Ron Chernow: “Do you see another school of thought that relates to the life of Alexander Hamilton as an African – ‘one drop of blood that was black’ – since his mother was from Nevis? ... We are looking for the DNA,” she says. He responds that he was open to the idea when writing Hamilton’s biography but did not find evidence to support this assertion.


\textsuperscript{61}Hamilton’s candidness in the Reynolds Pamphlet mirrors the frankness with which Jamaican planter Thomas Thistlewood (1721-1786) described his own sexual encounters in his diary. Scholars have used Thistlewood’s diary to emphasize “the uncontrolled nature of white men’s sexuality in Jamaica”: see Sarah M. S. Pearsall, “The Late Flagrant Instance of Depravity in My Family’: The Story of an Anglo-Jamaican Cuckold,” The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. 60, no. 3 (July 2003): 570 f8f6f.. Trevor Burnard writes in Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) writes that white men in Jamaica were “expected” to take “full advantage of the sexual opportunities offered to white men,” and doing so “brought no social condemnation” (5). Of course, Thistlewood’s sexual encounters with slave women were not comparable to Hamilton’s affair, since Thistlewood’s encounters were also a display of racial hierarchy on Jamaican plantations – “slave owners needed to show that they were strong, violent, virile men who ruled the little kingdoms of white autocracy that were Jamaican plantations as they pleased,” writes Burnard (160). Still, Hamilton’s exposure to the “sexual environment,” as Pearsall terms it, of the Caribbean during adolescence may help to explain his apparent relative lack of shame in his pamphlet.
political weight of openly discussing his sexual dalliances, or he simply might have expected that the Jeffersonians would refrain from commenting on his private life after proving himself innocent of the speculation charges. Whatever the case, in writing the Reynolds Pamphlet, Hamilton played a game apparently without fully knowing its rules. Still, he and the Federalists quickly realized his folly: by December of 1797, one newspaper reported that Hamilton and his friends had purportedly found themselves “so ashamed of the performance” that they allegedly hunted down and purchased as many available copies of the Reynolds Pamphlet as possible in an attempt to remove it from circulation. “There is not a single copy of the [Reynolds Pamphlet] to be had at New-York,” lamented the Jeffersonian author.62

**Rational Men and Seductresses**

While some depictions attempted to arouse sympathy for the women affected by the affair, others focused on what Hamilton’s affair directly indicated about his temperament and character, and by extension, his ability to exercise good political judgment. Unlike appeals to sympathy for Maria’s plight, these comments instead sprung from the belief that men who were slaves to their sexual passions in their private lives could not be capable and rational public leaders. Not coincidentally, this was yet another trait associated with aristocratic men in contemporary print culture. In this version of the debauched aristocrat, he was a man so consumed with the pleasures

---

62 *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, December 8, 1797.
of the flesh that he neglected all of his other duties and responsibilities. Often
his mistress (or mistresses) would often have such control over him that he
would dole out large amounts of money at her request. Instead of money
acting as a bribe to persuade an otherwise virtuous and innocent woman, the
aristocrat’s willingness to spend money functioned as evidence that he was
mad for an exploitative, powerful woman and therefore unable to make wise
civic decisions.

In one example of this tactic, an author wrote of Hamilton’s own
assertion that “Jacobins threatens [sic] a more extensive and complicated
mischief on the world, than... WAR, PESTILENCE, and FAMINE.” The writer
continued by condemning this as the talk of a man “eternally opposed to
every principle of human right” with a “blind attachment to those systems of
monarchy, aristocracy, a titled nobility, and a privileged order.” Hamilton’s
behavior was deemed “pernicious to the good order and cultivation of civil
society.” According to the writer, Hamilton’s conduct in his affair with Maria
was a direct result of “angry passions and petulent [sic] propensities,
inseparable from proud hearts and weak heads.” He added that a
“philosopher would never yield to passion.” Jacobinism offered an alternative

---

63 Brewer, 133. Brewer writes of this counterpart to the sentimental victim who is “less
sympathetic, more shrewd, more in command of her fate” and has “power and independence
that enables her to exploit men for her own ends.” In the book’s study of the press coverage
of events involving a wealthy “libertine” public official – namely an affair and a murder –
Brewer notes that his detractors believed he was “totally in thrall to his mistress” and thought
she was a “corrupt influence” on him (140-141). “Sandwich’s libido may have not inhibited his
attention to his duties, but in the eyes of hostile observers it did blur the line between his
public responsibilities and his private libertinism” (142).
of “pure and rational morality,” concluded the writer. Yet another author wrote of the “ardor” of Hamilton’s “passion.” One wrote of the Federalist Party’s similarities to the English Court and its “debauched Nobility.” “Is it not too much to be feared that they are all equally debased?”, another writer asked. While the Federalists portrayed the French revolutionaries as a mob that was slave to their passions, these depictions invoked a different stereotype: Hamilton as the depraved aristocrat, too consumed with matters of the flesh to effectively rule as a virtuous republican leader.

Sometimes writers explicitly referenced religion, which served as an antidote to the debauched and unrestrained behavior of godless aristocrats. This was a rather artful tactic on the part of the writers, who flipped the Federalists’ oft-repeated accusations of a link between atheism and supporters of the French Revolution on its head. In fact, one writer explicitly asked how Federalists could deem these supporters godless when a confessed adulterer was a prominent member of its ranks. Another called attention to the hypocrisy of the Federalists’ frequent accusations of Jefferson being an atheist while a “habitual debauchee” who wrote “a book to prove himself an adulterer” called the Federalist Party home. Yet another wrote by “religion and order” the Federalists really meant, citing Hamilton’s affair as

64 Greenleaf’s New York Journal and Patriotic Register, September 20, 1797.
65 Centinel of Freedom, September 27, 1797.
66 Centinel of Freedom, as reprinted from the Boston Chronicle, December 19, 1797.
67 Centinel of Freedom, December 18, 1797.
68 The Constitutional Telegraphe, August 23, 1800.
69 The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser, May 22, 1800.
evidence, “debauchery,” and by “republicanism” they actually meant “monarchism.” Some took a more poetic approach; one wrote of a “modern Eve” and “Adam’s fall,” adding that Hamilton’s “amorous inclination” made it too difficult for him to resist temptation. Hamilton “fell... to his passions,” continued the author. A writer assuming the pen name of “Virtus” took a more humorous approach in parodying Hamilton’s pamphlet: “I have been grossly and injuriously charged with guilt. I have been charged with being a speculator; whereas I am only an adulterer. I have not broken the eighth commandment of the decalogue. It is only the seventh which I have violated.” Finally, another penman explicitly referenced the commandment of “thou shalt not commit adultery,” and throughout his piece made repeated use of words such as “thou” and “hath” in an allusion to the importance of the Ten Commandments.

In writing of Hamilton’s inability to resist temptation, even if they did not always portray Maria herself as a bewitching seductress, Jeffersonians were aware of and perhaps even alluding to other real-life contexts in which this trope appeared, such as the American salon. While not explicitly referenced, the salon of early America, an import from Britain and France, was a Federalist stronghold. Salonnières chose and regulated the topics of discussion and aimed to bring order to the varied views held by their guests.

70 Greenleaf’s New York Journal and Patriotic Register, October 9, 1797.
71 Centinel of Freedom, October 18, 1797.
72 Susan Branson, These Fiery Frenchified Dames (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 125.
According to one scholar, America’s salon culture “ensured that Federalist women could hold sway, establishing for themselves avenues to political power and influence.” Salon culture was inexorably linked to an aristocracy – or the upper echelon of a meritocracy, depending on one’s view. It was the social standing of the elite women of the salon which allowed them to exert their influence in the first place. The resulting influence of these women often reinforced (or at least highlighted) existing class divisions. Jeffersonian ideology and rhetoric, highly at odds with such a system, rested on the breakdown of social hierarchy and class among whites. In attempting to delegitimize the influence of the salon’s women, Jeffersonians judged the scene a hotbed of aristocratic debauchery. The women who exercised some degree of political power in the salon met the same judgment often faced by women in history who ventured into a predominantly male world; they were viewed as unchaste and impure, corrupted by the entire aristocratic scene. The salon was the real-life example of the press’s representation of the Reynolds Affair: aristocratic leaders could simultaneously corrupt America’s good wives through their licentiousness while these same leaders found themselves too consumed with the availability of sex to properly govern in the new republic.

According to Hamilton’s biographer, Hamilton’s allies generally refrained from addressing the Reynolds Affair. If they did, they contended (or

73 Ibid.
at least hoped) that the attacks on Hamilton's private character would not be
enough to tarnish the stature of Hamilton or his party – or, as one Federalist
put it, “purity of character after a period of political existence [was] not
necessary for public patronage.” Federalist newspapers wrote about the
Reynolds Affair with far less frequency than did the Jeffersonian papers,
usually preferring not to discuss it. A few, however, did address the affair,
castigating the Jeffersonians for publicly revealing Hamilton's misconduct and
arguing that his behavior should have no effect on the nation's trust in the
Federalist Party. A “single error in private life [was] brought forward by the
malignant spirit of faction, to tarnish the character of the most virtuous patriots
America has to boast of,” wrote a Federalist writer with the pen name of
“Patrioticus.” He wrote that readers should “pity the weakness of human
nature,” especially “knowing the frailty attached to humanity especially in what
relates to the operations of the flesh.” While Hamilton was to be pitied,
Patrioticus argued that readers should feel “indignation at the pitiful
malevolence of Mr. Monroe” and realize that “unlike [Hamilton's] political
enemies he is and ever has been actively laborious, (to the injury of his health
and his private interest).” Another Federalist writer, “Marcus,” defended
Hamilton by dismissing the Reynolds Affair as only evidence of Hamilton's
“temporary frailties” and as a single “unguarded moment.” Condemning

74 Quoted in Chernow, 536-537. Chernow notes the infrequency of Federalists addressing
the Reynolds Affair. John and Abigail Adams, political enemies of Hamilton despite their
party affiliation, were exceptions to this rule.
75 New York Gazette, September 26, 1797.
"Jacobinical bigots" and their "Jacobin malignity," Marcus defended their "devoted victim" (Hamilton) by, again, defending Hamilton's conduct in public office. "Twice did a committee of the House of Representatives, the grand national inquest – selected at his desire from his sworn political enemies, declare him innocent (after screpulous [sic] research) of even the suspicion of blame, much less of official corruption," wrote Marcus. He continued: "Every good man fell ferious [sic] when his contemplates the extreme length to which party spirit has carried individual resentments." All in all, Hamilton's supporters either stayed silent on the matter of the Reynolds Affair or commented only to extol his conduct while Treasury Secretary, effectively arguing that private virtue should have little effect on a politician and his party's fitness for public office.

Conclusion

For the remaining few years of Hamilton's life, the topic of the Reynolds Affair appeared from time to time in the press. Such articles would usually sarcastically refer to Hamilton's reputation in an attempt to discredit Hamilton's political machinations of the day (which were becoming few and far between in the last years of his life). One example of Jeffersonian newspapers alluding to Hamilton's dalliance with Maria Reynolds years after the affair's exposure occurred during the fight between the two political parties for the female vote in New Jersey. Due to a loophole in New Jersey's

76 Columbian Centinel, September 30, 1797.
state constitution, women who owned a certain amount of property were allowed to vote (this policy was ultimately reversed in 1807). In a Jeffersonian newspaper article urging Newark citizens not to vote for Aaron Ogden, a Federalist, in an upcoming congressional election, the paper reported that “Col. Ogden and the chaste Alexander Hamilton, since their late electioneering tour to the eastward, have so far ingratiated themselves in the esteem of the federal ladies of Elizabeth-Town, and in the lower part of the state, as to induce them (as it is said) to resolve on turning out to support the federal[ist] ticket at the ensuing election.” The Jeffersonian writer was obviously not pleased with this prospect. “Should this be case,” the writer continued, it would “justly entitle them [the women] to an elevated rank among the memorable devotees of the Hamiltonian chastity.” Thus the aristocratic Federalist Hamilton and women who supported the Federalist cause were described as somehow unchaste.

A piece from 1800 sarcastically mentioned the “immaculate character of Alexander Hamilton” in the same sentence as decrying his “attachment to monarchy and aristocracy,” and even a couple of months before Hamilton’s death in a duel with rival politician Aaron Burr in 1804, a newspaper referenced his penchant for “debauchery” and “monarchism.”

---


accused the “very chaste and virtuous leader of the federal party” of having moved from “affording aid to Mrs. Reynolds” to scheming to overthrow the government of the United States through military force. “Pray tell us, most valliant General, if you are the man who is to erect your Standard and take Command?” asked the writer, with a clear eye for double entendres. “How, and where, you propose to raise your forces?—And of which they will probably be mostly composed; Men, Women, or Children?”, asked the writer. Perhaps the passing of a few years, not to mention the Election of 1800, now allowed the Jeffersonians to have a laugh at Hamilton’s expense.

The two tropes of the aristocrat as powerful seducer to an innocent victim and irrational sex fiend ensnared by a woman (or women) co-existed in the portrayals of the affair despite their apparent contradictory nature. After all, if the aristocratic Hamilton was a willful predator and Maria his victim, how influential could his victim really prove? And if the woman with whom he had an affair possessed the power and influence to affect his good republican judgment, then how could she be his guileless prey? Just as these tropes existed side by side in contemporary print culture and society at large, the press made no attempt to reconcile these versions of the Reynolds Affair’s characters. The writers’ goal was to further connect Hamilton’s conduct with undesirable political and economic views, not to provide readers with an unbiased or even coherent account of the saga. The self-serving and

79 American Mercury, February 25, 1802.
paradoxical nature of it all is also apparent: men, writing primarily to men, presented a version of a woman who was able to be conquered and stripped of their virtue due to a man’s presence – yet, these same men were afraid of losing control to a woman or women and reminded themselves that they must guard against this possibility.

The final irony in the Reynolds Affair’s treatment in the press was that Alexander Hamilton himself was, after all, no landed aristocrat. He attained his social standing through his military service, political and legal work, and penchant for endearing himself to those in power, and was never truly wealthy at any point of his life. The closest thing to an “aristocratic” class in the young United States was that of the planter elite, many of whom actually supported Jefferson’s party. Still, the backlash against Hamilton over the Reynolds Affair was yet another nail in his and the Federalists’ political coffin.

---

80 See Richard Godbeer’s “William Byrd’s ‘Flourish’: The Sexual Cosmos of a Southern Planter” in Sex and Sexuality in Early America, ed. Merrill D. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1998) for analysis of how a position in the early United States’ planter elite “purchased” advantages in sexual encounters through physical access to the bodies of servants and slaves and the status and power to coerce sex with them.

81 Elkins and McKitrick write that “the year 1800 marked the end of Federalist predominance in the nation’s public life, a predominance never to be reasserted” (Elkins and McKitrick, 691). It is difficult to assess the political impact of the Reynolds Affair when it occurred alongside several other errors in Federalist judgment, including the split in the Federalist Party between the “High Federalists” (such as Hamilton) and the “Adams Federalists” and the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts. In addition, the “Quasi-War” with France during John Adams’s presidency did not help the Federalist cause. On the other hand, many Jeffersonians saw the Federalists’ demise as more the result of the “nature of things bound to occur” than the result of Federalist blunders, believing that the election of 1800 marked “the definitive ascendancy of a natural republican majority over a minority faction whose hold on the powers of government had been maintained for twelve years through essentially artificial means” (691). For more on the downfall of the Federalist Party, see Elkins and McKitrick, Chapter XV, “The Mentality of Federalism in 1800.”
Bibliography


Pearsall, Sarah M. S. “The Late Flagrant Instance of Depravity in My Family”: The Story of an Anglo-Jamaican Cuckold, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (July 2003): 549-582.


**Primary Sources**

Hamilton/Reynolds Correspondence From:

<http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN.html>

Newspapers:

*American Mercury* (Hartford, Connecticut)

*The Argus, or Greenleaf's New Daily Advertiser* (New York, New York)

*Aurora* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

*Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, New Jersey)

*City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, South Carolina)

*Columbian Centinel* (Boston, Massachusetts)

*Constitutional Telegraph* (Boston, Massachusetts)

*Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register* (New York, New York)

*The Independent Chronicle and the Universal Advertiser* (Boston, Massachusetts)

*New York Gazette* (New York, New York)

*The Pittsfield Sun* (Pittsfield, Massachusetts)