

Coincidence or Conspiracy?: Mark Antony as the Classic Archetype Traitor for Aaron Burr

He was born into a prominent family, served with distinction as a soldier for the existence of his republic, entered political life, made powerful friends and powerful enemies, was ultimately pushed out of the spotlight during revolutionary changes within his republic, and then he was branded a traitor after leading a movement against these changes from the fringes of this growing republic. For many ancient historians, this brief biography is that of Mark Antony, the infamous right-hand man of Julius Caesar and lover of Cleopatra, who fell from the pedestal of power after his loss to Augustus in the late first century BCE. For many American historians, however, this short description could be attached to that of Aaron Burr, the rising political star turned Vice President, then murderer, then traitor. The parallels between these two men, separated by both time and ocean, are too similar to ignore. Examining these two men within their respective contexts sheds light on a rhetoric implored by the early American Founders through which they created their heroes and villains in the mold of famous Romans.

There are plenty of villains in the long history of Rome, but Mark Antony stands out as one of the more loved and loathed. Antony the lover, Antony the warrior, Antony the loyal friend, and Antony the traitor are the memories of Marcus Antonius that have been molded in large part for many Americans through Shakespeare and Hollywood. This caricature of Antony is not surprising given his loss against Augustus in the last of the civil wars of the Roman Republic, but the seeming immortality of Antony within American history and culture is more than a little surprising. Antony's legacy has been more than just a part of American popular culture; it is part of a method that the Founders employed to designate American lovers, warriors, loyal friends, and traitors in the style of ancient Roman politicians, soldiers, and writers. In particular, as the Founders sought to create an identity for their fledgling American

Republic, they used the heroes and villains of history's most famous Republic – Rome – as models for their own history.

Although most Americans would undoubtedly cast Benedict Arnold as the greatest and most well-known traitor in U.S. history, the life of Aaron Burr most closely resembles that of Mark Antony, both intentionally and unintentionally, within the contemporary sources. The classical educations of the U.S. Founders helped them to understand their current environment through the lens of the Roman Republic, and in the struggles to create their new nation in the aftermath of the American Revolution, they wrote their histories with an eye on their predecessor republic. Born into a well-known family, Burr went on to serve in the American Revolution, and then enter local and national politics. He eventually held the position of Vice President under Thomas Jefferson before killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel and falling from grace both politically and socially. Soon after this fall, Burr went west in an attempt to create for himself an empire to challenge the United States. Or so says the legend of Aaron Burr.

Much like Antony, Aaron Burr enjoyed a successful military career and political popularity thanks to his family background and eloquent speech. Both were on the winning sides of great military revolutions – Antony in achieving his revenge against Julius Caesar's assassins, and Burr in the American Revolution. Yet both were on the losing sides of the revolutions that came after – Antony in his civil war Augustus and the 'Roman Revolution' of the first century BCE, and Burr in what historians have dubbed the 'Revolution of 1800.' These two revolutions brought about the downfall of each, and created an archetype of traitor in which historians have continually contained them.

What this paper examines is how the early American Founders modeled their image of Burr after that of Antony in an effort to set the historical representation of treason within in an

American context. Ancient writers had created the standard with Antony, and Americans later reconfigured the memory of Burr to fit this ancient mold. The generic attributions of a fatherless upbringing, debt, wanton lust for power, a thirst for military glory, and the pursuit of inappropriate women have been attributed to each in order to reconfigure their roles in their respective republics. In the attempt to make Washington and Jefferson the heroes of the American Republic, Aaron Burr was made a Mark Antony.