

Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic. By Joanne B. Freeman (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001) Pp. 376.

Reviewed by Elijah Villafana

When thinking of America and its founding fathers, seldom does a student of history recount the antiquated legacy of concern for honor, respect, and reputation. Though a great deal has been explored, documented, and studied regarding the founding of the early American Republic, little has been said regarding what historian Joanne B. Freeman has examined to be a highly emotional “culture of honor.”¹ Through an interdisciplinary approach Joanne B. Freeman, in her study *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*, has captivantly illustrated a political landscape through the spectacles of the political elites whom, under the shared understanding, participated in a “distinctive political culture” that was ruled by a “grammar of political combat.”² Studying the early republic through a cultural and social lens, Freeman has offered new insight into the crucial decades that shaped the nation; revealing a series of cultural and institutional adaptations in an ongoing struggle to adapt the national government to a developing Republican nation.

Most everyone is familiar with the duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, however, Freeman has been one of the only fresh historian to have asked the right questions regarding these complex cultural accouterments that such behavior entails. Asking how and to what extent this honor culture shaped the political actions of men in the Early Republic is now a question that has become indispensable in the overarching

1

Freeman, Joanne B. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. Pp. ix.

2

Ibid, xxii.

framework of America's formative years. Setting the tone in the prologue and introduction, Freeman convincingly repeats and emphasizes her ongoing theme in the ensuing five chapters: in the late eighteenth century, the meanings of character, reputation, and honor were the basis of contentious national politics. Chapter one acts as a breakdown of how self-conscious national politicians were (regarding how they dressed, spoke, and acted) and the scrutiny they received. Chapter two analyzes the art of political gossip, focusing on Thomas Jefferson's expertise on collecting and dispersing gossip about friends and enemies. Demonstrating that despite his effort to come across as an "unbiased observer", Freeman portrays Jefferson as a capable and often shrewd politician.³ Chapter three on the other hand, shifts focus from the spoken word to the written as Freeman deftly examines in detail the various forms of political writing—letters, pamphlets, newspaper essays, and broadsides—by referencing their purposes along with their intended audiences.

Freeman continues to one of the bedrocks in upholding honor and reputation in her penultimate chapter: "dueling as politics." As the ultimate form of political combat, Freeman abridges the confusion surrounding the mystery of why such aristocratic men risked their lives to vindicate honor. Though the duel between Hamilton and Burr was only one instance in over a ten-year span, the reader is shown how this duel in particular was pressed by party politics in New York between Clintonian Republicans and Burrrites. Intuitively, Freeman reveals, in climax, the momentous election of 1800 and all the factors involved in her last chapter. With Aaron Burr as the central figure in the chapter, Freeman pays close attention to his *Memoirs*, specifically his motive in keeping them: "to

3

Ibid, 101

prove himself a man of honorable intentions who was often unwise but never corrupt.”

Though party politics was an ever-increasing factor in the Early Republic, Burr exhibits how the outcome of the election and the course by which the predicament of 1800 was resolved was a direct product of the politics of honor and reputation.

Joanne B. Freeman, assistant professor of history at Yale University, offers a hefty degree of evidence to fortify her thesis. Delving into both the public actions and private papers of figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and Alexander Hamilton, and the less prominent William Maclay, Freeman vividly portrays public life in the early years of the American republic. Through the engaging of approximately three-hundred primary sources—which seemingly included every personal and political inked document of the day—that have seemingly never been fully engaged in such a fashion before now, Freeman presents a well-organized case. Though at first glance, it may seem that the personal writings, particularly, of Maclay’s diary and Jefferson’s “Anas” are nothing more than the gripes of “touchy men,” Freeman convincingly navigates through the “emotional *patterns*” of the political elite through a well-attested “ethno-historical study of patterns of thought and behavior.”⁴

To be seen as a gentleman was all too crucial for the founders. Being judged by their national audience—rank, credit, fame, character, and reputation were word associations that could not be ignored; the offender was politically and socially doomed if they were. It was into this complex system of honor identities that the founders interjected their political claims and personal aspirations for an audience that circumnavigated the globe. Through their “fighting words,” America’s self-proclaimed

4

Ibid, 29; 290-291

founders were speaking in ways that their contemporaries could understand; transcending the pragmatic, they spoke in cultural terminology that reflected that of the Old World. Single-handedly, these discursive fields formed the context in which eighteenth-century social pressure diagnosed politics, premeditated actions, and motivated its elite adherents to operate, sometimes at significant personal costs.

Criticisms of the book are few and far in between. However one criticism, which stems largely from ambiguity, is of her point that the culture of honor was a “source of stability” in the burgeoning Republic.⁵ Throughout the book, she impresses upon the reader how litigious the political ring was and entails how “national politicians were caught in a vicious circle” despite the adherents “inordinate amount of time [spent] analyzing and rationalizing” every facet of the political game. Constant fears of political civil war and national disunion undercuts her idea that this unorganized honor ‘rule book’ actually brought alleviation to a system where a “lack of well-defined standards in an unstable political environment convinced many politicians that the nation was in the throes of a moral crisis.”⁶ Did this rigid Old World system actually shape gentleman or did it do more harm than good, consequently shaping a nation of “self-interested elitists who cared for money and power above all else”?⁷ Notwithstanding, due to the originality and inventiveness of this scholastic study, it will prove difficult for historians of the period to ignore or neglect any longer the code of honor that so defined the political

5

Ibid, xv.

6

Ibid, 209

7

Ibid, 287

backdrop and as a result helped shaped a nation. No longer will such “seemingly trivial ceremonial matters” be devoid of their cultural context.⁸ Freeman’s work has adeptly expanded ones knowledge not just of how political parties first emerged, but also of how political actors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw their world and why they acted as they did.

8

Ibid, 38