

THE FOLLY OF AMBITION IN *Modern Chivalry*

Hugh Henry Brackenridge states as the moral of *Modern Chivalry* 'the folly of ambition,' or more specifically, 'the evil of men seeking office for which they are not qualified,'<sup>1</sup> primarily illustrated by the absurd pretensions of Teague O'Regan. As the book proceeds, however, Brackenridge frequently extends his scope beyond the fictional antics of O'Regan into the real world of politics. In Part II he draws from Livy for an account of the career of an ambitious Roman, Scipio Africanus, who, despite early political successes, suffered ultimate downfall as a result of his unscrupulous methods of advancement. Brackenridge calls Scipio 'the exact prototype and counterpart of some candidates for offices amongst ourselves,' and concludes his discussion with a reference to one of them: 'It is very possible that a certain public character, whom I could name, would have made an abler president than Thomas Jefferson. But the presidency was not intended for him, and it was a fraud upon the electors not instantly to have disclaimed a competition. We have seen in what manner the not having done so, injured his reputation, and, in my opinion, deservedly' (pp. 590, 593-594). The allusion is to Aaron Burr, who, in his vain pursuit of the presidency through the run-off balloting in the House of Representatives in 1801, had come to represent for Brackenridge, as for many of his contemporaries, the folly of ambition in American politics.

Burr began to acquire a reputation as an overly ambitious politician in the 1790s. In 1792 his arch-enemy Alexander Hamilton called him 'an embryo-Caesar' and 'a friend to nothing but as it suits his interest and ambition.'<sup>2</sup> Thomas

<sup>1</sup>Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry*, ed. Claude M. Newlin (1937; reprint ed., New York: Hafner, 1962), pp. 481, 611. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Hamilton, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, 12 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967): 480.

Jefferson considered Burr 'at market' throughout the decade.<sup>3</sup> *The Democratiad* (1795), a satirical pamphlet, accused him of 'intrigue' and 'mad ambition.'<sup>4</sup> *Aristocracy* (1795), a purported commentary upon 'the means which have been used to acquire undue consideration and power,' satirizes Burr in the role of Aristus, whose political machinations are directed toward the fulfillment of his ultimate ambition, the presidency.<sup>5</sup>

Brackenridge's connection with Burr, though never close, was longstanding. It began during their college years at Princeton where they belonged to rival literary societies;<sup>6</sup> Brackenridge graduated in 1771 and Burr the following year. During the Revolutionary War Brackenridge used Burr as a character in a play, *The Death of General Montgomery* (1777), portraying him as the aide-de-camp in whose arms Montgomery dies during the battle of Quebec. Apparently it was not until the protracted presidential election in 1801 that Brackenridge joined in the opposition to Burr. In a letter to Jefferson on January 10, 1801, Brackenridge expressed suspicion of attempts to rig the congressional vote in Burr's favor.<sup>7</sup> Six years later Brackenridge expressed relief to learn that his own son, Henry Marie, had not been drawn into Burr's conspiracy in the Southwest.<sup>8</sup>

In *Modern Chivalry*, however, Brackenridge is concerned with a broader issue than the character of a single man. His comments on Scipio and Burr are part of a general concern

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Jefferson, *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. H. A. Washington, 9 (New York: Riker, Thorne, 1854): 207.

<sup>4</sup>[Lemuel Hopkins], *The Democratiad* (Philadelphia, 1795), pp. 10, 11.

<sup>5</sup>*Aristocracy* (Philadelphia, 1795), 1:v. For a discussion of this work as a satire on Burr, see my article 'Aristocracy in the Early Republic,' *Early American Literature* (1972): 252-257.

<sup>6</sup>Martha Conner, 'Hugh Henry Brackenridge at Princeton University, 1768-1771,' *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 10 (1927): 152.

<sup>7</sup>Jefferson Papers, vol. 109, Library of Congress, excerpts from which are quoted in Claude M. Newlin, *Life and Writings of Hugh Henry Brackenridge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1932), pp. 230-232.

<sup>8</sup>Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Recollections of Persons and Places in the West* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1868), p. 109.

that is especially pronounced in the first two volumes of Part II. This section of the book was written in 1804–1805, during the attacks upon the judiciary in Pennsylvania, when Brackenridge, as a state supreme court judge, was at odds with both the Federalists and the extremists of his own Republican party in the state. At this time, as Claude Newlin points out, Brackenridge ‘took particular pains to explain his conception of a rational democracy equally removed from aristocracy and radical democracy.’<sup>9</sup> Radical democracy runs rampant in this part of *Modern Chivalry*, resulting in the removal of judges, mob destruction of property, and new fluctuations in the fortunes of Teague O’Regan, who at one point is nearly lynched and at others is popularly acclaimed an editor, physician, and judge. But as Captain Farrago explains at a town meeting, such democratic excesses actually lead to aristocracy by their encouragement of ambitious demagogues: ‘The demagogue is the first great destroyer of the constitution by deceiving the people. He is no democrat that deceives the people. He is an aristocrat; and seeks after more power than is just. He will never rest short of despotic rule’ (p. 507).

The threat of the ambitious politician, Brackenridge felt, must be met by balances of power built into the governmental system. Balances, the ‘stays and braces of distributed powers,’ especially the power of impeachment, ‘the most salutary principle of a free government’ (pp. 740, 744), provide some control over public officials. But even more important to a democratic government is the good sense of the citizen in the use of his vote. Brackenridge emphasizes this point in a key passage of the book:

In the age of antient chivalry, when the youth had come to manhood, and was made a knight, it was with matter of ceremony, and his equipment was by the hand of a fair lady buckling on his armour; and inspiring him by her charms and her sentiments, with heroic sense of honour, and the scorn of all that is false or

<sup>9</sup>Newlin, *Life and Writings*, p. 259.

mean. . . . Now the vote of the citizen takes place of the sword of the adventurer. . . . Shall the knight of the Golden Cross be free from stain in his achievements; and shall a republican prostitute his vote, or dishonour his standing in society, by bestowing it on the unworthy? (p. 521).

The vote, then, becomes the ultimate meaning of the book's title. It is modern chivalry itself, the best defense against the folly of ambition, the best hope for the selection of properly qualified, disinterested public officials.

Charles E. Modlin

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.