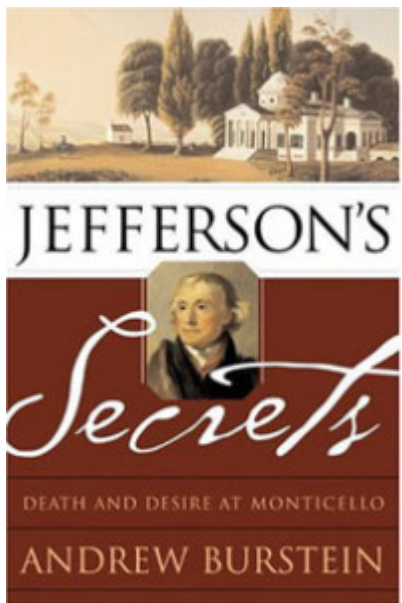
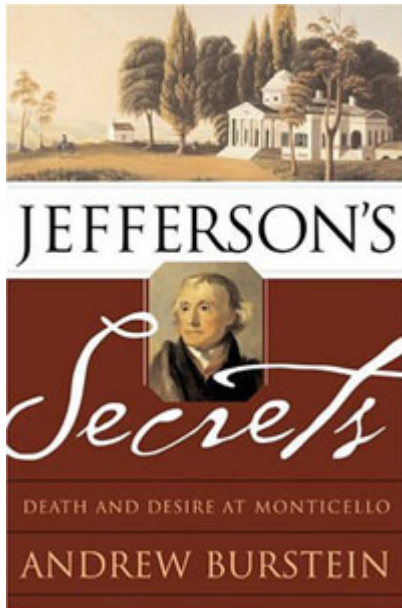


## The Not-So-Unfamiliar Jefferson



Andrew Burstein, *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

With his new book *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello*, Andrew Burstein contributes another volume to the ever-growing genre of founding-generation biography. Most recently authors have focused their attention on Benjamin Franklin, but in fact few members of that revered group, the Founding Fathers, have escaped scholarly (and popular) analysis. Unlike many of his predecessors, though, Burstein is not interested in celebrating the virtues of his subject or attacking him as a hypocrite. Instead, he seeks to create a middle ground, a corrective for others to follow. The author aspires to present an examination of Thomas Jefferson on his own terms, as he would have seen himself, and ultimately, as a man few present-day readers would recognize. In

other words, Burstein is “interested in the unfamiliar that was familiar to Jefferson” (2).

To accomplish this goal, Burstein redirects his reader’s attention away from the ever-popular portions of the third president’s long and distinguished political career and asks the audience to focus on Jefferson’s retirement years and the world of medical enlightenment he inhabited. It is in this time and amidst this context that Burstein claims to have discovered “a relatively uncensored Jefferson” and a rich language of eighteenth-century health science, which together finally reveal the “secrets [that] were hidden in plain view” (283).

Most readers recognize that Thomas Jefferson was a man of the Enlightenment. Like many of his contemporaries, he believed in the individual’s capacity to manipulate, control, regulate, and reform human society. He was constantly experimenting, searching for ways to improve the world he inhabited in practical and socially meaningful ways. Monticello embodied his spirit of improvement more than any other artifact of his life. For Burstein, though, the rational, enlightened Jefferson so familiar to most Americans is representative of only half the man. He declares that to understand the real Jefferson, Jefferson as he saw himself, readers need to understand his “imagination,” particularly as it was informed by the medical Enlightenment. Throughout his public career Jefferson described political contests and evaluated his political friends and enemies by employing the language of the body. As he promoted his own vision of an agrarian republic, for example, Jefferson characterized his opponents as “sickly, weakly, timid” men whose unrestrained pursuit of power and aristocratic tendencies were “thoroughly unhealthy” (57).

Why not, asks Burstein, explore how the third president’s medical ideas might have shaped his private world? Accordingly, Burstein frames his discussion of Jefferson’s retirement amidst his family in terms of his medical sensibility. He concludes that Jefferson’s determination to achieve a balance of felicity and tranquility, a supremely healthy home life, led him to cultivate and maintain strong affectionate and sentimental feelings for his family. Even though the public (and most often celebrated) Jefferson was an austere, rational man, he was consistently passionate about his family. His strong familial affections, however, had little impact on his view of women. As Burstein observes, “Jefferson . . . held fast to rather conventional notions of a woman’s role at home and in society,” a view that persisted even as his own daughter and granddaughter exhibited talents and imaginations that should have undermined his confidence in such a belief. As any scholar might predict, Burstein’s Jefferson “thought that a healthy republic was one in which every inherently passionate female was transformed into a dutiful wife and nurturing mother” (88). While most of what the reader learns in these two chapters is hardly surprising, Burstein enriches our understanding of the very private side of Jefferson by reframing the discussion within a context of his nineteenth-century physiological ideas.

Where Burstein seeks to gain the most from reconstructing Jefferson's medical sensibility is by using it to explain how and why the Sage of Monticello cultivated a long-term relationship with Sally Hemings. According to Burstein, Jefferson's understanding of medical theory would have led him to conclude that regular sexual activity was required to maintain his health. Additionally, these same medical ideas could have led Jefferson to determine that Sally Hemings, who was of mixed racial heritage and thought of as "nearly white" by her contemporaries, was more akin to a white servant than a black slave. When combined with his fascination with Greek society and culture, which accepted, even expected, men to enjoy the services of a concubine, Burstein claims that it would have been perfectly logical for Jefferson to maintain a relationship with one of his slaves. It is this collection of contextual evidence that allows the author to declare that "the most reasonable cultural explanation still appears to be that Jefferson found a healthy, fruitful female to bear children for him, whom he supported just as an ancient Greek man of honor . . . would have done. What in modern times appears as the selfish pursuit of physical gratification," he reminds the reader, "was easily rationalized by the medical literature of Jefferson's age" (182-86).

Burstein's attempt to explain the Jefferson-Hemings controversy is intriguing and innovative, but it is difficult to ignore that the author makes his claims without the benefit of direct evidence. While it is certainly true that Jefferson's library contained several medical treatises, that many of his intimate friends and correspondents were medical doctors, and that he suffered from a variety of physical maladies that refocused his attention on his body during that last decades of his life, Jefferson never appears to have applied the ideas he absorbed, or discussed his personal sexual habits in the terms Burstein describes. Perhaps one way to address the absence of direct evidence would have been to situate Jefferson within a group of contemporaries who behaved and made the very decisions Burstein suggests. But that context is missing. Instead, the reader is presented with an emotional, feeling, affectionate man happily ensconced at Monticello, an image designed to replace the more conventional understanding of Jefferson as a rational and curious, but aloof, man isolated on a distant mountain top. In his defense, Burstein never claims to substitute context for evidence. He does caution the reader to approach this book with an open mind (4) and confesses that "we can do no more than speculate" given Jefferson's silence on the issue (182). Still, the confidence with which Burstein moves beyond his own qualifications can be troubling.

While it is probably safe to conclude that he meant to keep the specifics of his relationship with the Hemings family a secret, Jefferson clearly possessed a strong desire to provide posterity with a clear understanding of his public life. According to Burstein, Jefferson's pursuit of private tranquility and felicity constantly competed with his growing concern for, and even fear of, a Federalist resurgence in the 1820s. As they competed for power just before the emergence of the second party system, national politicians appropriated the legacy of the Revolution to legitimize their policies and their claim to

authority. Even more frightening for Jefferson, though, was the unchallenged emergence of Federalists' interpretations of the Revolution. Although he consistently professed a desire to remain aloof of political controversy, Jefferson increasingly felt compelled to enter the political fray by regulating the use of his own legacy. He attempted to do this by encouraging the publication of Republican histories. Initially, he sought to correct the historical record by soliciting authors and offering advice on content from behind the scenes. But as each person he approached rejected his call to public service, Jefferson concluded that only a "chronicle of his letters and other papers would" accurately "display his convictions . . . tell the truth and do the country good" (231). While Burstein's Jefferson remained situated in his own private world at Monticello during the last decades of his life, his passionate regard for the nation's political future constantly pulled him away from his private concerns. In the end, Jefferson could not restrain himself from engaging in historiographical battles designed to promote his own partisan agenda.

Burstein is most provocative and imaginative, and the book is most intriguing, when he is exploring the "Jefferson-Hemings puzzle," as he terms it (158). Here he creatively, if at times problematically, addresses the absence of any direct, or even inferential, evidence by reconstructing Jefferson's medical understanding of sexuality. At the very least, his suggestions will provoke considerable debate both in and outside academic circles. Disappointingly, though, Burstein offers very little that is unfamiliar about Thomas Jefferson. His discussions of the Sage of Monticello's views on women, race, history, and religion are eloquently presented, but not really ground breaking. Perhaps most ironically, Burstein aspires to place an emotional, imaginative, feeling, and, ultimately, private Jefferson next to the rational, aloof, and aggressive public politician that has dominated the nation's memory of him. Yet, the sections most readers will remember insist that the Jefferson who maintained a long-standing relationship and fathered children with a enslaved woman could do so precisely because he was a distant, rational, dispassionate man more concerned with maintaining a regimen of physical health than revealing his innermost feelings and passions, even to the family he loved so strongly.

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