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Remarks for Columbia Seminar on New York Worthies
Columbia University, December 10, 2004

First of all, a few words on biography. For scripture, I turn to Plutarch's Life of Alexander where he famously distinguishes Biography from History.

"It must be born in mind that my design is not to write Histories, but Lives. And the most glorious exploits do not furnish us with the clearest discoveries of vice or virtue in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest informs us better of the characters and indentations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments or the bloodiest battles. . . ."

I think it was Morris's uninhibited "expressions or jests," as Plutarch put it, that first inspired me to look at the "Life" of Gouverneur Morris.

I first met Morris perhaps 30 years ago when I discovered his European diary covering the turbulent years of the French Revolution. I met him again when I was invited to curate the exhibition "The Eye Of Thomas Jefferson" at the National Gallery of Art. As the two men overlapped each other in Paris in 1789, observing many of the same characters and illuminating the same scenes but drawing quite different conclusions on their significance, my interest in the man increased when I worked on Jefferson's diplomatic years in Paris.

The more I got to know Morris the more I became fascinated with the man as well as his role in public affairs. What appealed to me was, in Hamilton's words, the "exotic genius" of his personality rather than his at times extravagant performance in the public arena in the New York Constitutional Convention, the Continental Congress, the Convention of 1787 and his role as minister to France, staying at his post through the worst days of the Revolution.

Who could resist such a subject particularly when there were masses of papers and of course his intimate diary, which, unlike most such documents of the Founding generation, he never intended to publish. With his private diary we are allowed to peer behind the mask that virtually every Founding figure managed to wear at one time or another. In his patrician, Whigish indifference to the opinions of others, Morris was also indifferent to rigorously maintaining the kind of public disguise that Jefferson, Hamilton and even Washington worked so resolutely to keep in place.

To me, the thing that makes Morris the man so richly rewarding, entertaining and instructive is the astonishing depth of his critical self-knowledge. Much of this quality comes through in his diary but it is also evident at crucial junctures in

his life displaying an instinctive ability to play to his strengths, his virtues, while avoiding as best as he could positions that would exacerbate or expose his everyday human weaknesses, what his more Puritan colleagues called "vices."

Here are a couple of examples of what I am driving at.

In 1776 when Morris turned 24, at the outset of military action, he decided rightly that he was temperamentally much better suited "to the deliberations of the Cabinet" as he called it, than serving "in the glorious Labors of the Field" of the military. It was similar to the decision both Jay and Livingston both made at about the same time.

Or take the example of his reluctance to seek public, and, in particular, elective office, and to avoid as much as possible the need to court public approval and fame. In this seeming lack of personal ambition, he is quite distinguished not only from our other subjects today but from most of the central figures of his generation. While he accepted the implications of popular government, he knew he did not have what it took to be a successful politician. It was, in fact, their ambitions and appetite for public fame that caused the friendship of Jay, Hamilton and Livingston to finally fall apart. Only Morris remained on good, or at least civil, terms with all of them to the end of his life and as far as I know none of the three became his "enemy."

Along with his absence of the politician's self-delusions, another quality that impressed me was Morris's first-class mind combined with an irreverent, often irrepressible sense of humor, qualities that set him apart.

In his rational skepticism, his tolerance and curiosity, his insistence on evidence, not only was he a man of the Enlightenment, he shared values we continue to esteem as a foundation of modern trans-Atlantic liberalism. Neither religious or ideological certainty figured in his calculations of how best to organize a government or how to pursue a civilized existence.

He believed with Hamilton, Jay and Livingston in the vision of a dynamic central government and for Morris in particular, a government that encouraged a pluralistic society, a society that protected the rights of minorities: Catholics, Quakers, former Tories, slaves and even the American Indians then being exterminated on the Western frontier. I have often thought that the Huguenot heritage, not to mention their polyglot New York City upbringing that Morris, Jay and Hamilton shared may have more than a little to do with their varying degree of tolerance.

[And I should say that none of the labels tacked on to the author of the Preamble beginning with "We the People"—"conservative," "aristocrat," "reactionary," not to mention "rogue and libertine"—are particularly helpful in illuminating his striking, controversial personality.]

Now briefly to Morris's relationship with our other worthies.

First, Morris and Hamilton

In his eulogy of Hamilton, Morris leaves us with a fair summary of his final assessment of his brilliant, flawed friend. He was, of course, out of the country during Hamilton's rise and achievements during the Washington administration, which he nevertheless admired from his post in Paris. Both believed in an expansive, evolving Constitution although Hamilton's Public Credit and Banking Acts fairly took Morris's breath away as did Jefferson's later visionary decision to make the Louisiana Purchase which Morris supported.

But the contrast in the background and personalities the men could not have been more different. Morris came from a family of property, with two generations of men behind him who had wielded power while playing a part in the experiment of self-government.

While Morris with natural self-confidence rarely seemed to give a damn what others thought of him, Hamilton with his Dickensian childhood of poverty in the West Indies, was driven throughout his life by what others thought and expected of him. [Ron Chernow gives us a superb picture of Hamilton's wretched early years.]

In Morris's eye, the native of Nevis remained throughout his life an alien, an outsider both defining and limiting him as he sought the highest rung of leadership advancing with what Chernow calls Hamilton's "hyperthyroid" ambition.

Secondly, Morris and Jay

Here again we have a study in sharp contrasts not in family, background and social cast but in personalities. Being of the same breed and class and being cosmopolitan New Yorkers, the two men had much in common. Personally they too were united in their belief in a strong government founded on a solid foundation of checks and balances.

But while they both shared a French Huguenot heritage, the dyspeptic Jay's brand of Protestantism had a strong puritanical streak. Nothing reveals the contrast on "moral values" of the day than the letter Morris wrote to Jay, when Jay now in Paris reported that he had heard rumors that Philadelphia had fallen to the temptations of "Luxury."

"With respect for our taste for Luxury," Morris replied with his typically pragmatic, ironic argument, "do not grieve for it. Luxury is not so bad a thing as it is often supposed to be and if it were, still we must follow the course of Things and turn to Advantage what exists since we have not the Power either to annihilate it or create. The very definition of Luxury is as difficult as the Surpress of it, and if I were to declare my serious Opinion, it is that there is a lesser Proportion of Whores and Rogues in coaches than out of them. If I am mistaken,

I shall say with the poor Roman Catholic, it is a pleasing error, for my intimate Acquaintance is with those who ride in coaches."

Finally, Morris and Livingston

Between the four subjects of our attention today, it seems to me that Morris and Livingston have the most in common united by class, education and background. There remained a warm camaraderie throughout their lives even after Livingston bolted from the Federalist camp for the Jefferson's Republican party. First of all, both men were unapologetic hedonists, Epicures if you will, who frankly enjoyed the sensual pleasures of life without the slightest tinge of Puritanical guilt or Romantic angst.

With his shameless inner balance of pre-Freudian feelings, Morris often admitted that, "constitutionally he was the happiest of men." Only Benjamin Franklin and Livingston seemed blessed with such a worldly, sophisticated disposition.

One antidote that illuminates Morris's and Livingston's friendship involves a collection of the finest pre-Revolutionary French silver to come to America and is now in the Metropolitan Museum.

Morris was an avid collector of French decorative arts and bought some of the best royal belongings during the fire sale auctions at Versailles after the collapse of the monarchy in the 1790s. All was brought back to Morrisiana and in 1800 after the election of Jefferson, Morris offered a splendid set of massive tureens to the new president to furnish what Morris called the "presidential palace." With Morris's sales pitch, Jefferson, the democrat, was immediately overcome with temptation, saying that the pieces were "desirable in the first degree." In the end, as it so often happened with the third president, his pocket book could not match his taste. When he couldn't swing the deal since he had already overspent the allotment Congress had appropriated for presidential furnishings, Jefferson still wanted to buy part of the service. In a typically wry reply, Morris told the president that, as in the spirit of national unity after the bloody, divisive election, he thought it ought to somehow be kept together.

When Jefferson named Livingston minister to France, Morris convinced his friend, a consummate Francophile—he and Morris often wrote each other in French during the Revolution—that royal silver from the ancient regime was just the thing to impress the parvenu Bonaparte crowd in Paris. So Livingston bought it all. Two hundred years later, when the collection was given to the Metropolitan Museum by the Livingston family, it was labeled the *Livingston silver*, a twist that would have amused, and certainly not offended, Gouverneur Morris.