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Can Great Art Also Be Great History?

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KENNETH OWEN

On a street just off Times Square, you can nightly see one of the more unlikely crowds in New York. There's a sense of anticipation on the street; inside a theater that holds little more than a thousand paying customers, you can find an atmosphere rivaled only by the nation's largest sporting events. The air of excitement only builds when the production starts: the appearance of each character on stage is greeted with rapturous cheers. And the subject of this adulation is a figure more associated with constitutional and economic debate: Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. In producing a musical that has transcended Broadway and passed into the broader public consciousness, Lin-Manuel Miranda has achieved a remarkable feat. Americans aren't just discussing the American Revolution because their state educational standards demand it. They are talking about the late eighteenth century because it's cool.

As an early American historian, I have found myself caught between two contradictory reactions to this phenomenon. On the one hand, it is wonderful to see so many people enthused and energized by a tale of the American Founding. On the other, *Hamilton* portrays a distorted, if popular, version of early American history. Since the late 1990s, there have been a flurry of biographies of well-known (and lesser-known!) Founding Fathers, most famously David McCullough's (2001) biography of John Adams. Academics have vocally criticized these books for their very safe, traditional version of the American Founding, in which the visionary wisdom of a small coterie of individuals secured independence and greatness for posterity.

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More recent academic works have tended to focus either on unheralded contributors to the revolution (e.g., Young, Nash, and Raphael 2011) or on broader, structural historical currents. The attitude of the profession is perhaps best summed up by a collection of essays entitled *Beyond the Founders* (Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher 2004), in which a number of historians of the early republic examine ways in which political historians can look beyond the most elite officeholders to give a more rounded view of popular political activity in the late eighteenth century.

Hamilton stands somewhere strangely in the middle of these two camps. To celebrate the first secretary of the Treasury, a man who often relied on the patronage of George Washington and was never elected to federal political office, is a conservative choice that owes much to the personality-driven popular narratives of the Founding era. Yet in having Hamilton, his friends, and his enemies rap, dance, and verbally spar their way to forming a new government, Lin-Manuel Miranda presents the revolutionary elite as a vibrant, energetic, rambunctious crowd, in stark contrast to the fusty and distant figures often presented in high school textbooks. The race-conscious casting of the musical, in which all leading cast members are people of color, also modernizes traditional interpretations of the Founding era. Indeed, the politics of the twenty-first century clearly lurk beneath the surface of the script.

Alexander Hamilton the character has clearly been finely tuned to appeal to a modern urban audience. A scrappy immigrant from the Caribbean, “coming up from the bottom,” Hamilton arrives in New York, “the greatest city in the world,” where “you can be a new man.”¹ Beside the gushing tributes to the musical’s home city, *Hamilton* has received accolades for its race-conscious casting; several references in the songs also portray Hamilton as an abolitionist. One of the biggest cheers in the whole performance comes when the Marquis de Lafayette remarks to Hamilton that as “immigrants—we get the job done!”

For all the modernity of presentation, though, *Hamilton*’s narrative hews to a deeply traditional interpretation of the American Founding. Miranda has frequently acknowledged that the musical was inspired by Ron Chernow’s (2004) eight-hundred-page biography, and the narrative of the play does little to challenge Chernow’s hagiographic treatment of Hamilton. Almost anything Hamilton touches in his military or political career turns to gold; his failings are explained away as purely personal (most notably his affair with Maria Reynolds). The play has thrust many fresh faces into the national consciousness, and Miranda’s deep love of both Broadway musicals and rap music lends the production a remarkably vibrant creativity. But, at heart, *Hamilton* remains a deeply familiar story—the hero narrative of the revolution familiar from McCullough (2001), Chernow (2004), and Joseph Ellis (1997)² recorded to a hip-hop soundtrack.

1. Quotations from *Hamilton* are from my recollection of memorable lyrics in viewing the musical and my listening to the lyrics on the soundtrack. They all are available in Miranda and McCarter 2016.

2. Ellis’s book *American Sphinx* is a biography of Thomas Jefferson.

The historical imagination required simply to tell Hamilton's life in this manner is substantial; for Miranda to have achieved this in such an engaging and entertaining manner is remarkable. For starters, the production has to maintain some narrative focus while covering more than thirty years of history in about three hours. Although *Hamilton* certainly takes some liberties with historical details, many deviations are necessary to avoid overcomplicating an already long story. For example, it doesn't affect the overarching interpretation that the onstage Philip Hamilton, Hamilton's first son, is killed in a duel before the election of 1800 rather than in 1801. Similarly, the musical implies that lingering bitterness over the outcome of the election of 1800 rather than the New York gubernatorial election of 1804 pushed the Burr–Hamilton relationship from acrimony into violence. Given that the long-running feud provides the backbone of the musical's structure, the precise reason for pistols at dawn is neither here nor there.

The broader interpretation taken by the musical, though, is one that academic historians have criticized for many years. Alexander Hamilton is held up as an exemplary political character—a charming, intelligent, overconfident risk taker who seizes the mettle at every opportunity to lead his “young, scrappy and hungry” nation to independence and future greatness. This is a well-worn trope; John Adams's recent ascendancy to a high ranking among American presidents owes much to David McCullough's (2001) Pulitzer Prize-winning biography; other figures such as Washington and Jefferson have inspired several weighty tomes (Ellis 1997; Ferling 2009; Meachem 2012). Academic historians have largely rejected these narratives for their oversimplification of the revolutionary era. They have reacted in particular against the focus on a small number of individuals, as if the founding of a nation of millions were due solely to the efforts of a handful of elite men. They especially resist the idea that “character” provides a meaningful substitute for historical context. In an era when politicians are held in low esteem by the general public, such historical interpretations become a reliable lament: if only we, today, had our own Washington or Jefferson!

Hamilton, of course, allows a different take on these tropes. He was among the youngest of the revolutionary generation—a contemporary of James Madison but considerably younger than Franklin, Washington, Adams, and Jefferson. To say he had a challenging upbringing is to understate matters considerably; with the possible exception of Franklin, who ran away to Philadelphia to establish his own printing business, no other Founding Father even came close to experiencing Hamilton's low-status, poverty-stricken upbringing. And unlike the Virginian elites, Hamilton's connections with slavery were more indirect (the Schuyler family, into which he married, had significant mercantile ties with the slave trade). Though Hamilton could not be described as antislavery in any modern sense (and certainly had no abolitionist credentials in the way the musical claims), he bears less-direct personal culpability than many of his contemporaries. This allows Hamilton to be presented not only as a visionary but also as one much more attuned to modern sensibilities on class and race.

The “Founders chic” interpretation can thus be transmogrified into something suitably progressive.

This interpretation is notable for its enormous omissions, which are stark throughout the musical. Hamilton was a controversial character throughout his political career because he so frequently voiced opinions that were out of step with contemporary public opinion. For example, Hamilton was a committed militarist throughout much of his political career. In 1783, with the young United States struggling to establish trade with other foreign powers, he was at the heart of the Newburgh Conspiracy, a failed attempt at a military coup. In the late 1790s, when America feared war with France and Federalists sought to suppress political dissent, Hamilton went even further than simply supporting the Alien and Sedition Acts: he used Washington’s patronage to usurp higher-ranking generals as John Adams prepared to form the New Army. His fervent hope was that this army could be used to put down Democratic-Republican opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts in Virginia and Kentucky. Not once does *Hamilton* mention his favoring of military above civilian leadership.

Another example: Hamilton’s known admiration for the British fiscal-military state. Although foreign policy features heavily in “Cabinet Rap Battle #2,” much less is made of Hamilton’s lengthy speech at the Constitutional Convention. Burr appears on stage to mock Hamilton’s six-hour monologue, but when it comes to the detail, all the audience is told is that Hamilton proposed “his own form of government”—conveniently leaving out the fact that he spoke in favor of instituting a monarchy in the United States. When such important details are left out, the political controversies of the 1790s appear as mere personal battles rather than as deep-seated fears stemming from Hamilton’s repeated promotion of the interests of wealthy merchants, speculators, and social elites. Hamilton’s political enemies saw his belief that society could prosper only from the top down, with a well-respected and well-rewarded social hierarchy, as dangerously aristocratic. The audience of *Hamilton*, though, are shown none of these beliefs.

Hamilton is all too often told as a story with little reference to the substance of political conflict in the 1790s. This is particularly surprising, for when Miranda first performed the musical’s opening number at a White House poetry evening in 2009, he spoke glowingly of Hamilton’s belief that the written word could make a difference (“Lin-Manuel Miranda Performs” 2009). The content of Hamilton’s ideas, though, are all but absent from the musical itself. Hamilton’s contribution to the *Federalist Papers* is praised not for its quality but for its quantity. (One wonders whether the *Federalist Papers* would have been twice as good if Hamilton had penned 102 essays.) In the highly entertaining “Cabinet Rap Battle #1,” Hamilton’s defense of his financial plan rests primarily on ad hominem attacks on Jefferson. Miranda succeeds in creating a cast of engaging, bombastic characters. But the reason Hamilton left a trail of controversy wherever he trod was not simply the fact that he was an aggressive personality. It was that his ideas were unpopular and often undemocratic.

Hamilton instead portrays all of Hamilton's failings as failings of personality or of character. Although the musical does recognize him as a divisive figure—After all, what else would provide the dramatic tension?—the substantive grounds of disagreements are subsumed by personality clashes. When Hamilton's opponents gloatingly celebrate that "he will never be President now!" it is because of his sexual impropriety, not the deep unpopularity of his elitist economic plans, which many viewed as close to crony capitalism. Hamilton was too divisive, even within his own Federalist Party, to have been a serious contender for the only elected national office.

The politics of character even get in the way of the musical's presentation of Hamilton's signature achievement. The compromise with Jefferson and Madison—in which the Virginians orchestrated congressional support for a national bank in return for situating the national capital on the Potomac River—is presented primarily not as a policy or even a political victory but as an embodiment of Aaron Burr's frustrated personal ambitions. In crafting his "scrappy immigrant" story, Miranda makes Hamilton's rough edges those of an overeager teenager rather than the attributes of a man who mistrusted democracy, preferred policy solutions that favored an economic and social elite, and owed most of his political positions to patronage and nepotism rather than to the approbation of the public.

To the historian of the early republic, then, *Hamilton* fails to give a fair and accurate reflection of the country's early years. To state this so baldly, though, seems churlish. *Hamilton* is a production of real quality. As a play, it deserves the accolades it has received in almost all quarters. The performances by its leading cast members, especially Leslie Odom Jr. as Aaron Burr, Daveed Diggs as Thomas Jefferson, and Phillipa Soo as Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, will long be remembered in Broadway folklore. The choreography of the performance, utilizing a rotating circular stage, is also remarkably creative. In several scenes, leading figures are able to step into and out of historical events to provide personal reflections on key moments. As a theatrical production, it is creative, intricate, emotional, and hugely entertaining. In short, it succeeds in being great art. But does that give it the right to masquerade as history?

It certainly cannot be argued that Miranda and his writing team did not do their historical research. Historians of the early republic will recognize many academic works referenced in the songs, especially Joanne Freeman's book *Affairs of Honor* (2001) in the lyrics to "Ten Duel Commandments." Some of the subtler historical interpretation, too, comes through in the musical's use of musical and theatrical form. The original casting call made it clear that each Founding Father was based on a combination of different rap or hip-hop figures; these styles are used onstage as a means of signifying the generational divide between many of the important figures. This is achieved particularly well in "One Last Time," where Hamilton's authorship of George Washington's Farewell Address is signified by the two characters performing a duet. This subtlety is certain to appeal to the academic historian. I wonder, though, whether these interpretations are too finely woven into the fabric of the production for the casual observer to notice.

Miranda similarly uses lyrical, musical, and choreographic callbacks to highlight running continuities in Hamilton's life. The staging of all the duel scenes is nearly identical. Lyrically, the question "Why do you write like you're running out of time?" is posed repeatedly, with greater urgency as Hamilton becomes inextricably tied to the Maria Reynolds controversy and with great poignancy as the audience recognizes that Hamilton is nearing his fatal duel. Musically, King George III appears three times with different takes on the same tune, signaling Great Britain's changing reactions to events in the colonies. Structured in this way, the musical is thus able to highlight important lines of historical analysis and interpretation while still moving through the timeline of Hamilton's life at a dizzying pace.

These creative uses of theatrical form, though, do little to mask the traditional nature of the narrative. When true villainy is needed, the British step out of the shadows, performing in older and less trendy musical styles. (It is perhaps notable here that the two Loyalists who appear in the production—Samuel Seabury and King George III—are also the only roles in which white performers are cast.) Despite the popularity of the Schuyler sisters proclaiming in their opening number that they will compel Jefferson "to include women in the sequel" to the Declaration of Independence, the portrayal of the female characters is also very traditional, with the women of the play appearing primarily as devices to further develop Hamilton's character.

When considering the errors and omissions of Miranda's interpretation of early American history, it is important to note that this is not his first attempt at bringing a scrappy immigrant narrative to the Broadway stage. His musical *In The Heights* received great Broadway acclaim in the mid-2000s, with thirteen Tony nominations and four Tony Awards, including Best Musical. For all the excitement in the theater world, though, *In The Heights* never permeated the cultural zeitgeist. As Miranda himself noted, that musical needed critical acclaim to remain on stage ("Broadway Carpool Karaoke" 2016). *Hamilton* was never in such dire straits. It has reached national consciousness precisely because it has wrapped itself in the cloak of history. If the musical had featured fictional soldiers rapping their way through revolution, then theater aficionados and some historians may have taken notice. It was only by making bold claims about how to understand the American Founding that Miranda attracted such widespread attention.

Miranda is well aware that his musical is just part of a broader historical debate—the final number, "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story," is just one of several nods the show gives to historiography, the study of writing history. Many of Eliza's songs directly address the question of how someone is written into or out of the historical narrative, recognizing that parts of the past are simply unrecoverable. This recognition is most powerfully indicated in the musical when Eliza burns all of her correspondence with Alexander—consciously denying posterity a chance to understand their marriage after Alexander's pamphlet on the Reynolds affair had destroyed their marital privacy.

It is in establishing an emotional connection with figures of the past that *Hamilton* is most successful. I never thought I would tear up at the memory of Alexander Hamilton, but when the ensemble sang of Alexander and Eliza “going through the unimaginable” after their son Philip’s death, it was hard to keep myself together. The nature of the relationships between political figures is also far more vivid in the musical than can be captured in text. Washington and Hamilton snapping angrily at each other like a parent and child simultaneously highlights the closeness of that relationship and the generational divide between their political outlooks. Both Aaron Burr’s calculated scheming and Thomas Jefferson’s bombastic, swaggering assertiveness give the musical dramatic foils for Hamilton.

But it is in those personal relationships that it is also easiest to take historical liberties; after all, emotion is notoriously difficult to re-create through traditional historical evidence, and in many cases the full substance of personal interactions is quite literally lost to the past. It is certainly part of the historian’s task to get people to empathize with the objects of their study; a history with no definable stakes too easily passes into dusty antiquarianism. In inviting a modern urban audience into the lives of many Founding Fathers, *Hamilton* certainly provides a gateway through which the curious can reflect on broader patterns of history.

At the same time, however, history is more than just an imaginative playground for creative types. It derives its power from its authenticity. The events portrayed on stage aren’t high stakes purely because they have been manufactured for dramatic tension. They have dramatic tension because they were real events in which the future of the United States hung in the balance. The revolution retains its cultural relevance today because America’s Founding myths are so central to national identity. To that extent, then, portraying Hamilton as a great man—and thus, by extension, as a man whose leadership and political style should be admired and emulated—must adhere to the historical record. Alexander Hamilton isn’t simply a figure of entertainment. His writings in *The Federalist* form a not insubstantial part of recent Supreme Court jurisprudence. Decisions he made in establishing the Treasury Department and the ensuing fallout framed American economic policy for centuries. Hamilton isn’t an important historical figure because of what he represented; he is an important historical figure because of what he did. Evaluating his politics and his ideology reveals more to us about the present than trying to recast him as a sympathetic personality.

The question thus remains: What, exactly, does *Hamilton* encourage its audience to reflect on? Like the “Founders chic” interpretations of the Founding Fathers, *Hamilton* is more a study of character than a detailed explication of historical context. It works better as a morality tale than as a historical narrative. As a consequence, the historical questions it raises are buried or left implicit. Enough referential nods are included for the historian to feel on the inside of the production, but the musical does not examine these references in any particularly deep or systematic manner. *So what?* one might say. After all, Broadway’s primary goal is to entertain, and *Hamilton*

doesn't fail on that score. But great history doesn't have the liberty to turn the past into mere entertainment. The history profession has developed an exacting series of norms precisely to protect the study of the past from being either a mere recounting of past events or simply a mirror through which we view the present. Especially in a society where modern understandings and interpretations of the revolution not only can be used as a political cudgel but also literally define questions of law, a production that places the revolution on such a high pedestal should be examined for its interpretive weight.

All too often *Hamilton* uses history more as a comfort blanket than as a serious means to enhance popular understandings of the American Revolution. For a production that has been heralded (and often has implicitly presented itself) as the best hope to shift popular discussion of the revolution in a more progressive direction, this use is particularly problematic. The historical philosophies underpinning *Hamilton's* narrative tell a very familiar story—an exceptionalist narrative; only this time the exceptionalism comes through Hamilton's ability to rise from the dregs of society to the very top. The characters who appear in *Hamilton* are certainly more energetic, more aggressive, and less white than in most recountings of the story. But the musical's top-down, elite-driven model of historical change isn't all that different from the Great Men narratives that have characterized popular historical understandings for generations. Where *Hamilton* does raise progressive questions, it is more by way of presentation than by way of substance. That means those questions are often muted, allowing the casual observer to retreat to the comforting, comfortable narratives he or she can find on the shelves of a Barnes & Noble. It is a shame that such great entertainment and such great art fail to examine the complexities of the past more fully.

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