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Alexander Hamilton

The Wrong Hero for Our Age

— ◆ —

BILLY G. SMITH

Alexander Hamilton may have been one of the few people who actually would *not* like the play *Hamilton*. He would not have objected to being the center of attention because he had an inflated ego—not quite as great as Donald Trump’s, but what person’s is? However, Hamilton would have been dismayed at the sight of himself singing, dancing, and intermingling on a stage with so many common, ordinary people. Even though he lived a rags-to-riches story, he wanted desperately to separate himself from his past and from the “rabble” (as elite Americans referenced the lower and middle classes at the time). Hamilton, the man, would have been made socially uncomfortable by singers and dancers of the common sort.

In political terms, Hamilton envisioned himself as a member of the wealthy, educated, rational part of humanity who should restrain the democratic “leveling” tendencies (Hamilton’s term) that reverberated deeply during the era of the American Revolution. Among the most well-known Founding Fathers, Hamilton was the most conservative—to the point of being a reactionary. As the script glosses over, for example, Hamilton gave a six-hour speech at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 advocating that the new nation should return to a monarchy or at the very least have a president and senate elected or appointed for life—after which the stunned delegates moved along to other business. Alexander Hamilton, the real person, is thus not a good fit for America today, either socially or politically, making it all the more surprising and impressive that the musical has garnered him so much favorable attention.

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It has been able to do so in part because of the power of the play itself; its production simply overwhelms audiences, leaving many of them stunned, not unlike the convention delegates in response to Hamilton's speech. Lin-Manuel Miranda and his creative team are extraordinarily hard-working geniuses, having produced one of the greatest pieces of art and entertainment of the early twenty-first century. The brilliant multiracial, multicultural casting of the play in a hip-hop musical style has reverberated intensely among Americans, akin to how the democratic, egalitarian spirit resonated during the American Revolution.

Many of the play's sentiments speak directly to our current political debates. The mutually congratulatory joint declaration by Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette that "[i]mmigrants: we get the job done!" (Miranda and McCarter 2016, 121) draws enthusiastic, sustained applause. It is little wonder that the musical has earned eleven Tony Awards, a Pulitzer Prize, and near universal acclaim. With scalpers routinely receiving more than \$1,000 per ticket, this piece of art is so outstanding that it may even be worth considering taking out a home-equity mortgage to buy tickets for you and your family.

In his marvelous book about the play, which details the musical allusions to the classics of rap and Broadway show tunes, Miranda brags about the production's faithfulness to history, challenging "historians to take this seriously" (Miranda and McCarter 2016, 32). A great many historians, most of whom are protective of historical precision, have taken the challenge, not only writing about the accuracy of the play but even organizing panels at conferences. Most of the problematic parts, from my perspective, arise out of interpretation rather than factual error. And, of course, artists have every right to interpret history to create plays, films, novels, and the like.

Many of Hamilton's contemporaries would not have recognized the character depicted by the playwright. Miranda acknowledges some of Hamilton's shortcomings, such as his elitism, which continued throughout his life; he warned of the "poison" of "democracy" in one of his last writings before his duel with Aaron Burr.¹ Miranda also, if understandably, makes one of Hamilton's affairs crucial to the romantic tension in the play. A number of Americans at the time, however, were shocked by Hamilton's reactionary speech at the Constitutional Convention. His publication of his mistress's love letters as evidence that he was not a crook also drew considerable scorn. Abigail Adams weighed in on the latter issue, calling Hamilton a "cock sparrow," noting that "I have read his Heart in his Wicked Eyes; many a time the very Devil is in them, [and] they are lasciviousness itself."² John Adams agreed, complaining that

1. Alexander Hamilton to Theodore Sedgwick, July 10, 1804, *Founders Online*, National Archives, n.d., at <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-26-02-0001-0264> (accessed September 12, 2016).

2. Abigail Adams to John Adams, January 28, 1797, *Founders Online*, National Archives, n.d., <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-11-02-0271> (accessed September 12, 2016). Quotes are silently modernized for ease of reading.

Hamilton was “always pretending to Morality” but that his “debauched Morals” were comparable to those of the raconteur Benjamin Franklin.³

Hamilton also drew criticism for being too brutal in his quest for power, fame, and certain ideological goals. Like many of his generation, Hamilton saw the War for Independence as a means of self-advancement. Throughout the administrations of both George Washington and John Adams, Hamilton continually advocated military action, a strong army, and even war with France as a means to strengthen the national government as well as his own power. “That man would in my mind,” Abigail wrote, “become a second [Napoleon] Bonaparte if he was possessed of equal power.”⁴ Her husband concurred that Hamilton schemed so that “he himself might be the Dictator.”⁵ The views expressed by both Abigail and John Adams were colored by the internal wrangling within the Federalist Party, but a great many other Americans found Hamilton’s behavior and his over-the-top ambition distasteful.

Miranda leans too heavily, sometimes almost exclusively, on the biography of Alexander Hamilton by Ron Chernow (2004), a very traditional account that occasionally verges on hagiography. Chernow’s account is part of the “Great Man” theory of history. During the past decades, scholars and teachers have adopted different approaches to help us understand the vast array of actors and actresses that participated in fashioning American history.

The important “men” in *Hamilton*—and it is virtually all men except for the romantic interests served by “the sex” (as women were often called by the men at the time)—operate in a vacuum. They debate, argue, and fight with virtually no influence from outside the major “room” that Burr so elegantly sings about wanting to be “in.” However, common people staffed the militias as well the Continental Army for seven long years during the war. Ordinary men and women also protested in the streets, from the Stamp Act riots to the Boston Massacre to the Tea Parties, helping to cause the break with Britain. Meanwhile, a poor artisan such as Thomas Paine spoke to and for common people, articulating why America should be both independent and republican rather than the monarchy that Hamilton hesitated to condemn.

Miranda is brilliant in his multiracial casting as a challenge to white actors’ monopoly of historical roles in the theater. His play also reminds audiences of the emergence of an antislavery movement inspired in part by the radical rhetoric of American revolutionaries. However, he neglects to include on stage any black people who actually lived during the era. But black lives mattered in the eighteenth century just as much as they do now.

3. John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 9, 1797, *Founders Online*, National Archives, n.d., <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-11-02-0251> (accessed September 12, 2016).

4. Abigail Smith Adams to William Smith, July 7, 1798, *Founders Online*, National Archives, n.d., <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-0129> (accessed September 12, 2016).

5. John Adams to Abigail Adams, January 9, 1797, *Founders Online*, National Archives, n.d., <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-11-02-0251> (accessed September 12, 2016).

As scholars have abandoned the exclusive study of famous great men to write a more inclusive history, they have discovered that thousands of African Americans envisioned the American Revolution era as a time to carve out their own liberty and independence. Many took seriously Thomas Paine's declaration that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again" (1776, 64). Slaves, who accounted for 20 percent of America's population, often succeeded in their goal of personal freedom. As the new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., highlights, many black people fought for their liberty, both for the revolutionaries and for the loyalists. They also fled bondage during the chaos of war or bought themselves out of thralldom when possible. The ones who liberated themselves established the first free black communities in northern cities during the 1790s.

Hamilton promises to have an impact on Broadway similar to that of musicals written by African Americans during the 1920s. These musicals helped popularize the relatively new countercultural art form of jazz as it moved from bordellos and speakeasies to Broadway stages, thereby solidifying the 1920s as the "Jazz Age," in the phrase coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald. As *Hamilton* travels and is performed throughout the nation during the next few years, it likely will seep deeply into upper-middlebrow popular culture, especially that of older, more affluent white people who have largely ignored rap. If the musical proves to be transformative in this fashion, then it will become an even more important cultural event.

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