

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Kingsborough Community College

2019

Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past

Ryan McKinney

CUNY Kingsborough Community College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/197

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past

***Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past.* Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter, eds. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018; Pp. 399.**

A new addition to *Hamilton* scholarship, *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past* marks another valuable collaboration between its editors, Renee C. Romano and Claire Bond Potter. Consisting of fifteen insightful essays, the book presents adroitly composed analyses of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* as well as its surrounding historical, cultural, social, political, and racial implications. Constructed by historians from a wide array of fields ranging from American Studies and theatre studies to history and Africana Studies, *Historians on Hamilton* takes up "the challenge that Miranda himself made to us when he was just beginning to write the show, 'I want the historians to take this seriously'" (6). The scholars herein rigorously examine the musical's relationship to history and how history is made, the claim of *Hamilton* as a revolutionary musical, and the musical's proposed theatrical innovations and historical omissions.

Following the introduction that sets up the tone and content, the book is divided into three sections: "Act I: The Script," "Act II: The Stage," and "Act III: The Audience," each consisting of five essays. The first part begins with William Hogeland's essay, "From Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* to *Hamilton: An American Musical*," which posits that any historical inaccuracies in the musical are due, in part, to not only imprecisions in the source material (Ron Chernow's biography), but also a lack of necessary criticism of Chernow's work from professional historians. This section also features essays by Joanne B. Freeman, Lyra D. Monteiro, and Leslie M. Harris, who explore Alexander Hamilton's politics, the complications associated with the casting of *Hamilton*, and New York City's historical past with slavery, respectively. The section closes with Catherine Allgor's illuminating essay, "'Remember...I'm Your Man': Masculinity, Marriage, and Gender in *Hamilton*," which introduces readers to "coverture, or the system of laws that defined women's subordinate legal status" (96). Allgor showcases coverture's absence from the musical and advocates for historians and theatregoers to use *Hamilton*'s popularity as a means to understand coverture and its legacy in the contemporary political lexicon.

"Act II: The Stage" begins with three essays that view the musical as both history and entertainment: Michael O'Malley explores *Hamilton* and money, as well as Hamilton's policies as Treasury Secretary; David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey L. Pasley place *Hamilton* in the literary genre of "Founders Chic," defined as "admiring individual portraits of major leaders of the Early Republic like Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and Hamilton" (140); and Andrew M. Schocket details how *Hamilton* follows a series of genre conventions that inform how this specific historical period is typically portrayed on stage and screen. Elizabeth L. Wollman's and Brian Eugenio Herrera's respective essays offer resonant conclusions to this section. Wollman smartly tempers *Hamilton*'s status as a revolutionary musical by historicizing other uber-popular Broadway musicals while arguing that although *Hamilton* is innovative, it is also "a carefully honed product of musical theatre history" (215). Herrera's essay considers *Hamilton*'s theatrical context alongside other "presidential musicals" and notes both the importance of and the problems within the musical's casting practices. Also recognizing the musical's entrance into a "U.S. Latinx theater tradition" (238), Herrera highlights how the musical utilizes code-switching and signaling techniques to address Latinx audience members.

The final section opens with Jim Cullen's refreshing essay that recounts his development and teaching of a course on Hamilton and *Hamilton*, complete with a sample syllabus in the appendix. Act III continues with an essay by Patricia Herrera on *Hamilton*'s use of Hip Hop through the lens of her family's cross-country trip through the United States' national parks. Next, by viewing *Hamilton* as a work of art rather than scholarly history, Joseph M. Adelman's essay provides a necessary counterpoint to some of the other chapters. The collection's co-editors author the two concluding essays. Renee C. Romano's piece, "*Hamilton*: A New American Civic Myth," posits how conservatives and progressives in this country advocate for versions of American history that align with their differing politics, and that, in spite of this, *Hamilton* has still managed to strike a chord of agreement. Claire Bond Potter investigates *Hamilton*'s social media life by documenting the vastness of #HamFam (the Hamilton Family) and its current and future site as a digital archive. The final pages of the book consist of an appendix that offers the aforementioned course syllabus as well as a Hamilton/*Hamilton* chronology.

This book is a worthy addition to popular culture studies, history, American Studies, Africana Studies, Latinx Studies and, of course, theatre and musical theatre studies. The book aims to serve students and fans of *Hamilton*, though ardent fans of the #HamFam may be less appreciative of the essays that are critical of the musical. Regardless, academics are certain to find value in this publication, and the book is very accessible for the general reader. Like the recent special issue of *Studies in Musical Theatre* devoted to an exploration of the musical across twelve articles, many of the essays herein investigate *Hamilton* primarily as a theatrical work. That said, true to its title, history reigns supreme in this collection, serving as the primary lens through which the majority of the essays explore *Hamilton*, as well as its greater cultural, political, and societal effects. *Historians on Hamilton* successfully meets Miranda's challenge, presenting engaging essays in which accomplished historians do take *Hamilton* seriously and offer a range of perspectives on its place in, and depiction of, American history.

Ryan McKinney

Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York

The Journal of American Drama and Theatre

Volume 31, Number 3 (Spring 2019)

ISSN 2376-4236

©2019 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center