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World Wide Enough: Historiography, Imagination, and Stagecraft

Benjamin L. Carp

Is *Hamilton* good history? Or is this the wrong question? *Hamilton: An American Musical* is both an intriguing and imperfect vehicle for understanding the history of the American Revolutionary Era. The show is grounded in learned interpretation of archival sources. The show's writer, Lin-Manuel Miranda, drew extensively from Ron Chernow's well-researched biography, *Alexander Hamilton*. He and his co-creators also researched primary sources, quote from them extensively in the libretto, and use facsimiles of them on stage. Finally, the creators consulted other works to get a sense of historical context, while adding references to hip-hop, musical theater, films about the Revolutionary Era, and other sources.¹

At the same time, Miranda relied too heavily on Chernow, who exaggerated Alexander Hamilton's anti-slavery credentials and his sympathy with debtors, and deemphasized (or even celebrated) some of his more militaristic, elitist, and antidemocratic inclinations. Since there was little scholarly criticism of the biography when it appeared, however, current critics have been poorly equipped to engage in the debate over the quality of the musical's history now.²

Miranda told a story that focused on elite characters, missing opportunities to show how the Revolution and its conflicts affected—and was effected by—a broader swath of the

¹ Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton: An American Musical*, dir. Thomas Kail, produced by Sander Jacobs, Jill Furman, Jeffrey Seller and The Public Theater, The Public Theater and Richard Rodgers Theatre, New York, attended Feb. 22, March 8, Aug. 27, 2015; for quotations, I will use Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: the Revolution* (New York: Grand Central, 2016); see also Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004) [hereafter *HTR*]; for Miranda's discussion of source material, see Edward Delman, "How Lin-Manuel Miranda Shapes History," *Atlantic*, Sept. 29, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/lin-manuel-miranda-hamilton/408019/> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016).

² Andrew Schocket, "Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* Is Not Throwing Away Its Second Shot," *Process: A Blog for American History* (June 13, 2016), <http://www.processhistory.org/schocket-chernow/> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016); two substantive exceptions: William Hogeland, "Inventing Alexander Hamilton: The Troubling Embrace of the Founder of American Finance," *Boston Review* 32, 6 (Nov./Dec., 2007), 21–24; Andrew S. Trees, "The Importance of Being Alexander Hamilton," *Reviews in American History* 33, 1 (March 2005): 8–14. Few current critics have referenced the previous debate over New-York Historical Society's Alexander Hamilton exhibit (2004–5): see Gotham Center for New York City History, "Does NYC's Past Have a Future?" Oct. 2, 2004, <http://www.gothamcenter.org/past-special-projects/does-nycs-past-have-a-future> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016).

population. The show gives little sense of how the Revolution engaged with broader social and political movements, played out ideological differences, and overthrew some (but not all) entrenched institutions. The reasons for this are easy to explain: popular stage and screen performances demand a robust narrative plotline, and this demand perpetually draws popular narrators toward the well-documented “Big Six” Founders at the expense of broader and more complex phenomena. The result has been a series of Revolutionary Era stories with Manichean “heroes” and “villains,” which frustrates academicians who find this structure to be too simplistic for understanding history.

Finally, Miranda told a story with some very fierce female characters, who generally don’t display much historical agency and seem mostly to respond to what the male characters are doing. Richard Samuelson notes the “potent anachronism” of Angelica Schuyler Church asking for women’s equality in a fictive “sequel” to the Declaration of Independence, yet critics have still decried the show’s masculine tilt.³

What does the show actually say about the Revolution? “We won the war,” Hamilton says to Aaron Burr, “What was it all for?” *Hamilton* rather vaguely answers this question—it was about glory-seeking immigrants (never mind Hamilton’s material advantages), challenging a distant tyrant. The show is designed to reassure the audience about the righteousness of the American cause and the promise of the new nation (never mind the fate of the enslaved and dispossessed). The Constitution put the United States on a stable financial and military footing, free from foreign entanglements and petty domestic interests (and never mind the squeezed debtors, the Whiskey Rebellion, or the Alien and Sedition acts). Overall, the show serves up a pretty vanilla narrative. But before the audience can interrogate any of this too deeply, the

³ “The Schuyler Sisters,” *HTR*, 44; Richard Samuelson, “Hamilton Versus History,” *Claremont Review of Books* 16, 3 (summer 2016), 66; Hilton Als, “Boys in the Band,” *New Yorker* 91, 3 (March 9, 2015), 98.

show's plot becomes enmeshed in the petty rivalries of honor-bound elites and the personal tragedies of the Hamilton family, which—in the show's view—can be laid at the feet of Alexander's arrogance. Hamilton may be the protagonist of *Hamilton*, but he does not always come off as its hero. The show's second act, in particular, focuses on character (even invoking, “who'd you rather grab a beer with?” from the benighted 2000 election) rather than policy. Interestingly, the show has Eliza speculate that Hamilton could have done “so much more” if he'd only lived (specifically to abolish slavery, which is dubious); ultimately, however, *Hamilton* is more interested in the notion that his early death gave him less chance to shape his own legacy.⁴

David Hackett Fischer once said of Mel Gibson's movie, “*The Patriot* is to history as *Godzilla* was to biology.” And whatever its faults, *Hamilton* is better than *The Patriot* in its treatment of history and its treatment of race. Criticisms of Miranda's interpretation have been valid and welcome.⁵ It would be too dismissive to argue—as some of the show's defenders do—that *Hamilton* is merely entertainment and thereby beneath highbrow criticism; popular culture does matter, and it influences popular audiences, including students. On the other hand, it would be too much to claim that Miranda puts historians to shame by presenting Revolutionary history to a wider audience. History's practitioners should instead argue that he—or any popularizer—arrives at his achievements on their shoulders. Historians can and should have it both ways: take credit for what Miranda gets right, and criticize him for what he misses or gets wrong.

⁴ “Non-Stop,” “The Election of 1800,” “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?” *HTR* 142, 259, 281; “Who Would You Rather Sit Down and Have a Beer With ... Al Gore or George Bush? Sam Adams Taps Voters,” *Business Wire* (Oct. 17, 2000).

⁵ David Hackett Fischer, “Hubris, But No History,” *New York Times* (July 1, 2000), L, Opinion and Editorial, A2; for links to previous criticisms, see Cassandra Good, “Historians Take on Hamilton,” June 12, 2016, <https://cassandragood.wordpress.com/2016/06/12/historians-take-on-hamilton/> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016).

Historians are not responsible for an artist's mistakes, but they do (in general) lay the foundation for artists' interpretations.

In the end, "Is it good history?" is the wrong question. The audience already knows the show is not strict history, because the actors break into song, their movements are choreographed, and their references are flagrantly and joyfully anachronistic. The audience is asked to suspend belief—indeed, in interesting ways. Scholarly critics have only occasionally taken the holistic audience experience into account, and one suspects that this is because not all of them have been able to see the show.

One might more fruitfully ask, "Is it good for historians?" Miranda said he was trying to earn historians' respect, and he largely succeeds, for two reasons. The first boon to historians is the show's treatment of race and revolution. In February 2015, the *New Yorker* reported that Miranda and his creative team had been paying attention to two deaths involving police in 2014: Eric Garner in Staten Island on July 14, and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. "We're screaming 'Rise up,'" Miranda said, "and a lot of people are feeling that way." So while some critics have been horrified that the show has no *characters* of color and instead has a non-white cast playing white slaveholders, the fact that the cast members *are* people of color allows Miranda to connect the eighteenth-century Revolution to contemporary activism against police brutality. The show calls for an end to the "cycle of vengeance and death with no defendants," possibly referring to the non-indictment of police officers in these two cases and others. Again, the show has no non-white characters; does the color-conscious casting solve this problem or deflect from it like a stage musician? *Hamilton* makes use of "prophetic memory," using an innovative retelling of the American story to imagine a more racially egalitarian future. Hamilton himself was hardly an anti-slavery crusader, but Miranda argues for racial justice and

acceptance of immigrants. Is that surreal and provocative or just an offensive erasure of eighteenth-century people of color?⁶

Hamilton's progressive argument isn't solely applicable to issues of race and immigration. When producer Jeffrey Seller accepted the Tony award for *Hamilton*, he quoted the show—"How lucky we are to be alive right now!"—which had added poignancy mere hours after the June 12, 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Great theater heightens the audience's emotional responses not just to the show itself, but to the wider world. Such a response may well lead audiences to a more empathetic, broad-ranging, inclusive, and innovative investigation of the past.⁷

The show also makes a lively argument about historiographic practice, unlike most fictive treatments of history. *Hamilton* openly invites multiple interpretations and uses imaginative interventions to fill gaps in the historical record, just as historians do, and in doing so, the show actually enhances the public's understanding of the Revolution. At the very least, *Hamilton* encourages audiences to explore historical inquiries further. The show aids those who study and teach the Revolution by opening up questions about how historians analyze and interpret the past, with lines such as "You have no control/Who lives, who dies, who tells your story"; "Thomas claims..." and "We'll never really know what got discussed"; "I'm erasing myself from the narrative...Let future historians wonder..."; "History obliterates/In every picture

⁶ "My Shot," *HTR*, 28; Rebecca Mead, "All about the Hamiltons," *New Yorker* (February 9, 2015), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/09/hamiltons> (accessed Nov. 11, 2016); on "prophetic memory" (for which I thank Seth Cotlar), see Harvey J. Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 7; Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (San Diego and New York: Harvest Book; Harcourt Brace and Co., 1981).

⁷ "Schuyler Sisters," *HTR*, 44, 45; Mike Hale, "A Polished Night of Selling Broadway, With Nods to a Tragedy," *New York Times* (June 13, 2016), C2(L).

it paints.” Such lines draw attention to the imperfections of historical interpretation and encourage humility.⁸

History teachers are constantly trying to tell students that history isn’t just a dead recitation of settled facts, but a lively conversation full of missing pieces, redactions and omissions, competing stories, and manipulation by legacy-obsessed chroniclers. *Hamilton* confesses that its own portrayal is hardly the only way to tell the story; it deconstructs; it remixes; Miranda concludes by calling America an “unfinished symphony.” It better fits what Andrew Schocket describes as an “organicist” rather than “essentialist” reading of the Revolution, however tempted some observers might be to treat a biography of the “ten-dollar Founding Father” as an essentialist show celebrating the values of its elite protagonists.⁹

Hamilton may well be an entrée to the Revolutionary Era for some, but the show strongly argues that it shouldn’t be the last stop on the viewer’s journey: that the audience should keep reading, keep learning, and keep looking for inspiration for how this story might influence their world and their lives. It’s up to historians to carve out some of the spotlight, to write their way out of the Founders cul-de-sac. But at the same time, *Hamilton* has made the world wider for historians, and that’s worthy of their respect.

⁸ “History Has Its Eyes on You,” “The Room Where It Happens,” “Burn,” “The World Was Wide Enough,” “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?” *HTR*, 120, 187–88, 238, 274, 280; Gabrielle Spiegel (chair), Linda Colley, Natalie Zemon Davis, John Demos, Jane N. Kamensky, Jill Lepore, Robert A. Rosenstone, Jonathan D. Spence, “Pleasures of the Imagination” (Plenary session, American Historical Association, 123rd annual meeting, New York, January 2, 2009).

⁹ “Alexander Hamilton” (second quote), “The World Was Wide Enough” (first quote), *HTR*, 16, 273; Andrew M. Schocket, *Fighting over the Founders: How We Remember the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).