

Hamilton: An American Elitist

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An unexpected cultural phenomenon, Lin Manuel Miranda's Hamilton: An American Musical brought Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton back into the public eye over 200 years after his death. This paper inquires as to whether Hamilton accurately depicts the political beliefs of its titular character. It also explores the ways in which Hamilton can help us understand the relationship between individuals, social power, and our conceptualizations of the past. In doing so, it concludes that the show fails to address the elitist ideas that saturated Hamilton's political theory. Consequently, it argues that Hamilton projects contemporary values onto a historical figure and supports the highly contentious Great Man Theory of History.

Alexander Hamilton is making a comeback. Slandered both in life and centuries after death, Hamilton's work has been, at best, relatively unappreciated by the public and, at worst, caricatured and demonized by Thomas Jefferson and his admirers.¹ But everything changed when lyricist, composer, and performer Lin-Manuel Miranda began dazzling Broadway audiences with *Hamilton: An American Musical* in 2015. A celebration of Hamilton's life, the show was highly praised for its cast of non-white actors and its unique musical style, which combines rap, hip-hop, R&B, and traditional showtunes. *Hamilton's* cultural impact was significant; it quickly earned a level of mainstream recognition that was unheard of for a Broadway musical. The show has arguably become the most popular and accessible means of learning about Hamilton and by extension, perhaps, the era in which he lived. As such, we have to wonder: Is *Hamilton* really the revolution we think it is?

This paper will consider the following questions: Does *Hamilton: An American Musical* offer a fair and comprehensive depiction of Alexander Hamilton's politics? What does its portrayal of

¹ Stephen F. Knott, "The Four Faces of Alexander Hamilton: Jefferson's Hamilton, Hollywood's Hamilton, Miranda's Hamilton, and the Real Hamilton," *American Political Thought* 7, no.4 (Fall 2018): 543-544.

Hamilton imply about the nature of the past as it relates to individuals and social power? In exploring these questions, it will first provide context surrounding Alexander Hamilton's life and how it has been portrayed in popular contemporary works. It will then discuss his political beliefs with regards to republicanism, economics, and immigration, and whether or not these beliefs were effectively captured in *Hamilton*. Finally, it will consider the broader implications of *Hamilton*'s portrayal of its titular character, and what these implications suggest about the progression of history. Ultimately, *Hamilton: An American Musical* neglects to highlight the elitism and distaste for common people that pervaded Alexander Hamilton's political theory. In turn, it projects present day ideals onto a historical figure and perpetuates the questionable notion that history is driven by select heroic and socially powerful individuals.²

Alexander Hamilton: Then and Now

In 2004, historian Ron Chernow published *Alexander Hamilton*, an 818-page biography about the life of America's first Treasury Secretary. The book tells Hamilton's story in immense detail. Born in the mid-1750s, he suffered an impoverished childhood on the Caribbean island of Nevis.³ Upon noticing his talents, the community sent him to America to receive an education, and within a decade Hamilton had served in the Continental Army both in combat and as George Washington's top aide.⁴ After the war he became a lawyer, penned 51 essays for *The Federalist Papers*, and served as a delegate at the Constitutional Convention.⁵ In the new national government Hamilton once again served under Washington, this time as Treasury Secretary.⁶ While in office, he created ambitious financial systems and fought so relentlessly with Thomas Jefferson that it caused the formation of

² It is crucial to note that, although this paper focuses on political inaccuracies in *Hamilton*, these are not the show's only historical flaws. There are also representational inaccuracies, such as the noticeable absence of African-American characters and mention of Indigenous peoples. Such issues fall outside the scope of the present thesis, but nonetheless offer a wealth of opportunities for future study.

³ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004): 7, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83-86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5, 248.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

America's first political parties. Tragically, after their career-long political rivalry piqued with Hamilton's endorsement of Jefferson during the election of 1800, Hamilton was killed in a duel with then-Vice President Aaron Burr in 1804.⁷

Ultimately, Chernow portrays Hamilton as a troubled yet sympathetic, brilliant, and admirable figure. As David Brooks wrote for the *New York Times*, "Other writers... have done a better job describing Hamilton's political philosophy, but nobody has captured Hamilton himself as beautifully and fully as Chernow."⁸ It was this portrayal of Hamilton—a rags-to-riches immigrant who became one of the most powerful men of the Founding Era, a man who seemed simultaneously human and superhuman—that caught the attention of Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Eleven years after Chernow's biography was published, *Hamilton: An American Musical* premiered on Broadway. Stage time is essentially balanced between Hamilton's professional life and his personal life. Like Chernow, Miranda depicts Hamilton as a complex figure. He is brilliant, brave, charming, ambitious, and exceptionally hardworking. He is also hot-headed, egotistical, and at times neglectful of his family. However, although the show explores the positive and negative aspects of Hamilton's temperament and personal life, it conveniently leaves out the questionable aspects of his politics.

The Politics of Hamilton vs. The Politics in *Hamilton*

Elitism and mistrust of the masses were central to Alexander Hamilton's political theory. Politically, his two leading commitments were to build a strong and active national government that could assert authority over the states, and to diversify the American economy by encouraging commerce and mass-manufacturing.⁹ These priorities were accompanied by fear that republicanism would result in anarchy, and fear that powerful monarchies in the international system would be able

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸ David Brooks, "Creating Capitalism," *New York Times*, (25 April 2004). <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/25/books/creating-capitalism.html>.

⁹ Andrew Shankman, "A New Thing on Earth: Alexander Hamilton, Pro-Manufacturing Republicans, and the Democratization of American Political Economy," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 325-326.

to overcome the new American nation.¹⁰ As such, according to historian Andrew Shankman, Hamilton’s policies promoted consolidation, elite management of new investments, and the promotion of elite commercial classes at the expense of small producers.¹¹ Through these policies, Hamilton sought to “empower elites and prevent the chaos of social fluidity, mobility, and democracy that he believed would overwhelm the republic.”¹² This is a touch ironic, not only because Hamilton himself was a social climber, but because social fluidity, mobility, and democracy are celebrated themes in *Hamilton*.

While *Hamilton* does address the protagonist’s desire for a strong federal government, it does not tell the audience what this truly meant to him. In the song “Non-Stop,” just before he attends the Constitutional Convention, Miranda’s Hamilton raps about his desire “for a strong central democracy.”¹³ In reality, the extent to which Hamilton wanted a democracy was questionable. At the Constitutional Convention of 1787, Hamilton did give a six-hour speech in which he proposed a new form of government for the United States, as recounted in “Non-Stop.”¹⁴ While the musical mentions this as a way of highlighting Hamilton’s intellect and egotism, it does not touch upon the contents of the speech.

Hamilton believed that both the Executive and the Senate should be elected by electors to “serve during good behaviour.”¹⁵ In other words, they would remain in office until they died, resigned, or were removed for committing offenses such as treason. Only the Legislative Assembly would be elected by the people to serve fixed terms, and it would be far outweighed by the lifetime offices held by people in the Senate, Executive, and Supreme Court.¹⁶ This plan indicates an extremely low level of faith in common people’s abilities to rationally

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 324.

¹³ Lin-Manuel Miranda, “Non-Stop,” *Hamilton: An American Musical*, (Avatar Studios, 2015).

¹⁴ Chernow, “Alexander Hamilton,” 231.

¹⁵ Alexander Hamilton, “Constitutional Convention. Plan of Government,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, (18 June 1787).

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0099>

¹⁶ Ibid.

select and change their minds about their political leaders. Hamilton's ideal was startlingly undemocratic- some scholars have even called it monarchical.¹⁷ Revealing such information in the musical would have alerted the modern masses as to just how little confidence Hamilton had in their historical counterparts.

We see Hamilton's aversion to the populace emerge once again in a letter he wrote to Edward Carrington, the first U.S. Marshal for Virginia. In the letter, Hamilton discussed the accusation, put forth by Madison and Jefferson, that he was a power-hungry monarchist. Hamilton noted that while he was "*affectionately* attached to Republican theory," he was "far from being without doubts."¹⁸ He feared that republicanism would lead to "faction and anarchy" and "engender disorder in the community."¹⁹ Hamilton was trying to avoid coming across as radical- he made a point of asserting that he was not "disposed to promote Monarchy & overthrow State Governments."²⁰ However, through this letter we see that any support he showed for republicanism and popular control of government was merely theoretical- he was skeptical that such measures would succeed in practice.

In the Letter to Edward Carrington, Hamilton spends considerable time discussing and defending his financial plan. One year prior, he had engaged in a heated debate over this plan with Thomas Jefferson, who vehemently opposed it.²¹ Although Hamilton's plan passed in both the House and Senate, Washington hesitated to sign it due to resistance from his southern Cabinet members. In February of 1791, Hamilton submitted his "Opinion on the Constitutionality of the Bank of the United States" to Washington. In his Opinion, Hamilton declared that establishing a national bank would not excessively favour his own capitalist leanings over southerners' agrarian leanings.²² In other words,

¹⁷ Billy G. Smith, "Alexander Hamilton: The Wrong Hero for Our Age," *The Independent Review* 21, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 519.

¹⁸ Alexander Hamilton, "Letter to Edward Carrington," (26 May 1792).

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/letter-to-edward-carrington/>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Chernow, "Alexander Hamilton," 351-352.

²² Hamilton, Alexander. "Opinion on the Constitutionality of the Bank of the United States." (23 February 1791).

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/opinion-on-the-constitutionality-of-the-bank-of-the-united-states/>.

Hamilton's plan to assume state debts and establish a national bank faced accusations of elitism, and he had to defend against them.

Hamilton addresses this debate over the national bank in "Cabinet Battle #1," a rap battle between Hamilton and Jefferson. In his verse, Jefferson notes that the bank would tax southern states to pay off northern debts, and suggests that Hamilton designed his financial plan to heighten his own power as Treasury Secretary (to which Hamilton responds, "Not true!").²³ Hamilton's retort includes a brief defense of the Bank Bill itself. As the song states, "If we assume the debts/ The union gets/ a new line of credit/ A financial diuretic... If we're aggressive and competitive/ The union gets a boost/ You'd rather give it a sedative."²⁴ It then enters into a long (and well-earned) assassination of Jefferson's character. However, "Cabinet Battle #1" still sidesteps a broad and crucially-important issue that permeated this debate; namely, the extent to which the Bank favoured elite merchant classes.

This avoidance may have occurred because Hamilton's bank *was* elitist, in that it promoted a hierarchical system of crediting and finance. The bank was structured to privilege already powerful public creditors, placing them among the directors and allowing them to select who was deserving of a loan.²⁵ Thus, elites could prevent the masses from accessing funds via the national bank, instead permitting only likeminded businessmen to use this capital. Speculators would be able to use public resources to pursue commercial goals, while agricultural communities would grow increasingly economically obsolete.²⁶ Even if Hamilton's financial plan was not explicitly partial towards the merchant class, it implicitly institutionalized their prevalence.

Additional evidence of Hamilton's elitism can be identified in his stance on immigration, which is especially important to discuss given the way he is portrayed in the musical. Miranda's Hamilton is presented as a shining example of what immigrants can do for American society. He is, as highlighted by historian Joanne B. Freeman, "an immigrant striver above all else, born disadvantaged, battling against the odds to

²³ Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Cabinet Battle #1," *Hamilton: An American Musical*, (Avatar Studios, 2015).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Shankman, "A New Thing on Earth," 334.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

promote himself and to better his adopted nation.”²⁷ Indeed, celebrating immigrants is one of the show’s themes; our hero is introduced as a “bastard, orphan, immigrant,” and “Immigrants/ We get the job done” is a fan-favourite line.²⁸ While this message is in itself admirable, perhaps Alexander Hamilton should not be its poster-boy.

Despite being an immigrant himself, Hamilton was mostly anti-immigration. He supported the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which made it harder for immigrants to become citizens and permitted their deportation if they were thought to be disloyal (he did, of course, encourage exceptions for some foreign merchant elite.)²⁹ Further, in an 1802 article for the *New York Post*, Hamilton argued against President Jefferson’s proposed open-immigration policies. Writing under the pseudonym Lucius Crassus, Hamilton declared:

“The safety of a republic depends essentially on a uniformity of principles and habits; on the exemption of the citizens from foreign bias, and prejudice; and on that love of country which will almost invariably be found to be closely connected with birth, education and family.”³⁰

He concluded the article by stating that open-immigration “would be nothing less, than to admit the Grecian Horse into the Citadel of our Liberty and Sovereignty.”³¹ Ultimately, in Hamilton’s eyes, the only people more suspicious than the American masses were the foreign masses.

This section has explored elitism in Hamilton’s ideas about republican governments, economic policy, and immigration policy. It has also highlighted the ways in which this elitism was brushed over,

²⁷ Joanne B. Freeman, “Will the Real Alexander Hamilton Please Stand Up?,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 259.

²⁸ Lin-Manuel Miranda, “What’d I Miss?” and “Yorktown,” *Hamilton: An American Musical*, (Avatar Studios, 2015).

²⁹ Jason Frank and Isaac Kramnick, “What ‘Hamilton’ Forgets About Hamilton,” *The New York Times*, 10 June 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/11/opinion/what-hamilton-forgets-about-alexander-hamilton.html>.

³⁰ Alexander Hamilton, “The Examination Number VIII,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, (12 January 1802). <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-25-02-0282>

³¹ *Ibid.*

ignored, or contradicted in *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Notably, Lin-Manuel Miranda has acknowledged that some historical inaccuracies (such as the number of Philip Schuyler's children) were included to make the show "stronger dramatically."³² However, sidestepping or outright erasing broad aspects of Hamilton's political character arguably extends beyond the realm of mere "inaccuracy." While the artist certainly has claim to creative license, it is clear that the way Alexander Hamilton is portrayed in *Hamilton* has troubling implications as to how we perceive socially-powerful "heroes" in contemporary retellings of history.

Alexander Hamilton: America's "Great Man," 240 Years Later

Many sources have been left for us by and about Alexander Hamilton. He was an extremely prominent figure in early American public life who, in the words of Miranda, "wrote like he was running out of time."³³ Hamilton wanted to be remembered, and he used his talents, his time, and his social status to ensure that he would be. Given the numerous texts that exist in relation to him, we can make well-supported arguments for both "Hamilton the self-important monarchist" and "Hamilton the immigrant rags-to-riches folk hero." In this sense, he was both of those things, and he was neither of them.

Lin-Manuel Miranda's heroic depiction of Hamilton offers insights into the relationship between our present day ideals and the ways we choose to construct history. Namely, it shows us how a historical person's story can be tailored to suit the needs of the storyteller. In all likelihood, Miranda had particular social messages he wanted to convey through his art, and Alexander Hamilton was an *almost* perfect vehicle through which he could communicate them. However, it seems that to ensure Hamilton's story would entirely align with the present day morals he wanted to promote, Miranda had to tweak a few aspects of Hamilton's character. The embodiment of the American immigrant ideal cannot, after all, be disdainful of poor immigrants.

³² Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Lin-Manuel Miranda On the Play's Historical Inaccuracies," *Genius.com*, Video File, (n/d). <https://genius.com/videos/Hamilton-lin-manuel-miranda-on-the-play-s-historical-inaccuracies>.

³³ Miranda, "Non-Stop."

Similarly, Miranda's *Hamilton* shows us how a person's story can be tailored to suit the needs of the people it is being told to. For *Hamilton* to work both artistically and commercially, the character of Alexander Hamilton needed to be agreeable to a modern liberal audience. Audiences can forgive personal flaws- they are what make a character human. Political shortcomings, however, are of a different nature. It would be hard for much of *Hamilton*'s demographic to root for and admire a protagonist who loved the merchant elite but mistrusted the poor. As such, in order to truly connect with the show's audience, Alexander Hamilton's politics could not be depicted in a way that highlighted the elitism that permeated his beliefs.

What happens, then, when we portray historical people in a way that conceals the less-favorable aspects of their character while emphasizing the good? We are left with a story that appeals to audiences and focuses on sympathetic characters, but also a story that celebrates the Great Man Theory of History- the questionable notion that history is driven by a few heroic and socially powerful individuals, rather than by society as a whole.³⁴ *Hamilton* leads us to view Hamilton as a man whose politics were on the "right side of history," and who worked tirelessly to leave a mark on that history that we can still be proud of today. In doing this, however, it simply encourages us to project our present-day ideals onto a historical figure.

It seems today's American liberals and moderates want to celebrate a Founding hero who was anti-slavery, pro-immigrant, and fervently dedicated to the emerging republic. They want a character-driven historical narrative with themes of both inclusivity *and* conventional nationalism. The problem is that such narratives do not necessarily exist with regards to the Founding Fathers. Alexander Hamilton meets us halfway, but Miranda had to do the rest himself. While *Hamilton* fulfills our desire for a Founding history we can be unabashedly proud of, this pride is not fully earned. Ultimately, *Hamilton* makes a Great Man out of someone who was, in reality, simply a man.

³⁴ Edward Peter Stringham, "Hamilton's Legacy and the Great Man Theory of Financial History," *Independent Review* 21, n.4 (Spring 2017): 524. ISSN: 1086-1653.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the following questions: Does *Hamilton: An American Musical* offer a fair and comprehensive depiction of Alexander Hamilton's politics? What does its portrayal of Hamilton imply about the nature of the past as it relates to individuals and social power? The first section offered a brief overview of Hamilton's professional life, and the complex ways in which his life was portrayed by Chernow and Miranda respectively. The following section discussed how Miranda's depiction of Hamilton did not accurately represent his political character, arguing that *Hamilton* ignores the elitism that in fact pervaded Hamilton's political beliefs. In doing so, it notes that Hamilton was skeptical of the practical efficacy of republicanism, advocated for a financial system that would benefit capitalists at the expense of small farmers, and opposed open immigration policies. The final section considered what *Hamilton* can tell us about how contemporary values shape our retellings of history, and the problematic nature of this relationship. To conclude, it is apparent that *Hamilton: An American Musical* conveniently "forgets" that elitism and reservations about common people were central elements of Alexander Hamilton's political theory. In turn, it projects present day ideals onto a historical figure and furthers the dubious Great Man Theory of History. While it is important to recognize the significant contributions that individuals have made to America's history, we must remember that truth can rarely be confined to a singular narrative.

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