

Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*: A Revolutionary(?) Musical

by Kehley Coleman

There is no denying that Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* is something special. Vibrant and powerful, it has taken the world by storm and become arguably Broadway's most popular musical to date. According to Caitlin Huston, reporting for Broadway News, the show has twice broken the Broadway box office record, with tickets regularly selling for hundreds of dollars. Praised for its musical soundtrack, its choreography, and its fresh interpretation of its historical subject matter, *Hamilton* is often called a revolutionary musical. And this is indeed true, in more than one sense of the word. Much of the show's subject matter, after all, deals with an actual revolution—namely, the American Revolutionary War. Likewise, the show's music, choreography, costume design, and many other theatrical elements have received critical acclaim and have been heralded as the beginning of a new age of Broadway theatre. The show's color-blind casting policy has allowed it to become one of the most diverse shows Broadway has ever seen, allowing people of color to see themselves represented on the Broadway stage. Additionally, its extensive use of musical styles such as rap and hip hop rather than exclusively traditional musical theatre styles has again redefined what is “allowed” in a Broadway show. There is no doubt that *Hamilton* has indeed shattered traditional narratives of what a Broadway show should look like. Applying the term “revolutionary” to the show in its historical context, however, is troubling.

Some may argue that through its use of contemporary musical styles and colorblind casting, among other aspects of the production, the show has radically altered (for the better, implicitly) the way its average audience member views history. This argument seems plausible at first. After all, the presence of people of color playing Founding Fathers certainly presents

history in a manner that, on the surface level, appears decidedly less white and male than it is ordinarily presented. However, when one closely examines *Hamilton*, one finds that this sort of representation does not go beyond the surface level. In this essay, I will illustrate some of the ways in which *Hamilton* oversimplifies the historical narrative to conform to modern conceptions of the past rather than accurately illustrating the history of the American Founding in a way that challenges our stereotypical view of the past. These include *Hamilton*'s depiction of Loyalism, the first American political party system, and slavery during the Revolutionary era, all of which play directly into the same oversimplified misconceptions we are taught about the American past. I will argue that, while *Hamilton* may have had some positive effects on our culture as a work of art, it has not ultimately changed our understanding of history for the better, and in fact often contributes to our *misunderstandings* of the time period. I will thus demonstrate the ways in which it is wrong to refer to *Hamilton* as “revolutionary” in its context as a historical work.

One of the ways in which *Hamilton* plays into our mistaken assumptions about the past is the complete failure of the show to address the sizable and legitimate presence of a Loyalist movement among colonists during the American Revolution. The only representation of a Loyalist colonist in the show is Samuel Seabury, who is hardly given the chance to present his argument before Hamilton and his friends begin talking over him and mocking him. Not only is Seabury's argument glossed over, but the very character himself is presented in a clearly unfavorable manner. As Catherine Allgor points out in her essay “Remember... I'm Your Man,” Seabury's delivery of his argument is decidedly effeminate, or “prissy,” which is meant to be compared unfavorably with the strong, masculine tones of Hamilton's rap (99). Likewise, King George himself—the only other character to express Loyalist sentiments—is also portrayed in a

similar manner, with his “womanly mannerisms” played for laughs (99-100). The clear implication is that Loyalism was not only a negligible presence but a laughable one, and a viewpoint held only by those very few Americans who were too cowardly or not “manly” enough to recognize the necessity of a war with England.

This may seem an insignificant misrepresentation, but *Hamilton*’s failure to portray Loyalists as a group with a legitimate set of beliefs rather than a nearly negligible minority faction whose central argument was being too afraid to fight a war fits neatly into a large and disturbing trend of ignoring Loyalism, as Andrew M. Schocket points out in his essay “*Hamilton* and the American Revolution on Stage and Screen.” Popular presentations of the American Revolution nearly always completely ignore the presence of Loyalism, or give it only a cursory mention before moving on to the honorable and “manly” deeds of the Patriots, and *Hamilton* is no exception (Schocket 176-177). This is, however, a drastic oversimplification; according to NPR, up to 20% of colonists were Loyalists (some estimates are even higher), and many had powerful reasons to be so. Take, for instance, the many enslaved African-Americans offered freedom if they rebelled against their Patriot masters by joining the British cause, according to PBS. This is of course ironic given the way the Patriots are always presented in modern media as the champions of liberty, fighting against the Loyalists who would keep the colonies “enslaved” to the British crown. Clearly, the Patriot cause was not the only “correct” one, and many colonists had legitimate reasons to be reluctant to fight a war against the crown that, after all, the colonies were expected to lose. By ignoring this fact and portraying Patriotism as the clear “right” side of the American Revolution, the one promoting freedom where Loyalism favored servitude, *Hamilton* is joining a decades-old tradition of promoting a misconception-riddled view of the past that prioritizes pro-American (specifically, pro-Patriot) sentiment over actual

historical fact. This can hardly be called a revolutionary way of presenting the historical narrative.

Another troubling example of *Hamilton*'s tendencies to under-explain and oversimplify history is its complete failure to accurately present the political dispute between the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans. While Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton's biggest political rival, does feature in the show as a character, he is never given a chance to truly present his political policies. The closest Miranda and *Hamilton* come to properly illustrating the conflict between these two political parties is in the "Cabinet Battles #1 and #2," in which Jefferson and Hamilton debate matters of policy. But these songs are centered on personal attacks and ultimately aimed at getting the audience to have a laugh at Jefferson's expense rather than to learn more about the complicated positions of each party on the issues of the time. Hamilton's Federalist policies are presented as the only rational ones, and as the ones that ultimately are best for American citizens of the time. But this often may not have actually been the case. Francis Cogliano recounts in his book *Revolutionary America, 1763-1815: A Political History* the political policies of Federalists and points to a disturbing amount of elitism within the party. Cogliano goes as far as labelling the Federalists as "no friends of democracy" in reference to their attempts to decrease the political agency of the common farmer or average citizen in favor of the upper class (141). While I might not go as far as endorsing this choice of words, there is no denying that there was a strong elitist streak in the Federalists' policies. Nowhere is this presented in the musical *Hamilton*, which presents Federalism—the party founded by Hamilton himself—in a unilaterally positive light. The unsavory side of Hamilton's policies are never once explored.

By contrast, the Democratic Republicans, headed by Jefferson and James Madison, are vilified fairly often throughout the show's second act, often based on the party's connection to

slavery. And while it is true that, in general, Democratic Republicans tended to be more friendly toward the institution of slavery (with Jefferson and Madison notably owning slaves themselves), this was by no means a party-line issue as it is presented in the show. Not all Democratic Republicans owned slaves, and there were slave owners among the Federalists. Washington himself, for example, owned hundreds of slaves, and according to Richard Hofstadter in chapter 3 of the book *The Idea of a Party System* was essentially a Federalist in practice despite his objection to political parties in theory (91). Likewise, the more positive aspects of Democratic Republican policy are not touched on by the show, because this would mean acknowledging some of the flaws of Hamilton's opposing policies. For example, the fact that the Democratic Republicans supported more widespread suffrage than did the Federalists, according to Ohio History Central, is never mentioned.

It is easy to see from this how *Hamilton's* presentation could lead an audience member to assume that the Democratic Republicans existed only to serve as close-minded obstacles to the implementation of the brilliant ideas of Alexander Hamilton and his fellow Federalists. Such an over-simplistic presentation of the first party system is intensely damaging for audience members, and feeds directly into the sort of misconceptions those who view the show as a "revolutionary" work of history claim that it is helping dispel. Namely, the portrayal of Democratic Republicanism as an unpleasant foil for Federalism, while not fully acknowledging the unsavory side of Federalism itself, fits directly into the trend of "Federalist Chic" David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey L. Pasley acknowledge in their essay "*Hamilton* as Founders Chic: A Neo-Federalist, Antislavery, Usable Past?" The term "Federalist Chic" refers to the tendency of works celebrating the American Founding to focus on praising the Federalist "merchant-led elite" at the expense of the Democratic Republicans, and can be seen in many popular

biographies of figures such as Washington, Adams, and Hamilton (140). Because of its prevalence in these sorts of works, this way of thinking often dominates popular conceptions of the past. And undeniably, *Hamilton*, with its tendency to villainize Democratic Republicans and idolize Federalist policies, fits directly into this troubling trend—hardly revolutionizing the way its audience thinks about the first party system.

Finally, and most troublingly of all, there is the approach the show takes to slavery. *Hamilton* takes place during the American revolutionary era, a time in which the economy of the entire country was based on slavery and nearly every one of its citizens would have interacted with the institution on a daily basis. And yet the show barely addresses the horrors of the institution, and certainly not in any meaningful way. As Lyra Monteiro points out in her essay “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in *Hamilton*,” the show does not feature a single character of color, enslaved or free, despite its diverse cast (62). While the institution of slavery is mentioned as an aside here and there, nowhere is its centrality to the entire American economy ever addressed, and nowhere do we get even a single line that gives any true idea of the sorts of horrors that enslaved people were put through. Indeed, “Cabinet Battle #3,” the only musical number that even slightly works to shed light on the institution of American slavery, was cut from the show. Lin Manuel Miranda cited time concerns in a tweet addressing the song’s removal, claiming that it made no sense to spend time on a number introducing an issue with no resolution provided by its end. This seems reasonable—at two and a half hours, *Hamilton* is already on the long side for a theatre piece, and it would not be ideal to introduce yet another plot line into the show without providing the audience a satisfying resolution. But still, the failure of the show to include even one song properly devoted to depicting the Founders struggling with the slavery question is telling. It demonstrates the same

sort of willingness to gloss over the centrality of slavery to American economics that features prominently in most depictions of the American Revolutionary era. Reinforcing this misconception can hardly be considered a “revolutionary” depiction of slavery.

Still, many may object to the claim that *Hamilton* fails in this regard, pointing out the references to slavery that the show does make—perhaps not one full song, but various lines scattered throughout the show, calling attention to the existence of slavery and the participation of Thomas Jefferson in the institution. While I acknowledge that slavery is not left out of *Hamilton* altogether, I maintain that these few throwaway lines—all of which could be cut from the show without significantly altering its plot in any way—fail to actually encourage critical thinking about the role of slavery in American society. Instead, these various lines are inserted in order to quickly convince the audience to be sympathetic to one character or dismiss the political arguments (even those unrelated to slavery) of another. Slavery in *Hamilton* is not brought up in order to criticize the institution in its own right; it is brought up as a shortcut to make some characters more appealing than others.

Take Hamilton himself, for example. The show does not hesitate to portray him as a “revolutionary manumission abolitionist,” someone firmly against the institution of slavery who actively fought it at all opportunities. And yet the real Hamilton’s relationship with slavery was far more complicated. As Leslie M. Harris points out in her essay “The Greatest City in the Word?: Slavery in New York in the Age of Hamilton,” Hamilton had a great deal of interaction with slavery in his lifetime, much of which can only be interpreted as, if not active endorsement of the institution, at least passive acceptance of its presence (85). Hamilton, after all, married into a slave-owning family, whose ownership of slaves he did not contest, and while he was a member of the New York Manumission Society, this did not necessarily indicate abolitionism; a

great many slave-owners also were members, as Harris illustrates (84-85). Why, then, does the show place emphasis on Hamilton's questionable status as an anti-slavery activist rather than simply avoiding the topic altogether? This is done because portraying Hamilton in this way simplifies the narrative in a way that has several benefits for the show's message. It quickly wins audience sympathy for the show's protagonist, serving as a handy plot device to make Hamilton more likable. It also allows Hamilton to easily convince the audience to support his political plans without requiring the show to actually explain in detail what these political plans truly entailed; "during Cabinet Battle #1," Hamilton's callout of Jefferson's ownership of slaves serves as an easy way to convince the audience that Jefferson's financial plan is wrong for the nation without forcing them to actually consider the complicated plans being proposed, even though the issue is only tangentially related to slavery. It is clear, then, that the main reason the show brings up slavery or people of color in any way at all is to convince the audience to support the policies of one (white) man over another.

Nor is *Hamilton* the only depiction of the American Revolution to follow this trend. As Waldstreicher and Pasley point out, the show is hardly unique in its tendency to downplay the actual effects of slavery and the extent to which Federalist Founding Fathers such as Hamilton benefitted from it while simultaneously making use of any evidence of potential anti-slavery sentiment to make these characters more palatable. This, they argue, fits directly in with the movement known as Founders Chic, a movement which they claim is centered around an obsession with and celebration of the character and interactions of the Founding Fathers, as well as an attempt to make them relatable and palatable to modern audiences. They illustrate the way that "Founders Chic seeks and highlights antislavery sentiment wherever it can be found, and looks to burnish those founding fathers who qualify by association" (143). All of this,

inarguably, can be applied to *Hamilton*, which also seeks to celebrate the Founding through the use of relatable characters and uses questionable anti-slavery sentiment to make these characters more acceptable for modern audiences. In this way, *Hamilton* fits directly into the trend of most representations of the time period in its depiction of slavery. The show brings up the abolitionist sentiments of its protagonist whenever possible, ignores the connections to slavery of any character whom the audience is supposed to respect (see, for example, Washington, whose slave-owning status is not once mentioned), and ultimately fails to actually explore the extent of slavery's impact. Despite the presence of people of color on the stage, then, the show's handling of slavery and race relations in early America hardly be called revolutionary, and does more harm than good for our understanding of the complexity of the time. Presenting slavery in this way, in addition to the more obvious problem of downplaying the effect the institution had on people of color, simplifies the historical narrative in a way that damages, not improves upon, the way the audience understands slavery during this time period.

Some may argue that all of this is unimportant and that the positive effects *Hamilton* has had on modern society far outweigh any regression it may have caused in our popular understanding of the past. It is true that *Hamilton* has had positive effects on our culture. The presence of more people of color on the Broadway stage has opened doors for more diversity in musical theatre, a genre traditionally associated with whiteness. Likewise, the fact that the show allows for the Founding Fathers to be portrayed by people of color may allow other people of color in the audience—particularly young people—to feel more connected to American history, and thus like an important part of the modern nation. And the show's pro-immigrant message provides much-needed commentary on the roles immigrants play in shaping our nation in the face of modern anti-immigration rhetoric. As a work of art in a modern context, *Hamilton* has

indeed done far more good than harm. If the show were viewed only as what it is—a work of art that, while based on historical events, radically oversimplifies the historical narrative and presents a story that, while entertaining and uplifting, is not truly representative of the past—I would not hesitate to say that *Hamilton* is a wholly positive aspect of our culture.

And yet, the show is consistently upheld as a work that is reshaping for the better the way we view history. It is even taught in classrooms as an alternative to more “boring” works of academic history that seek to truly raise questions about the past and accurately reflect the historical narrative. Take, for instance, the “Eduham” program sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, which directly encourages the use of *Hamilton* as a teaching tool and subsidizes tickets to the show for schoolchildren. This treatment of *Hamilton* as a valid alternative to works of academic history that seek to truly represent the complexity of the past is extremely damaging to these young children, who come away from the show with an overly simple perspective on history. Even for less impressionable adult audiences, *Hamilton*’s simultaneous reputation for historical accuracy (encouraged by its use in classrooms) and tendency to misrepresent history lead its audience into a false sense of complacency as they see their previous misconceptions about the past repeated on stage and take them once again for truth.

Ultimately, it is clear that *Hamilton*, with its tendency to oversimplify and even misrepresent the historical narrative to make it more audience-friendly, fits directly into the trend of most presentations of history, and can thus hardly be called a revolutionary look at the past. Beneath the surface layer of a diverse cast and contemporary musical styles, the show does not lead its audience to seriously question the age-old kindergarten-friendly presentation of the past, in which political divisions were a simple matter of right and wrong, slavery was ultimately

condemned by most of the Founders, and the Patriots were the only legitimate side of the Revolutionary War. While it would perhaps be unfair to expect a more nuanced perspective on the past from a two and a half hour work of theatre with the ultimate goal of selling tickets to a patriotic audience, it is even more unjust to claim that the show is truly providing this nuanced perspective. In order to gain a truly revolutionary perspective on the past, we must look to works of academic history that actively work to raise the sorts of questions *Hamilton* seeks to avoid.

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