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Will the Real Alexander Hamilton Please Stand Up?

JOANNE B. FREEMAN

Since February of 2015, we've been in the midst of a Hamilton conversation: a disjointed, angry, joyful, sometimes lightweight, sometimes weighty multimedia debate. Its roots are in a book, a bill, and a show. In 2004, Ron Chernow's blockbuster *Hamilton* set the stage for our current onslaught by depicting Hamilton as a heroic but forgotten founder who deserves recognition. In 2015, the Treasury Department invested Hamilton-celebrating with a sense of purpose by threatening to remove him from the ten-dollar bill. And later that year, Lin-Manuel Miranda's revolutionary and seemingly irresistible musical *Hamilton* transformed that celebration into a cultural phenomenon with staying power. In the theater world, the music world, the scholarly world, and among educators of all kinds, *Hamilton* and Hamilton will be topics of debate for some time to come.[1]

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1. Ron Chernow, "Save Alexander Hamilton!," June 18, 2015, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/save-alexander-hamilton-119176; Nikki Schwab, "Alexander Hamilton Fans 'Outraged' He's Getting Bumped From the $10 Bill," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 19, 2015, http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/06/19/alexander-hamilton-fans-outraged-hes-getting-bumped-from-the-10-bill; Quin Hillyer, "The Decision to Replace Hamilton on the New $10 Bill is Outrageous and Ignorant," *National Review*, June 18, 2015, http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/419958/outrageous-and-ignorant-decision-10

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This conversation is complex for historians, particularly for early American historians. Broadway's *Hamilton* is a fictional representation of a historicized past that comments on the present. It's a hybrid creation filled with inventions, omissions, and fantasies, yet inspired by a biography and pumped full of references to historical documents, events, and characters. There's a lot of history in *Hamilton*, and it's presented with enthusiasm, respect, and an appreciation of the historical craft, making it hard for historians to resist. More than once, Miranda has said that the "secret sauce" of the play is that he was learning—and loving—the period's history while writing.[2]

For some historians, that winning use of history is the play's biggest problem. Its fictions seem factual when mingled with historical facts. And there are many fictions. Some exist for the sake of good theater. For example, Hamilton's opinion didn't decide the presidential election of 1800; Burr's loss of that election didn't lead to their duel; and Burr and Hamilton didn't bump up against each other as often or as meaningfully as the play suggests, but those inventions make for heightened drama that plays out in a practical two and a half hours.[3]

But the play's inaccuracies go deeper. It is for good reason that scholarly commentators have criticized its relative silence on slavery and gender, and objected to its "Great Man" approach to the past. After decades

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-bill-quin-hillyer; Russell Berman, "Saving Hamilton," *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/save-hamilton-the-backlash-to-a-historic-currency-announcement/396614/ (accessed Aug. 26, 2016).

2. On *Hamilton's* historical accuracy, see Joanne B. Freeman, "How *Hamilton* Uses History," *Slate*, Nov. 11, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/11/how_lin_manuel_miranda_used_real_history_in_writing_hamilton.html; Joseph M. Adelman, "Hamilton, Art, History, and Truth," *The Junto*, Aug. 31, 2015, https://earlyamericanists.com/2015/08/31/hamilton-art-history-and-truth/ (accessed Aug. 25, 2016). Edward Delman, "How Lin-Manuel Miranda Shapes History," *The Atlantic*, Sept. 29, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/lin-manuel-miranda-hamilton/408019/; "Hip-hop and history blend for Broadway hit 'Hamilton,'" *PBS NEWSHOUR*, Nov. 20, 2015, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/hip-hop-and-history-blend-for-broadway-hit-hamilton/; Charlie Rose interview with Lin-Manuel Miranda, *60 Minutes*, airdate Jan. 10, 2016, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/hamilton-broadway-musical-60-minutes-charlie-rose-2/ (accessed Aug. 15, 2016).

3. Freeman, "How *Hamilton* Uses History."

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of scholarship insisting that America wasn't founded by a handful of elite white men, some historians fear that *Hamilton* may set back the historiographical clock. They worry that by presenting the public with an infectiously upbeat, celebratory, Founder-full version of history, the play may discourage people from grappling with America's far more complex and problematic past at the precise moment when reckoning with that past is needed.[4]

Of course, the absence of that problematic past is part of the play's appeal. *Hamilton* is an ode to a somewhat nebulous American exceptionalism, a powerful message given America's current identity crisis. With immigration under attack and the "American Dream" becoming increasingly unobtainable for most Americans, the play offers a Horatio Alger success story, celebrating an immigrant who raised himself from poverty through the power of his talents and merits alone. In the midst of a raging struggle over racial inequality, *Hamilton* creates a gloriously inclusive multicultural Founding. It's no wonder that this subversive yet exceedingly good-natured play has seduced audiences of all kinds.

So has its hero. Its Hamilton is a flawed but charming master rap-battler with an almost superhuman work ethic. He's also an abolitionist, although the historical Hamilton's views on slavery were decidedly more complex. At a time when many of America's Founders are under fire as

4. See for example Nancy Isenberg, "Let's Not Pretend That 'Hamilton' Is History," *Zocalo*, Mar. 17, 2016, http://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2016/03/17/lets-not-pretend-that-hamilton-is-history/ideas/nexus/; Ishmael Reed, "'Hamilton: the Musical:' Black Actors Dress Up like Slave Traders . . . and It's Not Halloween," *CounterPunch*, Aug. 21, 2015, http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/21/hamilton-the-musical-black-actors-dress-up-like-slave-tradersand-its-not-halloween/; Jennifer Schuessler, "'Hamilton' and History: Are They in Sync?," *New York Times*, Apr. 10, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/11/theater/hamilton-and-history-are-they-in-sync.html?_r = 0; Lyra Monteiro, "Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton," *Public Historian* 38 (Feb. 2016), 89–98, http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/38/1/89; Annette Gordon-Reed, "Hamilton: The Musical: Blacks and the Founding Fathers," ibid., Apr. 6, 2016, http://ncph.org/history-at-work/hamilton-the-musical-blacks-and-the-founding-fathers/. For a roundup of links to other pieces, see Cassandra Good, "Historians Take on Hamilton," June 12, 2016, https://cassandragood.wordpress.com/2016/06/12/historians-take-on-hamilton/#links (accessed Aug. 26, 2016).

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slaveholders, *Hamilton's* Hamilton is an antislavery Founder mascot, a shining exemplar amidst tarnished idols. Like the play as a whole, he's a tonic for trying times.[5]

This phenomenon is nothing new. From the dawning of the republic to the present day, generation after generation has created a Founding narrative that served their needs, with Hamilton's reputation rising and falling accordingly. More often than not, he has been the Snidely Whiplash of early American politics: an evil, scheming, elitist foil for the far more democratic Jefferson.[6]

But Hamilton has had his moments. At the closing of the Civil War, northern nationalists praised him as a nationalistic seer whose sage advice about centralizing and empowering the national government had been ignored at a high price. As Hamilton's son John Church put it in an 1864 biography of his father: "had Hamilton's views prevailed this crisis could not have taken place."[7]

Toward the start of the twentieth century, Hamilton the Progressive

5. Kenneth Owen, "Historians and Hamilton: Founders Chic and the Cult of Personality," *The Junto*, Apr. 21, 2016, https://earlyamericanists.com/2016/04/21/historians-and-hamilton-founders-chic-and-the-cult-of-personality/; John Fea, "Wait a Minute! Is 'Founders Chic' Okay Now?," *The Way of Improvement Leads Home*, Apr. 21, 2016, https://thewayofimprovement.com/2016/04/21/wait-a-minute-is-founders-chic-ok-now/ (accessed Aug. 25, 2016).

6. Phillip Magness, "Alexander Hamilton's Exaggerated Abolitionism," *History News Network*, June 27, 2015, accessed Aug. 25, 2016, http://historynewsnetwork.org/blog/153639; Michael D. Chan, "Alexander Hamilton on Slavery," *The Review of Politics* 2 (Spring 2004), 207–31. For a nice summary of the evolution of American views of the Founding, see R. B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York, 2009), 126–43. See also Michael G. Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978).

7. On the rise and fall of Hamilton's reputation, see Stephen Knott, *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth* (Lawrence, KS, 2002); Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American* Mind (New York, 1960); Joanne B. Freeman, "Punching the Ticket: Hamilton Biographers and the Sins of Thomas Jefferson," in *Thomas Jefferson's Lives: Biographers and the Battle for History* (Charlottesville, VA, forthcoming); and John S. Pancake, *Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton* (Woodbury, NY, 1974), 371–403. John Church Hamilton, *History of the Republic of the United States of America, as Traced in the Writings of Alexander Hamilton and His Cotemporaries* (Philadelphia, 1857–64), 7: 694.

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came into view. Heralded for his constructive statecraft, this Hamilton's bold strokes of political engineering were of a piece with the Progressive mindset, though his discomfort with the rumblings of the masses didn't suit their focus on public welfare. Progressives smoothed over this rough spot by praising Hamilton for his total disregard for public approval. Here was a man who stuck to his principles at any cost.

Given the level of adulation for Hamilton before the Depression, his link with moneyed men, his seeming indifference to the everyday struggles of the common man, the degree to which Republicans claimed him as their own, and perhaps most damning of all, the ardent public appreciation voiced by Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, the economy's collapse couldn't help but bring Hamilton down. "When the great clash came," notes political scientist Stephen Knott, "Alexander Hamilton might as well have been the chairman of the Republican National Committee."

Hamilton's stock didn't rise again until the Cold War, when Hamilton the Capitalist stepped into view; a flurry of attention surrounding the bicentennial of his birth set the stage. In the shadow of an alleged Communist threat, with American post-war prosperity booming, Hamilton became a prophet of the glories of capitalism. "This is Alexander Hamilton's year," wrote historian Paul Boller, Jr. in 1957, little knowing the scale of what was to come. The waning of the Cold War once again cost Hamilton his pride of place in American historical memory until Chernow's book and Miranda's play restored him to center stage.[8]

Our Hamilton differs fundamentally from his past incarnations. He's not a seer, or a statesman, or an economic compass, or even a politician. Notwithstanding Miranda's attention to Hamilton's fiscal policy, his support of industry, and his distrust of revolutionary France, our Hamilton is an immigrant striver above all else, born disadvantaged, battling against the odds to promote himself and to better his adopted nation. A man of outsized talents and audaciously ambitious goals who is sometimes admirable and sometimes reprehensible, engaged in a seemingly singlehanded struggle against formidable enemies and obstacles, he is the

8. Paul Boller, Jr., "Precocious Hamilton," review of Broadus Mitchell, *Alexander Hamilton, Youth to Maturity, 1755–1788, Southwest Review* 42 (Autumn 1957), 346–48.

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virtual embodiment of a folk hero, a heroic and beloved advocate of the American Way.[9]

A folk hero: It's a strange thing for Hamilton to be. He has certainly never been one before. The most unapologetically elitist of the nation's top-ranked Founders, Hamilton was never a man of the people. (Though it's worth noting that he did not call the American public a "great beast." That tin can was tied to Hamilton's reputation posthumously.) Although he acknowledged the importance of popular politics in the new republic and actively appealed to the public in the press, he was never entirely comfortable with the politics of the street. He disliked the disorder of popular unrest, distrusted the impact of popular protest, and disdained wooing the masses. Worse, he rarely hesitated to say so. More than once, he yearned to march the army on political protestors; during the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, his wish came true. He viewed his distrust of democracy as the height of responsible governance, a vital anchoring counterweight to the flighty whirlwind of democratic excess. The Federalists' leading spirit, he virtually embodied this mentality—the gradual decline of both his reputation and his party in the early nineteenth century revealing the degree to which he was swimming against the democratic tide.[10]

For these reasons and more, during Hamilton's past moments of popularity, people admired him but generally didn't *like* him. As Frederick Scott Oliver—the early twentieth century's blockbuster Hamilton biographer—wrote in 1907, the American public saw Hamilton as a "master" but Jefferson as a "friend," and it was "useless to point to the ledger account of benefits conferred." Noting the rise of Hamilton's reputation in 1957, political scientist Clinton Rossiter came to a similar conclusion. Hamilton "will never become a folk hero, never rank in popular esteem with Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Franklin. But he

9. Graham Seal, *Encyclopedia of Folk Heroes* (Santa Barbara, CA, 2001), xii–xvi; Daniel Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (Charlottesville, VA, 1994), 79.

10. Knott, *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth*, 74; also 155, 173, 207. Hamilton allegedly said this at a dinner party; an alleged dinner guest told someone, who told Massachusetts Federalist Theophilus Parsons, who told his son, who included it in *Memoir of Theophilus Parsons* (1859), which was read by Henry Adams, who included it in *History of the United States of America during the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (1889).

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will henceforth receive more respect than all but these four supreme heroes of the American tradition."[11]

Thus the utter irony of Hamilton's folk-hero status, a development that he himself would have disbelieved, distrusted, and perhaps even disliked. He knew that the American public didn't fully trust him, and he carried that knowledge like a feather in his cap. To Hamilton, his unpopularity was proof of his commitment to doing what he thought was right regardless of the cost. He would have been even more horrified by the public airing of his troubled origins, a subject that he shunned; of the ten thousand of letters that he wrote during his lifetime, only a few touch on his childhood. In his own time, he would have been considered a "mushroom gentleman," a rootless upstart who shot up "in a night's time out of the dirt."[12]

For later generations, that rootlessness has been useful, making Hamilton an exceedingly adaptable Founder whose life can be molded to suit the present. He's also more emotionally accessible than most of his Founder cohort. A simmering brew of emotions, Hamilton was an ambitious striver who pushed too hard and reached too high, an adulterer whose lust subjected him to blackmail, a defensive scrapper involved in ten near-duels before his fatal clash with Aaron Burr. Ambition, lust, and insecurity: Viewed out of historical context, Hamilton is us.

This very human Hamilton is at the heart of Broadway's *Hamilton*, which centers on the tempo and temper of his rise and fall rather than on the events and ideas that shaped and surrounded it. That feelingly human view of the Founding is part of the play's charm and power; racially and emotionally inclusive, *Hamilton's* melding of emotion and history gives the Founding an immediacy that is new to most of its audience, and thus all the more powerful.

Indeed, emotion is one of *Hamilton*'s strengths. It captures the founding period's heady feelings: the boastful swagger and rampant insecurities of the experimental young republic; the fear that dangerous

11. Frederick Scott Oliver, *Alexander Hamilton: An Essay on American Union* (London, 1907), 256–57. Clinton Rossiter, *Alexander Hamilton and the Constitution* (New York, 1964), 234.

12. Rebecca Rush, *Kelroy, A Novel*, ed. Betsy Klimasmith (1812; repr. Peterborough, ONT, 2016), 172. See also Henry Mackenzie's mention of "mushroom-gentry who wear their coats of arms in their purses," in *The Man of Feeling* (London, 1771), 223; and Gregg Crane, ed., *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Cambridge, UK, 2007), 11.

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contingencies could bring it to ruin; the keen awareness of that risk, which fueled the period's "crisis mentality." In Miranda's telling, the new nation was much like Hamilton—ambitious, risky, and in-the-making. And that telling bears true. For both Hamilton and the new United States, these instabilities were vital shaping influences; without them, the picture is incomplete.[13]

Yet they're new to most Americans, who tend to view the Founding as a stream of inevitably happy endings. Of course Americans won the Revolution. Of course they wrote the Constitution. Of course it worked. Seen through that lens, the Founders are little more than automatons doing their patriotic duty. By emotionally engaging its audience, *Hamilton* pushes people past that stopping point.

The play's unconventional form and casting have the same effect. People are unlikely to view a hip-hop musical filled with singing, dancing non-white Founders as objective historical fact. By definition, the play controverts prevailing assumptions about an exceedingly white, elite, and boring Founding, highlighting the power and hold of those assumptions in the process, and inviting people to probe deeper.

In essence, even as it encompasses America's creation myths, *Hamilton* de-familiarizes them, and it does so in a way that has galvanized the public and made them eager for more. There could hardly be a more portentous teaching moment; the play's momentum can and should be harnessed for the good. Historians and educators can talk about the mythic haze that clouds our understanding of the Founding; they can follow the play's lead and explore the link between history and stories. They can use the play's dark places and omissions to push past it, showing how the story changes with popular politics, women, or slavery on center stage. Historians and teachers can—and should—take full advantage of the spotlight that *Hamilton* has cast on America's Founding to advance our nation's understanding of its past, something needed now more than ever.

13. Joanne B. Freeman, "The Election of 1800: A Study in the Logic of Political Change," *Yale Law Journal* 108 (June 1999), 1959–94.

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