

Reshaping historical narrative in 'hamilton'



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Hamilton has proven to be a pivotal element in the American historical narrative. Both the musical's content and artistic license speaks to the power of collective memory and our perceptions of the past. The alterations to historical narrative made in Lin-Manuel Miranda's hit Broadway Musical Hamilton bridges the era of the American Revolution to current issues in American society.

Hamilton attempts to interweave the narrative of underrepresented individuals with that of America's Founding Fathers. Historians grapple to determine the best perspective from which to present history. Should future generations be presented with stories of the trailblazing leaders who produced significant change, or should attention be focused on the common people? Should we focus on those who perhaps did not have a voice or were not recognized in the 'official history'? Miranda's creative choices are met with both critical acclaim for their boldness and backlash because of the historical inaccuracies rendered by artistic license in response to such questions. He utilizes a highly diverse cast to illustrate Hamilton's story. In an interview, Miranda states " Our cast looks like America looks now, and that's certainly intentional . . . It's a way of pulling you into the story and allowing you to leave whatever cultural baggage you have about the founding fathers at the door." His adaptation of history invites every American, regardless of race, to see himself or herself reflected in the story of the Founding Fathers.

While Miranda's artistic choices have led to more conversation — both around current day issues and American history — some historians have expressed opposition. Joanne Freeman, professor of history at Yale

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University, commented on the historical inaccuracies in the musical: “ Aside from the condensation of time, certain dates are changed to allow the music to flow more easily; well-known characters such as Burr, Jefferson, and Madison take on the actions of less important characters of history; and Adams decision to fire Hamilton from Treasury Secretary was simply invented.” Additionally, she criticized the musical for depicting Hamilton in a linear, simplistic manner stating, “ the real Hamilton was a mass of contradictions: an immigrant who sometimes distrusted immigrants . . . a man who distrusted the rumblings of the masses yet preached his politics to them more frequently and passionately than many of his more democracy friendly-fellows.” Historian Shane White criticized Miranda for “ infus[ing] new life into an older view of American history [rather than] attempting to get away from the Great Men Story [by including] ordinary people, African-Americans, Native Americans and women [into a] historical narrative in which Hamilton has a cameo rather than a leading role.” While chastised by some for its inaccuracies, it is the existence of these inaccuracies, and the widespread debate about them that makes Hamilton a powerful work of art that has helped to focus attention and center conversation on race relations in America. By inserting both the values and challenges present in the 21st century into his musical, Miranda illustrates how historical narrative is shaped by the values of the generation responsible for passing the knowledge forward.

In addition to the musical’s creative choices, the content of the story outlines the underlying theme that historical narrative is fluid. Although the story focuses on telling Hamilton’s story, it is clear that many of the characters are

intimately aware of how historical narrative is manipulated. In *History Has Its Eyes On You* (Song 19, Act I), Washington confides in Hamilton about the time he led his men into a massacre. He is aware that as a Revolutionary hero and first President of the United States his actions will be scrutinized and studied for centuries to come, and he knows his failures are not exempt from this process. Washington warns Hamilton that “ You have no control: who lives, who dies, who tells your story.” This line is not only repeated in later songs but echoes the internal struggles many of the characters bear. After Hamilton’s political opponents learn of his affair, he is confronted by the shame Washington had prophesied.

Morally trapped between political blackmail and a deplorable truth, Hamilton attempts to control the narrative by writing about the scandal himself.

Despite the fact that his honesty does not do much to comfort his wife, it pushes Eliza to consider her own narrative. How must a wife in this circumstance react? With vengeance or support? Eliza ultimately decides to “ erase [herself] from the narrative. Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when [Hamilton] broke her heart.” However, after Hamilton’s death, she chooses to preserve his letters and allow his genius to be discovered for future tellings. She concludes in *Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story* (Song 23, Act II) to “ stop wasting time on tears . . . and put [herself] back in the narrative.” Eliza goes on to “ interview every soldier who fought by [Hamilton’s] side” and “ make sense of [Hamilton’s] thousands of pages of writings” taking on the persona of a historian herself. In many ways, Eliza’s character acts as the original lense through which Hamilton’s story is told. It also speaks to the fact that Eliza, who as a woman in the 18th century

without much external power, uses her own voice to influence the narrative of future generations. Regardless of who tells the story, history is in the hands of everyone, including those who may not have the strongest voice.

Miranda has succeeded in layering the theme of historical narrative into the character conflicts within the musical. At the same time, he created a production controversial enough to garner a significant change in the present-day narrative of the founding of America. Aside from giving minority voices an opportunity to speak both on the stage and in the media, he reminds us through both the portrayal of the characters' concern for how their story will be told and through our reaction to his unexpected portrayals, that historical narrative is controlled by the individual presenting the story.