

[Harvey on Romano and Potter, 'Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past'](#)

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Renee C. Romano, Claire Bond Potter, eds. *Historians on Hamilton: How a Blockbuster Musical Is Restaging America's Past*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018. Illustrations. 396 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-9029-5; \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8135-9030-1.

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The Age of Federalism in the Twenty-First Century

Hamilton: An American Musical debuted at New York City's Public Theater in 2015 and has since dominated Broadway's ticket sales and Tony Awards. Its creator, Lin-Manuel Miranda, is on the record stating, "I want the historians to take this seriously" (p. 6). The contents of the volume under review should gratify him. To the editors, "*Hamilton's* traditional political story, told through Afro-Caribbean music and by a multiracial cast, has seemed to capture the political zeitgeist of the Age of Obama" (p. 4), but Renee C. Romero and Claire Bond Potter have also brought together fourteen scholars of diverse perspectives who evaluate the show's historical accuracy and explain its significance. The wide-ranging essays in *Historians on Hamilton* will broaden readers' grasp of the varied contexts that have shaped the production, reception, and political and cultural stakes of the musical's story, staging, and celebration.

Appropriately, given the attention critics and fans have paid to the show's hip-hop foundation and the primarily African American and Latino/a cast, several of the essays address contemporary questions of race. Examining the play "from inside the Broadway bubble," Brian Eugenio Herrera argues that the play's casting "emphatically resists the presumptions and privileges of whiteness" and its "hybrid musical apparatus" expands the audience's sensibilities of what Broadway music can be (pp. 232, 236). Other authors are more critical. Referring to the show's focus on white social and political elites, Patricia Herrera argues that "when racial bodies take on a history that disavows race, the voices of enslaved people remain audibly silent" (p. 272). Lyra D. Monteiro goes further: "The idea that the musical 'looks like America now' in contrast to 'then' ... actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since." It is a "damning omission," Monteiro writes, that "not a single slave or free person of color exists as a character in this play" (p. 62). The significance of that omission comes through in Leslie M. Harris's history of slavery in New York City, where nearly 20 percent of inhabitants were enslaved in the colonial era and in which most people of African descent remained enslaved until well after *Hamilton's* death in 1804. In light of that history, Harris likens the play's "racially mischievous" casting to the traditional African American celebration of Pinkster, allowing for isolated role reversal while doing little to challenge structures of power (pp. 72, 88-89).

Other essays situate the show in diverse media of storytelling and communities of experience and circulation. Elizabeth L. Wollman examines *Hamilton's* place in the history of previous Broadway plays that combined innovation and commercial success, such as the all-black show *Shuffle Along* (1921) and the rock musical *Hair* (1967). Other essays look beyond the stage. From the Treasury secretary's day to ours, Michael O'Malley shows us, money has also told stories, particularly through the images that adorn it. O'Malley describes how those images have changed on paper money since the nineteenth century. In presenting *Hamilton* as "a democratic hero for a multiracial America" (p. 135), *Hamilton* makes the "the ten-dollar founding father" a symbol of American values today. Claire Bond Potter emphasizes that much of the show's significance can be found offstage, particularly the effective use of social media by Miranda and other cast members. It has created an online community of fans and a place of "cultural belonging and comfort at a moment when real politics, often played out on the same social media channels, could not have been more divisive" (p. 347).

Several essays address the genres of print and screen that help explain *Hamilton's* success. Joseph M. Adelman places Miranda in a long line of creators of "people's histories" that includes Parson Weems, Walt Disney, and Howard Zinn, all of whose interpretations of the American Revolution proved influential because they resonated with their contemporary audiences, as Miranda's show clearly does. Andrew Schockett situates the musical in the conventions of recent Hollywood portrayals of the American Revolution. These appeal to audiences, as does *Hamilton*, because, Schockett argues, they "speak in coded and sometimes explicit ways to what each side of the ideological aisle wants to see, while carefully avoiding serious engagement with interpretations that might prove offensive to either" (pp. 168-69). Renee C. Romero examines *Hamilton* as a "civic myth." Given the "heated conflict over museum exhibits, textbooks, and school curricula" in the "history wars" of recent years, Romero stresses how remarkable *Hamilton's* bipartisan appeal has been. She traces it to the show's fusion of "progressive and conservative visions of history," including American exceptionalism on the one hand and inclusion of people of color on the other (pp. 306-07). The show "delink[s] whiteness and the story of the nation's founding" while staging the power of American ideals (pp. 308, 310).

Hamilton tells a great story, but how well does it portray what we know about the period? One of the strengths of *Historians on Hamilton* is its inclusion of several essays by distinguished historians of the political culture of the US early republic. Catherine Allgor examines the show's shortcomings in showing gendered systems of power, calling particular attention to Miranda's choices to "celebrate ... a certain kind of masculinity that is defined by violence, sexual conquest, and ambitious social climbing" (p. 99) and to avoid grappling with women's limited legal rights in the eighteenth-century British Empire and early national United States (the legal doctrine of coverture, under which women lacked full legal identities, is crucial for understanding the circumstances faced both by Rachel Faucette, Hamilton's mother, and by Maria Reynolds, a woman with whom Hamilton had a politically damaging affair). Joanne Freeman, whose work on the honor culture of elite males Miranda drew upon in framing the duel with Aaron Burr, is mildly critical of the show. She praises its power to rivet attention on "the careening car chase of his [Hamilton's] life, including the flaming crash at its end" (p. 44), but she observes that the musical fails to show Hamilton's "desperate desire" to centralize government, admiration of British government, "habit of seeking military solutions to political problems," distrust of democracy, and skepticism that the United States would survive (pp. 42-43). Despite that litany of objections, however, Freeman thinks that the show "gets the underlying *spirit* of the moment right" (p. 52). On many counts, this reviewer agrees with that assessment, though

Freeman expresses no concern with the depiction of Hamilton's antagonists as exclusively southern slaveholders. Such a view neglects the western opposition to unjust taxation and enforcement epitomized in the Whiskey Rebellion, an event that Miranda cut from the Broadway show, as well as northern entrepreneurial interests' increasing support for Democratic-Republicans over the course of the 1790s.[1]

Other historians of the early republic link the politics of Hamilton's day to our own. William Hogeland calls attention to the show's reliance on Ron Chernow's biography of Hamilton, which Hogeland characterizes as but one contribution to a cult of Hamilton among those who espouse "national-greatness conservatism" (p. 21). By portraying an immigrant from nothing who became an abolitionist and wanted to extend social mobility to others, Chernow invented "a fictional Hamilton" that Miranda has now made familiar to millions (p. 27). Delineating the contemporary political stakes of Miranda's show, David Waldstreicher and Jeffrey L. Pasley note that *Hamilton: An American Musical* was preceded by another attempt to energize public interest in the first Treasury secretary. Where a Hamilton exhibition at New-York Historical Society in 2004 flopped by presenting "a too-naked attempt to enshrine finance capitalism and military glory as the foundation of the national story," Chernow's problematic biography added to those elements a Hamilton who was "interested in improving society through certain limited government programs and by expanding and protecting the individual rights of America's ... 'minority groups.'" It was an expression amenable not only to many Republicans, but also to the "neoliberal" Democratic Party of the Clinton and Obama era (p. 146), the party of Miranda and his parents (a point that Renee Romero also makes). Waldstreicher and Pasley point out the problems of identifying a supporter of the Alien and Sedition Acts who politicized religion with pro-immigrant multiculturalism, but they usefully provoke the reader by going further. They observe that Miranda's show pushes the audience to sympathize with the creation of "a robust American fiscal-military state," dramatized through elites' "honor politics and character battles" (pp. 152-53, 155). That policy aim and that view of politics are "neo-Federalist." So much for the revolution of 1800.

Unfortunately, the lone essay that focuses on pedagogy, by Jim Cullen, does not grapple with these kinds of historical criticisms. As his syllabus, included as an appendix, makes clear, he relies on Chernow's book as one of the course's major sources. This reviewer worries that such a use risks lending the patina of historical accuracy to the book's misleading portrayal of the man and the period. Cullen's attempt to allay such concerns with the assurance that he incorporates broader historical scholarship into his course for a "wider perspective" (p. 257), loses force when the reader turns to the corresponding endnote and finds only the work of Annette Gordon-Reed and Peter S. Onuf to complicate celebratory "Founders' Chic" titles by Joseph J. Ellis and David O. Stewart (p. 259n14). While *Hamilton* is undoubtedly valuable, as Cullen says, for its capacity to bridge the generational gap that separates him from his students, providing teachers with a tool to grab students' attention and potentially spark their unexpected interest, the varied historical criticisms one finds in *Historians on Hamilton* should make any teacher or professor wary of using the show itself as source in some way equivalent to but more exciting than written history.

The editors should be commended for assembling a volume that contains such diverse, and occasionally opposed, viewpoints within a capacious yet coherent framework. Cumulatively, the essays in *Historians on Hamilton* provide a useful and impressive range of perspectives from which to appreciate the historical significance of the Broadway sensation, to evaluate the historical accuracy

of the story *Hamilton* tells, and to prod us to consider the contemporary stakes of the historical narratives we consume, celebrate, and propagate.

Note

[1]. Freeman's endnote on Democratic-Republicans cites the work of Lance Banning and Drew McCoy, who stressed Thomas Jefferson's and James Madison's agrarian biases and ambivalence toward manufacturing (p. 56n19); but omits reference to work that has highlighted Democratic-Republican hopes for economic diversification and development. See Joyce Appleby, *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York: New York University Press, 1984); John R. Nelson, *Liberty and Property: Political Economy and Policymaking in the New Nation, 1789-1812* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Lawrence A. Peskin, *Manufacturing Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Early American Industry* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Andrew Shankman, *Crucible of American Democracy: Egalitarianism and Capitalism in Jeffersonian Pennsylvania* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004). On the Whiskey Rebellion, the best account remains Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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