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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/19231>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.19231

ISSN: 1991-9336

### Publisher

European Association for American Studies

### Electronic reference

Jeremy Brett, “I Put Myself Back in the Narrative”: *Hamilton* as Founders Fanfiction”, *European journal of American studies* [Online], 18-1 | 2023, Online since 19 February 2023, connection on 08 March 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/19231> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.19231>

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# "I Put Myself Back in the Narrative": *Hamilton* as Founders Fanfiction

Jeremy Brett

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- 1 Historians and scholars who decry Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical* miss a significant point of this particular creative endeavor. *Hamilton* is not designed as a documentary or as a full accounting of the life of Alexander Hamilton. Instead, it represents a conscious narrative reshaping of an existing series of historical events. That reshaping or reforming is rooted in the aspects of Hamilton's life and career that most touch Miranda's heart and his own life experience. The story has been often told of Miranda's reading of Ron Chernow's 2005 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Hamilton during a vacation to Puerto Rico and becoming inspired by Chernow's recasting of Hamilton's life as the story of an energetic and striving immigrant making his way in a new America. Miranda saw much of his immigrant NYC self in Hamilton as filtered through Chernow's book. As he noted in a 2016 interview,

[Hamilton] writes his way out of poverty. He writes his way into the war through just a war of ideas. He writes his way into [George] Washington's good graces. He also writes his way into trouble—at every step of the way when cooler heads are not around him to prevail. I immediately made the leap to a hip-hop artist writing about his circumstances and transcending them. There's also that self-destructive [nature]. You see rappers who have billions of dollars getting into wars of words with other rappers. It's a part of that verbal one-upmanship. Hamilton is no different than that.... What I recognized in Hamilton, which connected me to the genre of hip-hop and the hip-hop culture, was his relentlessness. I recognize that relentlessness in people I know. Not only in my father who came here at the age of 18 to get his education and never went back home, just like Hamilton, but also so many immigrant stories I know, and friends I know who come here from another country. They know they have to work twice as hard to get half as far. That's just the deal—that's the price of admission to our country. (Ball and Reed)

- 2 Rather than present a straightforward life story of Hamilton, Miranda chose instead to make Hamilton's life a reflection of his own concerns and sense of self-identity. Eliza Hamilton announces at the play's conclusion—after having earlier in the play announced her self-removal from the story—"I put myself back in the narrative"

(Miranda, *Hamilton*; from "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story"). Likewise, Miranda places himself—a Puerto Rican man of color—in the story as Hamilton to give his culture and his people a place in the historical narrative that has generally sidelined or ignored them.

- 3 Hence, the deliberate casting of actors of color as the white historical figures of Hamilton, Washington, and Jefferson, among others, was positively viewed by many who found the Founders to be a group of relatable "cool" and funny people. As multiracial blogger "the quintessential queer" notes, "*Hamilton* is not really about the founding fathers. It's not really about the American Revolution. The revolution, and Hamilton's life, are the narrative subject, but its purpose is not to romanticize real American history; rather, it is to reclaim the narrative of America for people of colour." She references Eliza's self-removal, noting that "Eliza talks... of 'taking herself out of the narrative.' That's what *Hamilton* is about; it's about putting ourselves in the narrative. It puts people of colour in the centre (sic) of the damn narrative of the nation that subjugates them; it takes a story that by all accounts has been constructed to valorize the deeds of white men, and redefines it all" (thequintessentialqueer). In identifying not only himself but the lives of his fellow actors with the characters in the play, Miranda works within the established literary tradition of *fanfiction*.
- 4 Examining *Hamilton* through the fanfictional lens offers a better understanding of its impact on the audience as well as a realization that gauging *Hamilton* by its historical accuracy or inaccuracy is to present a false narrative of the show's significance and narrative dimensionality. Furthermore, although fanfiction is now a worldwide phenomenon, its modern incarnation began in America, inspired by an American media production, and so much of it remains driven by American-made texts and media. Just as Miranda reshaped Alexander Hamilton, one of America's Founders, through the twin homegrown mediums of hip hop and the Broadway musical format, so do fanfiction creators today reshape canonical narratives through the distinctly American creative mode of fanfiction. The impulse to remold, reclaim, and reorder is a deeply American one, with both positive and negative outcomes, and so it seems only fitting that *Hamilton* be brought together with the fanfic phenomenon. As Aja Romano notes, "[t]his criticism of how *Hamilton* places its title character in context might be legitimate if *Hamilton* weren't, well, what it is. In essence, *Hamilton* is a postmodern metatextual piece of fanfic, functioning in precisely the way that most fanfics do: It reclaims the canon for the fan."
- 5 What is fanfiction? Over four decades of fan studies scholarship has bent itself towards answering that question, but a useful and effective definition comes from Sheenagh Pugh, who describes fanfiction in the context of playing with her children using plastic figures and Legos to act out all sorts of adventures in the world of Robin Hood. Pugh notes that when she ran out of remembered stories, she and her children would invent new ones, sometimes departing from the known "canon" stories about Robin. Pugh highlights that together her family "was writing fan fiction—i.e., fiction based on a situation and characters originally created by someone else. We had a canon of stories invented by others, but we wanted more, sometimes because the existing stories did not satisfy us in some way, sometimes because there are never enough stories and we did not want them to come to an end. So we invented the ones we wanted" (9).
- 6 Fanfiction in its modern incarnation dates, essentially, from the 1966 debut of the science fiction television series *Star Trek*. In 1967, while the show was in its first season,

*Trek* fans Devra Michele Langsam and Sherna Comerford produced a fanzine entitled *Spockanalia*. That zine, which ran until 1970, contained stories, poems, and essays exploring various aspects of the show, with a particular focus on fan favorite Mr. Spock and the culture of his native planet Vulcan. From that wellspring came torrents of new stories written by fans and set in the *Star Trek* universe. Some were straightforward adventures in the vein of the actual television episodes. Other were outright sexual fantasies chronicling romances or sexual encounters between characters. Others were satirical sketches or broad parodies. Still others were seriously written essays about fictional topics (such as Vulcan culture) as if they were “real” phenomena. The humanist ethos, the multidimensional characters, and their relationships, the ideal of a post-capitalist universe, all were attractive to so many fans that they could not, would not, give up the story. Indeed, many looked for other corners of the *Trek* universe to express themselves creatively or identified so strongly with characters that the existing corpus of stories about them failed to satisfy their imaginations. Over time, fanfiction became an integral and thriving component of fan activity for many television shows and movie series beyond *Star Trek*, such as *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, *Supernatural*, *Harry Potter*, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, to name only a scant few.

- 7 The fanfic impulse lies at the heart of *Hamilton*. The urge to rewrite or reshape the traditional historical narrative is built directly into the rationale, lyrics, and action of the production. To take a particularly striking example: As the Act I number “Satisfied” opens, a crowd of well-wishers celebrate newly married Alexander<sup>1</sup> and his bride Eliza as Eliza’s sister Angelica steps up to toast the couple. Angelica happily salutes the two with good wishes: “A toast to the groom / To the bride / From your sister / Who is always by your side / To your union / And the hope that you provide / May you always... be satisfied” (Miranda, *Hamilton*; from “Satisfied”). It is a joyous event, rooted in sisterly love. However, in the most striking example of choreography and arrangement in the show, Angelica suddenly goes still as around her, the rest of the cast, to the echoing refrain of “Rewind— / rewind— / rewind...,” reverse their steps and return to the immediately previous number “Helpless,” in which Angelica and Eliza meet Alexander. “Helpless,” sung primarily by Eliza and describing her introduction to and falling in love with Alexander, then proceeds once more in dance and shadow, swirling around Angelica at the center. As the bustling social activity of the number recurs, Angelica sings her own story about meeting Alexander and their own instant romantic attraction, an intense emotion she resolves to suppress out of love for and loyalty to Eliza. The spectators are now presented with Angelica’s perspective of Eliza and Alexander’s story, retold and re-observed this time with a new focus on Angelica and her own desires and experiences. Time itself winds backwards, letting the show provide “another chance to suggest that history looks very different depending on who’s telling it” (Miranda and McCarter 78).
- 8 What in the first instance is a joyous celebration of first meetings and romantic love, becomes reinterpreted through the eyes of this character as a poignant moment of sisterly affection and personal regret and loss. This is no mere theatrical trick or effect. What this scene does is demonstrate in active terms that history in many ways is subjective, a collection of individual experiences and interpretations. It also shows how an established story—usually fictional but, in this case, the actual history of an event—may not entirely satisfy the viewer emotionally because they have taken an interest in a different narrative possibility and a different character. The mind of a fan in their interaction with a textual source functions much the same way as the

"Helpless"/"Satisfied" double number plays out for both Miranda and the audience. The encounter with the canonical narrative of Alexander and Eliza meeting and falling in love leads to a love for that narrative's characters and an accompanying desire to see what engaging characters and stories branch out from that central story; in this case, Angelica's own feelings and internal struggles. The end result is a reader-driven reevaluation of the canonical text. That same dynamic plays out in Miranda's relationship to his source material. As Aja Romano notes, "In this case, *Hamilton's* canon is history, and the fan, Miranda, is doing a lot more than simply adapting it. Like the best fanfic writers, he's not just selectively retelling history—he's transforming it."

## 1. Hamilton vs. *Hamilton*

- 9 Grant that the Hamilton of *Hamilton* is not the living man, possessor of more dubious qualities than a hip hop musical immigrant story might want to tell. Miranda consciously leaves out any number of inconvenient truths about Hamilton's life. Nowhere, for example, does Miranda in his play reference Hamilton's letter of July 10, 1804, to his friend and fellow arch-Federalist Theodore Sedgwick, in which he notoriously references "our real disease, which is Democracy, the poison of which by a subdivision will only be the more concentrated in each part, and consequently the more virulent" (Hamilton 1022). Although Hamilton's eventual decision to support Thomas Jefferson over Aaron Burr for the Presidency is excitingly dramatized in the number "The Election of 1800," nowhere does Miranda mention Hamilton's notorious entreaty to New York Governor John Jay that Jay call the state legislature into session months before the election to change the state electoral law and so, Hamilton believed, ensure the victory of John Adams in New York State. As Hamilton underscores in his letter of May 7, 1800, to John Jay, "the scruples of delicacy and propriety, as relative to a common course of things, ought to yield to the extraordinary nature of the crisis. They ought not to hinder the taking of a *legal* and *constitutional* step, to prevent an *Atheist* in religion and a *Fanatic* in politics from getting possession of the helm of the State" (924). Hamilton's letter signals his desperate desire to circumvent if not entirely subvert the electoral process, an action entirely excluded from Miranda's version of Hamilton's story.
- 10 The play also ignores Hamilton's strong support for raising an overwhelming military force to crush resistance to the government during the Whiskey Rebellion and to fight a potential French invasion in 1799. In fact, the play elides altogether over much of Hamilton's later political life and his increasingly fervent and overheated opposition to Jefferson and the French Revolution, though his self-destructive October 1800 pamphlet attack on John Adams is featured. Instead, Miranda chooses to focus more on Alexander's personal struggles in this period, such as his affair with Maria Reynolds and the death of his son Philip. Alexander's understandable disgust with the dithering Continental Congress during the Revolution is dramatized in "Stay Alive," as Alexander notes, "I have never seen the general so despondent / I have taken over writing all his correspondence / Congress writes, 'George, attack the British forces.' / I shoot back, we have resorted to eating our horses." Yet, Miranda ignores Hamilton's risky proposal of 1783 to use growing discontent and threats of mutiny within the Continental Army to press Congress to relieve the Army's financial distress.

- 11 The differences between Hamilton and *Hamilton* are legion, and the professional historical community have taken note. A number of authorities, in various venues, weighed in on the musical's historical accuracy, citing, among other things:
- 12 1) The production's promotion of an ahistorical progressive American class system: William Hoagland: "Miranda's Hamilton... emerges on stage as a kind of disruptive democratic phenomenon, a man whose irresistible upward mobility will shatter class codes.... Yet even a superficial engagement with the historical Hamilton would reveal that for him the essential components of American society had nothing to do with enabling others access to the heights he had scaled with such dizzying speed" (qtd. in Romano and Potter 30).
- 13 2) The play's erasure of slavery and the Black Revolutionary experience: Lyra D. Montiero: "a truly damning omission in the show: not a single enslaved person or free person of color exists as a character in this play.... This pattern of erasing the presence of black bodies continues throughout the play, as the role of people in color in the Revolution itself is silenced" (qtd. in Romano and Potter 62–64).
- 14 3) The play's ignoring of Hamilton's classism and elitism: Sean Wilentz: Alexander Hamilton "was more a man for the 1 percent than the 99 percent." Turning him into an "an up-from-under hero seems dissonant amidst the politics of 2016." (qtd. in Schuessler).
- 15 *New York Times* columnist Jennifer Schuessler summed up the discrepancies by noting that "[i]t's an odd moment for the public to embrace an unabashed elitist who liked big banks, mistrusted the masses and at one point called for a monarchical presidency and a Senate that served for life."

## 2. Hamilton and "Founders Chic"

- 16 Pinning particular blame on Miranda for rearranging Hamilton's historical image, however, ignores several important considerations. First of all, Alexander Hamilton's legacy has been continually shaped and reshaped since his death in 1804. Stephen F. Knott points out that "the battle over interpreting Hamilton's role in the founding of the nation began within days after he was buried" (9). Hamilton's dramatic death at the hands of Aaron Burr and his subsequent Federalist martyrdom raised concerns among his political opponents that his posthumous reputation might be wrongly inflated. Soon after the shooting, James Madison wrote to James Monroe that "the newspapers which you receive will give you the adventure between Burr and Hamilton. You will easily understand the different uses to which the event is turned" (13). Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin admitted to Thomas Jefferson that "to the natural sympathy and sincere regret excited by Mr. Hamilton's death, much artificial feeling, or semblance of feeling, has been added by the combined Federal and anti-Burrite party spirits" (236). However, Hamilton's ally, Fisher Ames, wrote that "party rancor, eager to main the living, scorns to strip the slain. The most hostile passions are soothed or baffled by the fall of their antagonist. Then, if not sooner, the very multitude will fairly decide on character, according to their experience of its impression; and as long as virtue, not unfrequently for a time obscured, is ever respectable when distinctly seen, they cannot withhold, and they will not stint their admiration" (236).

- 17 Yet, Hamilton's legacy waned, and occasionally waxed, throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth century in accordance with the political trends of the day. As Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy achieved political dominance in the early 1800s, Hamilton's reputation suffered accordingly. In the age of America's centennial and Gilded Age, the business-minded Republican Party, championed by political figures such as Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt, "hailed Alexander Hamilton as an indispensable figure, eclipsed only by Washington as the father of the Union" (Knott 67). Charles A. Beard's seminal 1913 book *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, originally planned by Beard as a study of Hamilton's ideas, looked at Hamilton and his fellow Founders through the Progressive political lens, painting them as canny realists driven by economic self-interest; and while his thesis may have been overstated, nevertheless the book "was an essential corrective to the American tendency to deify the founders and a reminder of the importance that interest plays in the calculation of political actors" (101). A combination of a new Progressive trend in historiography, progressive political rhetoric that decried Hamiltonian institutions like banks as protectors of wealthy malefactors, and the financial disasters of the Great Depression all negatively affected Hamilton's reputation in the 1920s and 1930s. True, Warren G. Harding dedicated a statue of Hamilton outside the Treasury Department Building in 1923 with the pronouncement that Hamilton was the "prophet of American destiny." However, only a few years later the Democratic Party, which unrealistically tied New Deal government activism to Jeffersonian principles, enshrined Hamilton's Virginian rival over him by constructing the Jefferson Memorial, placing Jefferson's face on the nickel and erecting a statue of Jefferson's Treasury Secretary Gallatin on the other, more public-facing side of the Treasury Building. Miranda's adaptation of a Hamilton reflective of the modern age is, we see, nothing new.
- 18 Nevertheless, Hamilton was the recipient of scholarly and popular rehabilitation starting in the late 1990s. Why this particular span of years saw the birth of this phenomenon is not certain, but it is likely due to a number of factors, including the anti-liberal political reaction inspired by Ronald Reagan and his successors. The combination of Richard Brookhiser's 1999 biography *Alexander Hamilton: American* (1999) and Ron Chernow's best-selling *Alexander Hamilton* produced a new image of Hamilton as the true creator of America: "a blend of high finance, central banking, federal strength, industrialization, and global power for which we are indebted to the rare imagination and existential derring-do of our founding treasury secretary" (Hoagland 6). This new pop image of Hamilton was one of the outcomes of the so-called "Founders Chic" phenomenon, which swept along not only Hamilton but fellow Founders like Washington, Adams, and Franklin into a new popular consciousness. As David Waldstreicher puckishly put it, "[s]omething funny happened to the founding fathers on their way to the twenty-first century. Without a bi- or tricentennial in sight, they became, suddenly, newsworthy" (185). The Founders Chic phenomenon has been attributed to numerous factors such as a supposed nostalgic desire for "authentic" and "ethical" politicians and a conservative longing for a "true" and pure American past which has produced a number of scholarly and less scholarly works, including the Hamilton biographies of Chernow and Brookhiser, as well as David McCullough's *John Adams* (2001) and its 2008 HBO adaptation, and Joseph J. Ellis' *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (2000). These works are notable for a renewed reverence on the Founders as sources of original authority, a focus on biographical history driven by

idiosyncratic personalities rather than policy, and biographers' non-neutral emotional attachments to their subjects.

- 19 Particular note, given its role as the inspiration for *Hamilton*, should be taken of Chernow's biography of Hamilton, in which Chernow

play[s] not only the role of biographer but also that of defense attorney against the slander of Hamilton's foes, both those in Hamilton's own time and later historians, many of whom have judged him harshly.... Time and time again, Chernow bats away the critiques of previous biographers. As with McCullough's Adams, to Chernow, Hamilton's opposition to slavery trumps faults and elides misdeed that might invite criticism. Among these were Hamilton's extremely antidemocratic views, his scheming to encourage a military coup near the end of the Revolution, his adventurism commanding an army to establish martial law in western Pennsylvania during Washington's presidency, his efforts to increase the federal debt so as to enrich wealthy speculators, his manipulation of Adams' cabinet, and his fermenting public desire for war against France in the 1790s. (Schocket 57–58)

- 20 These avoidances and erasures are common to Founders Chic, and H. W. Brands underlines that "in revering the Founders we undervalue ourselves and sabotage our own efforts to make improvements—necessary improvements—in the republican experiment they began. Our love for the Founders leads us to abandon, and even to betray the very principles they fought for" (1–2). But this reminds us to this piece's main contention, that viewing *Hamilton* as a historical document, or even as a piece of Founders Chic, misunderstands and would move the spectators away from the particular textual nature of the play. The criticism of *Hamilton* and the liberties it takes with Hamilton's life might be considered legitimate, to borrow a statement worth repeating, if it "weren't, well what it is. In essence, *Hamilton* is a postmodern metatextual piece of fanfic, functioning in precisely the way that most fanfics do: It reclaims the canon for the fan" (Romano).

### 3. *Hamilton* as Fanfic

- 21 Fanfiction accomplishes a series of different creative and cultural goals, all of which relate to how a reader, or viewer in *Hamilton*'s case, engages with a particular text. Fan studies scholar Francesca Coppa illustrates that, among other things: *Fanfiction is fiction that rewrites and transforms other stories* (4–6). *Hamilton* narratively reframes two levels of source materials: in the more immediate, it dramatizes and brings to life through music and snappy dialogue Chernow's biography of Hamilton, in the same way that any other theatrical adaptation of a text would do. A work like Chernow's is comprehensive, including all relevant events and personalities, and in the proper order, of course. A staged production eliminates scenes from the text that obstruct smooth narrative flow. Characters that do not fit into the course of dramatic events such as John Adams and Timothy Pickering, two prominent figures in Hamilton's life, are conspicuous by their absence on stage. Scenes are compressed for time or to enhance dramatic effect.<sup>2</sup>
- 22 *Hamilton* also has a transformative effect on the story of Hamilton himself: through Miranda's modern reinterpretation, the nation for which Hamilton fought and wrote and agitated is *transformed* into a new framework that incinerates the traditional white-centric view of the man and the age. This is no incidental consequence but a conscious working by Miranda. It becomes evident when Alexander sings in "My Shot": "I'm past patiently waitin' / I'm passionately smashin' every expectation / Every action's an act



of creation!" (Miranda, *Hamilton*). *Hamilton*, as happens with the best fanfic, questions the assumptions and preconceptions of established textual canon, replacing or destroying them in favor of new ways of looking at that canon. By eliminating from his own text some of the more unpalatable aspects of Hamilton's life and career, Miranda creates a new Hamilton, one upon whose character he can instill his own particular social and historical concerns. Miranda's play further celebrates U.S. history, while he critiques much about that history. His perspective as the son of Puerto Rican transplants writing about an American immigrant from the Caribbean puts him in a unique position to do so. Miranda's fanfic interrogates the mythos of the American dream, tearing down the idea that "America" emerged from a single cultural identity that belongs only to white European immigrants and their descendants.

- 23 This is an idea which *Hamilton*'s fan base seems to grasp innately, as Romano notes in their piece. They suggest that "the fundamental objective of fanfic is to insert yourself, aggressively and brazenly, into stories that are not about and were never intended to be about or represent you."<sup>3</sup> One major motive for fanfic creators is to liberate their beloved texts from conventional constraints. Fans' responses to media, as media scholar Henry Jenkins notes, involves a mixture of love with the canonical narrative and frustration with its limitations. Because narratives so often fail to completely satisfy fans, those fans "must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works. Because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests" (Jenkins 23). And so, they write their own stories.
- 24 Sometimes, fans rewrite narratives because they become interested in the characters and those characters' emotional limits. In the same way, ironically, that Founders Chic has a particular interest in questions of personal character and personalities' influence on political action, so does fanfic often concern itself with the possibilities of characters' fates and decisions. Interestingly, whereas Founders Chic asks direct questions framed in historical context such as "How did John Adams' personal temperament affect his relationships with his fellow Federalists?" or "How did Hamilton's perception of George Washington as a father figure affect the former's role as Washington's aide-de-camp?", fanfic often frames its own questions in a "What if?" context that emphasizes variation and difference in the conventional narrative. Fanfic writers ask, "What if Captain James T. Kirk and Mr. Spock were lovers?" or "What if Bruce Wayne had gone to boarding school with fellow genius billionaire Tony Stark?" or "Who might Harry Potter grow up to be, considering we leave him as an eighteen-year-old orphaned war veteran?" (Coppa 13). In this way, Miranda wonders chiefly, "What if Alexander Hamilton were a particular kind of upwardly mobile and striving immigrant, one like Miranda's own parents?" Instead of focusing on Hamilton's inherent immigrant advantages as a white, male British subject arriving in America free and unindentured, Miranda asks his audience in the opening number to consider a "ten-dollar Founding Father without a father / Got a lot farther by working a lot harder / By being a lot smarter / By being a self-starter / By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter" (Miranda, *Hamilton*).
- 25 Fans sometimes write these stories, as well, to "correct" perceived errors in the canonical narrative that render the story imaginatively limited and unreflective of much of its audience. For example, a popular substrata of Harry Potter fanfic casts

major character Hermione Granger as Black—Hermione’s race is never explicitly denoted in the text—stemming from an upswell grounded in a Tumblr account entitled “Hermione Is Black.” This is a recent example of modern fan readers choosing to read characters as mirrors of their own cultural and life experiences, which makes the narrative somehow more correct to many readers. As Thomas points out, “as readers and viewers begin to claim interpretive agency, they not only imagine themselves into stories but also *reimagine the very stories themselves*” (154). In a similar way, Miranda’s *Hamilton* does the same thing with his racebending creativity. As Thomas further highlights,

Yet from *Harry Potter* to *Hamilton*, previously White cisgender heterosexual characters (and in *Hamilton*, historical figures) have begun to be imagined as Others. The rising generation is not only inscribing themselves into the narrative but also demanding to be the center of all their worlds, textual, visual, fannish, and otherwise.... [W]e are left with the possibility of infinite storyworlds. Though this plurality of possible worlds might represent a crisis for some audiences, it may provide an answer for emancipating the imagination for readers and fans who have for too long inhabited the margins—real and imagined (156).

- 26 *Hamilton*, then, provides such a center stage for the marginalized, fulfilling one of its key responsibilities as a fanfictional text. As Angelica joyously pronounces early in Act 1: “You want a Revolution? / I wanna revelation / So listen to my declaration / We hold these truths to be self-evident / That all men are created equal / And when I meet Thomas Jefferson / I’m ‘a compel him to include women in the sequel!” (Miranda, *Hamilton*). Through Angelica, *Hamilton* envisions a world of possibility where American women might enjoy equal rights with men, as humanity and fairness dictate should have happened. What is more, in placing a man of color as Hamilton at the very epicenter of the nation’s beginnings, Miranda deconstructs the traditional problematic history that traditionally focuses on the actions of well-off white men and ignores the contributions of other groups. His work “unites the story of American independence with Black, Latino, and Asian actors who were excluded from it, and in doing so allows these excluded citizens to put themselves back in the narrative... *Hamilton* is not just history, it is a corrective effort to ensure that people of color, immigrants, women, and other marginalized groups are included in the sequel” (Romano).
- 27 Whichever way a fanfic writer takes their text, they reinforce that the narrative belongs to them, above and beyond the original creator (or even the original historical figure). Furthermore, Miranda recognizes and places as a dramatic throughline the ongoing issue of contestation of narrative ownership throughout *Hamilton*, beginning with George Washington’s comment to Alexander that “You have no control / Who lives, who dies, who tells your story” (Miranda, *Hamilton*); through Burr’s surrender of the role of storyteller to Alexander in “Say No to This”; to the fluidity of witness and the impossibility of a single known narrative in “The Room Where It Happens,” where Aaron Burr sings:
- And here’s the piece de resistance / No one else was in the room where it happened / The room where it happened... / No one really knows how the game is played / The art of the trade, how the sausage gets made / We just assume that it happens / But no one else is in the room where it happens.<sup>4</sup>
- 28 Narrative fluidity is also reinforced through Eliza’s sad determination in “Burn” that “I’m erasing myself from the narrative / Let future historians wonder / How Eliza reacted when you broke her heart” to her resolve at the play’s conclusion to restore

herself to the narrative and wondering, in one of her final lines: "And when my time is up / Have I done enough / Will they tell my story?"

- 29 If one considers American history itself as a "text," then *Hamilton* powerfully meets the criteria as a fanfictional text, actively engaging with the source material. The show works against the grain of Founders Chic because its goal is not to defend or enshrine the actual Alexander Hamilton, or any of his allies and rivals. In truth, the show is not really about the *actual* Hamilton at all. Instead, it is about the reclamation of American history for the traditionally dismissed and downtrodden—the immigrants who "get the job done," the man and woman of color, as well as the poor. It is a metatext that comments on and champions modern contested values by placing people of color in positions of power they would never have held in real life, making decisions they would never have been in a position to make in actual history. Aja Romano states bluntly that *Hamilton's* entire point is "that the real Alexander Hamilton was a man for the 1 percent, not the 99 percent. The act of presenting Hamilton as a man for the people allows Miranda—and, by extension, the audience—to feel as though they are actively shaping the future by making the past all about themselves."
- 30 This powerful sense of narrative possession, particularly for people of color, is not limited to Miranda as testimonies from other people involved with the production have noted. Daveed Diggs, the originator of the roles of Lafayette and Jefferson, took note of the pleasurable incongruity in Miranda's casting choices marking, "I walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people" (qtd. in Montiero 61). Leslie Odom Jr., the originator of the role of Burr, further mentioned in a 2015 interview:
- I was a student of African-American history. I cared way more about the achievements and hard-won battles of Black people in this country than I did about the founding fathers. But this show has been such a gift to me in that way because I feel that it's my history, too, for the first time ever. We all fought in the Revolutionary War. I think this show is going to hopefully make hundreds of thousands of people of color feel a part of something that we don't often feel a part of. (qtd. in Montiero 66–67)
- 31 Just as early female *Star Trek* fans, pioneers in the creation of fanfic, constructed alternative narratives in large part because they were seeing imaginative opportunities in *Trek's* humanist, utopian worldview to create new character-driven adventures that made space for women's voices, likewise, *Hamilton* sees in the richness of American history a similar opportunity to create spaces for people of color.
- 32 Fanfiction reflects the desire for creative textual reclamation, the same that Miranda expresses in *Hamilton*, and which he punctuates through repeated shout-outs to his beloved hip hop and show tunes. As Jeremy McCarter points out, those shout-outs are persistent aural reminders that American history can be "told and retold, claimed and reclaimed, even by history who don't look like George Washington and Betsy Ross" (Miranda and McCarter 95). Rather than construct a simple alternative biography of Hamilton, he offers an "interpretive perspective about how not just to understand the past, but also how to engage with it. For him, 'history' is about possible pathways, choices, and contingency. It is, also, crucially, about interpreting the past through the lens of the present" (Adelman 292).
- 33 In an interesting iteration of creative flowering, *Hamilton*, itself a work of historical fanfic, has itself become a source of numerous fanfic stories. A search of the Hugo Award-winning digital repository "An Archive of Our Own" (AO3), which describes

itself as “a fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic,” reveals a large and growing *Hamilton* presence.<sup>5</sup> This doubling and expansion of the production’s fanfictional nature reflects not only *Hamilton*’s status as a cultural artifact with its own rabid and active fanbase but also the continuing, endless ways in which fans reinterpret narratives to suit their own expectations and cultural concerns. It is particularly interesting to note that the vast majority of these stories are rooted in the musical rather than actual American history; that is to say, when the reader is reading these texts, they are meant to be viewing it through the prism of the show—“Alexander Hamilton” is meant to be visualized in his image as played by Miranda, not in the image of the actual man.

- 34 An example of the types of creative endeavor that *Hamilton* inspires is centered on the relationship between Alexander and his friend John Laurens. Their friendship is a subject of much *Hamilton* fanfic, and worth noting as an example of the evolution of these sorts of texts as characters take particular hold in readers’ minds and hearts. Laurens has the preexisting emotional advantage of being an inherently attractive figure in American history. His personal rectitude was such that he risked his life in a duel in 1778 to defend George Washington’s honor against slanders from General Charles Lee.<sup>6</sup> Laurens was unusually outspoken in his antislavery views, especially for a rich South Carolinian and son of a major slaveholder. In April 1776, he wrote to his intimate friend Francis Kinloch: “I think we Americans at least in the Southern Colonies, cannot contend with a good Grace, for Liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our Slaves. How can we whose Jealousy has been alarm’d more at the Name of Oppression sometimes than at the Reality, reconcile to our spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind, the galling abject Slavery of our negroes?” (Laurens qtd. in Gilbert 76). Miranda focuses on this attractive trait early in the play by having Laurens pronounce: “But we’ll never be truly free / Until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me / You and I. Do or die. Wait til I sally in / On a stallion with the first black battalion / Have another / Shot!” (Miranda, *Hamilton*). By so vocally proclaiming his antislavery views, Laurens is immediately seen to modern audiences as a sympathetic figure, especially in the context of the play’s conscious choice to cast people of color, African Americans in particular.
- 35 The poignancy of the relationship between Alexander and Laurens is also made even more evident in the short scene “Tomorrow There’ll Be More of Us” near the end of Act One, where Alexander and Eliza receive the news of Laurens’ death in South Carolina; the near-total absence of song in this scene reinforces the grievous sense of Alexander’s loss. The personal relationship between Hamilton and Laurens is well-noted in history, although the physical limits of that friendship are forever unknown. We know that the two had an emotionally expressive friendship (in the tradition of many eighteenth-century men): in 1779, Hamilton famously wrote to his fellow Continental Army officer and aide-de-camp that “[c]old in my professions, warm in my friendships, I wish, my Dear Laurens, it might be in my power, by action rather than words, to convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that ‘till you bade us Adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you” (Hamilton 58). These sorts of effusive expressions of deep emotion have inspired theories of a same-sex romance among historians and popular audiences alike, and they have also fed into the production of a subgenre of *Hamilton* fanfic which I use here as an example of the powers of fan creativity when fans discover a media production of particular emotional interest.

- 36 Referring to the AO3 digital repository of fanfic mentioned previously, a search in June 2022 using the single search term "Alexander Hamilton/John Laurens" turns up 8,114 individual stories featuring their relationship as a plot point. That is far from an insignificant number when considered as part of the total. Within this particular sub-fandom, there are a number of different kinds of stories, several of which are also standard accepted fanfic generally. These include, among others, what are called *slash* stories: stories where two or more characters engage in a same-sex relationship. Obviously, Hamilton and Laurens' imaginary romantic/sexual relationship figures largely in these stories, but other characters from the show are also featured frequently. Although most slash stories in fanfic were and continue to be written by cisgender women, it is important to note that the sexual element in much fanfic fulfills a similar emotional need as that of racebending for fanfic writers of color. Don Tresca points out that "young adults, seeking to intellectually explore the sexual desires they are beginning to feel, are able to use the heroes of the fictional worlds that fascinate them... to comprehend those feelings, including desires that may feel somewhat perverse or different" (44). Thus, we see another example of "emancipating the imagination" that the source text *Hamilton* does so fruitfully.
- 37 *Hamilton*, in its various iterations and character combinations, can be seen in other kinds of fanfic as well, suggesting the limitless literary possibilities inherent to the play. Other fanfic stories that utilize *Hamilton* as their creative basis include so-called "Hurt/Comfort" stories—focusing on an instance of physical or emotional distress and pain by one character, who is then cared for by another character—and "Alternate Universe" stories—which change something crucial about the original source. (*Hamilton* itself, of course, is an A/U story in that it presents an America where people of color have taken the place of historically white figures.) *Hamilton* also features in so-called "Modern A/U" stories, which "[remove] characters and/or plots from their original context in the past and [bring] them into the present" (Romano). *Hamilton* itself is arguably a so-called Modern A/U in that it makes use of modern music, expressions, and language to dramatize figures from the eighteenth century. In terms of the AH/John Laurens stories featured in AO3 and elsewhere, these sorts of tales often cast Hamilton and Laurens (as well as other characters) as people living in the modern day, but with different occupations, residences, and backstories. In this growing legion of *Hamilton*-rooted stories, the creative impulse drives fans to insert themselves into a captivating narrative, which is not a new cultural phenomenon, though. In fact, it is evidence of a continuation of Miranda's own desire to reshape an existing text into an alternative narrative frame.
- 38 Miranda's fanfictional impulse is perhaps most eloquently expressed in the song "Wrote My Way Out" from *The Hamilton Mixtape* (2016). The *Mixtape* is a collection of songs from the show, covered by different artists, along with several examples of reworked or original songs that serve fanfiction's goal of reshaping narrative. For example, the "My Shot" remix adds lyrics that bring Alexander's cry of resistance and revolution into a modern atmosphere,<sup>7</sup> and "Immigrants (We Get the Job Done)" underscores Lafayette's and Alexander's crowd-pleasing line "Immigrants / We get the job done!" as the basis for showcasing and reframing the travails and abuses of modern immigrants to America.<sup>8</sup> In the musical's song "Hurricane," Alexander further ruminates on the difficulties of his early life, his escape from a hardscrabble Caribbean life, and how the act of writing will, as it always has, save him. In "Wrote My Way Out,"

the remix of "Hurricane," Miranda reshapes the original by explicitly linking himself and his own life, along with his hip hop collaborators on the song, to that of Hamilton. As Miranda himself reveals in the song's third verse:

High speed, dubbing these rhymes in my dual cassette deck / Running out of time like I'm Jonathan Larson's Rent check / My mind is where the wild things are, Maurice Sendak /

In withdrawal, I want it all, please give me that pen back / Y'all, I got my first beating from the other kids when I was caught reading / Oh, you think you're smart? Blah, start bleeding / My pops tried in vain to get me to fight back / Sister tapped my brains, said 'Pssh—you'll get 'em right back' / Oversensitive, defenseless, I made sense of it, I pencil in / The lengths to which I'd go to lean my strengths and knock 'em senseless / These sentences are endless, so what if they leave me friendless? / Damn, you got no chill, fucking right I'm relentless / I know Abuela's never really gonna win the lottery / So it's up to me to draw blood with this pen, hit an artery / This Puerto Rican's brains are leakin' through the speakers / And if he can be the shining beacon this side of the G.W.B. / And shine a light when it's gray out.

- 39 Miranda, Nas, and Dave East then sing together in the outro: "I picked up the pen like Hamilton / *I wrote my way out of the projects* / *Wrote-wrote my way out of the projects* / Picked up the pen like Hamilton / *I wrote my way out of the projects* / *Wrote-wrote my way out of the projects* / I wrote my way out / Picked up the pen like Hamilton." Here, Miranda and his co-lyricists explicitly link his own boyhood experiences of becoming a writer to seventeen-year-old-Hamilton's account of a 1772 hurricane that devastated his home island of St. Croix; his deft prose inspired people to donate money to send Hamilton to New York City for higher education. Miranda expresses a passionate connection of his life experiences to his art; a connection that he extended to Hamilton's life after initially reading Ron Chernow's biography. It is that same impulse to find ourselves in someone else's story that drives the creation of fanfictional texts.

## 4. Conclusion

- 40 All in all, Miranda's *Hamilton*, as fanfiction, endeavors to reshape canonical texts, unfettered by a commitment either to historical accuracy or to an established fictional canon. Fanfiction is a heavily personal endeavor, as the example of Miranda and *Hamilton* demonstrates. Miranda imbued the life of Alexander Hamilton—a Founder notorious for his militancy, his elitism, his suspicion of revolutionary democracy, and his concern with ensuring economic success for wealthy investors in the American experiment—with deep roots extending from his own life as a man of color and the son of immigrants. In the process, he reinterpreted Hamilton as a passionate democrat defined by his immigrant story. Even more significantly, he created a new storytelling space that placed people of color front and center and gave deep feelings of ownership to people generally considered on the margins of American history. That may not meet the standards of biography or historiography, but then that is not the musical's purpose, and to assume it should be misses the point of the enterprise. In this way, *Hamilton* presents a powerful story that allows so many forgotten and discarded to put themselves back in the narrative.

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## NOTES

1. In this paper, I distinguish between "Hamilton" (the actual historical figure) and "Alexander" (the center of *Hamilton* and the reconceptualized and fictionalized version of the man).
2. For example, *Hamilton* positions Alexander's endorsement of Jefferson over Burr in the 1800 election as the triggering event for Burr's rage at Alexander and their fatal duel. This is because Burr, Jefferson, and Alexander are all central characters in the play and Burr's challenge follows satisfactorily from a dramatic standpoint right on the heels of Alexander's attack on Burr as unprincipled. In reality, as Chernow and other biographers underscore, Burr's challenge actually occurred in 1804, after his bruising electoral loss for the governorship of New York, which he blamed in part on supposed scheming by Hamilton.
3. Modern media fanfiction understood this from the start. As mentioned above, it was the series *Star Trek* that launched the first wave of fanfiction. What is particularly notable about these early fanfic writers, who creatively reworked or rethought the existing *Trek* canon, is that most of them were women. This is no coincidence; although the cast, writing staff, and directing staff were all mostly or entirely male-dominated, women viewers found a particular emotional resonance in the series. *Star Trek* shared with the old wave of science fiction the romanticism, the heroism, the concern with themes and *ideas*, the optimism. What it added to science fiction was an absolutely startling new element: It did *not* keep its distance from emotion; did *not* deny close, warm human relationships even among males; did *not* call for a stiff upper lip; did *not* deny the existence and importance of sex; did *not* ban psychological action as a plot-moving force; did *not* deny the possibility of women who might be more the damsels (Lichtenberg et al. 225). In *Star Trek*, women viewers found themselves and their concerns *seen*. And they became engrossed in



the dramatic possibilities they saw on screen—"societies where women rule, androids capable of having their emotions and passions aroused . . . women as gladiators . . . women as doctors, lawyers, scientists, security officers. . . . And we submit the hypothesis that these were some of the elements which most intrigued people, which hooked into their own fantasies in profound ways, which cried out for more exploration—hence was one of the main sources of the need for fan fiction" (225–26). Lichtenberg, Marshak, and Winston, themselves long-time *Trek* fans and writers, posit that women in the 1970s (as they continue to do today) dominate the fanfic field "in a continuing effort to break free" from societal and cultural barriers.

4. The fluidity and subjectivity of narrative is reinforced after this passage with the chorus' repeated observation that "Thomas [Jefferson] *claims*."

5. A search using only the single term "Hamilton-Miranda" reveals—as of February 2022—19,175 stories in this fandom, although the number of *Hamilton* fanfics overall rises significantly when one factors in additional, similar search terminologies. Note that AO3, as of this writing, contains almost 9.4 million works across over 50,000 separate fandoms. Creative works stored in the ever-growing AO3 are open-access and identified by numerous tags that label characters, fandoms, situations, settings, and so forth.

6. Miranda recognized the inherent drama of the incident enough to compose an entire scene around it, with "10 Duel Commandments." In the scene, Miranda dramatically and visibly stresses Laurens' likability by contrasting his sense of honor and his respect for his commanding officer with Lee's battlefield cowardice and his bitter rantings against Washington.

7. For example, in the song's bridge, Busta Rhymes sings "Rise up / If you livin' on your knees, you rise up / Tell your brother that he's gotta rise up / Tell your sister that she's gotta rise up / When are folks like me and you gonna rise up? / Every city, every hood, we need to rise up / All my soldiers, what's good? We need to wise up / We ain't got no other choice, we need to wise up / Rise up!" (Miranda, *Mixtape*). This remix links the Revolution of the original to the Black Lives Matter protests underway in the United States at the time of the recording's release.

8. Miranda himself noted in a 2015 *Billboard* interview that "[the line] gets such a huge reaction here. We added bars [to the song] at the Public because it was getting such a reaction, and now I think we're going to have to add more bars. I also think it's because immigration is at the center of our politics the way it gets every 20 years. You know: Group comes in, everyone goes, 'They're taking over, they're taking our jobs.' And Trump being Trump, immigrants are at the forefront of the conversation right now" (Hayes). The line is from the Act One number "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)."

## ABSTRACTS

Scholars and critics that gauge Lin-Manuel Miranda's hit musical *Hamilton* in terms of its historical accuracy or inaccuracy miss the point about Miranda's creative endeavor. *Hamilton* represents a highly visible example of what might be called "Founders fanfiction"; although the musical is rooted deeply in historical fact, primarily via Ron Chernow's magisterial biography of Hamilton, nonetheless, as a narrative the production is a piece of popular wish-fulfilment. Certainly, the show elides or ignores some of his more unpalatable characteristics, such as his deep elitism and love of military display and power. The elaboration of certain aspects of one's character over another is a practice common to the creative endeavor of *fanfiction*. In fanfic, writers often create idealized or otherwise fantastical versions of beloved media characters,

placing them in situations unreflective of the traditionally established narrative. This practice lets fanfic creators craft their own narratives with their own sense of agency and identity and make them more meaningful. Miranda performs the same kind of narrative reshaping of Hamilton's life to conform to a particular view of Hamilton, much as historians and authors before him have done in the creation of what is known as "Founders chic"—the stressing of American Founders' virtues and character at the expense of historical dimensionality and reality. Furthermore, the play has itself become a source of multiple instances of fanfiction, signifying significant emotional connections in the story that reflect Miranda's own self-identification with Hamilton.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Hamilton, narrative, fanfiction, Founders chic, canonical

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