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Caity Hatchett

Ouachita Baptist University

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Alexander Hamilton: Underdog or Overrated?

Honors Thesis, Spring 2021

Caity Hatchett

“How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor grow up to be a hero and a scholar?”

This young, scrappy, and always hungry picture that we have of Alexander Hamilton comes from Aaron Burr’s opening line in *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Lin Manuel Miranda has given one of the most profound and lasting impressions of Alexander Hamilton that the world has ever seen. Before Miranda’s musical, Hamilton was often remembered as the obscure first treasury secretary who died in a duel—if he was remembered at all. Post-*Hamilton*, there is this starry-eyed view of a poor immigrant with an immense talent for writing who rose through the ranks of George Washington’s army and landed himself in the president’s cabinet. Hamilton is portrayed throughout the musical as an underdog (hence, “young, scrappy, and hungry”). However, he was a white man. He had the most freedom out of anyone else living at that time, and his being an immigrant did little to limit the opportunities available to him. *Hamilton* is an interesting theatrical piece, in that it conveys traditional American history in a non-traditional way. While the musical labels Hamilton as an abolitionist and a revolutionary, the actual history of who Alexander Hamilton was definitely has a different tone.

In reality, Hamilton was a much more complicated and much less revolutionary character than Miranda makes him out to be. The musical, along with its basis *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow, paints Hamilton as someone who did not like slavery and fought against it whenever he could. We also see Hamilton connected to John Laurens, a young revolutionary who sought to create a regiment of the Continental Army that was completely composed of African American men. The two were certainly fond of each other, but the Alexander Hamilton that we see in the

musical takes up Laurens' cause after his untimely death (during the Laurens interlude between "Dear Theodosia" and "Non-Stop"). In her essay "'As Odious and Immoral a Thing': Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History as an Enslaver," Schuyler Mansion historian Jessie Serfilippi discusses the evidence she uncovered proving that Hamilton dealt with slavery as part of his business dealings and that he owned slaves himself. Serfilippi's claims are based on Hamilton's personal books and financial records, and she did not find any evidence that suggested Hamilton was opposed to—or in favor of—slavery. Her essay provides a new and more familiar picture of Hamilton. Serfilippi's Hamilton, characterized by his own actions and records, is an indifferent businessman instead of the idealist underdog that Chernow and Miranda claim he was.

Alexander Hamilton is not the only historical figure to have been presented in conflicting lights; however, he is one of the more recent and well-known cases of this. An understanding of historiography and how to analyze and evaluate sources critically is an important part of knowing what to believe when it comes to history. Historiography is, at its core, how a certain historical figure, event, or time period is portrayed to the public. In Hamilton's case, historiography has typically been neutral toward him; he enjoyed a bit of protection as a result of his relative obscurity. Now that Hamilton is a more public historical figure, his image and the historiography surrounding him are becoming less celebratory than Chernow and Miranda's depiction of him. They put him on a pedestal, which means he is subject to more criticism. However, Serfilippi's Hamilton might not have come to light without Miranda's award-winning musical, and Alexander Hamilton would have continued to live in relative historical obscurity. Without Serfilippi's essay to contest it, though, Chernow and Miranda's image of Hamilton as a revolutionary abolitionist would have become the prevailing view of him.

Most of the current scholarship on Hamilton and the other founding fathers (George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, etc.) has followed a trend of historical realism, and there is more of a willingness to expose the founders' flaws than the traditional scholarship demonstrates. Although initially hailed as different from his counterparts, Hamilton's flaws are minimized in the musical and he is portrayed as an underdog because he is an immigrant. Serfilippi never explicitly states that Hamilton was privileged, but it becomes evident in the subtext of her essay. Hamilton married into one of the richest families in New York, and while most people saw him as an outsider (according to Miranda's musical) Hamilton was still afforded many opportunities. If being part of the first presidential cabinet is not enough evidence of that, the fact that he has had a hit musical written about him should prove it.

Analyzing and evaluating these different versions of Hamilton is an essential part of understanding who he actually was. Some of Chernow and Miranda's claims about Hamilton are in direct conflict with Serfilippi's claims, making the different claims disputable. The musical portrays Hamilton in an overly positive light for entertainment purposes, while Serfilippi's essay is a more accurate portrayal of Hamilton because it was written for scholarship purposes. Both are valid reasons for the claims that each person makes about Alexander Hamilton; however, neither is a complete portrait of his life. Chernow's biography is the most comprehensive piece of scholarship about Hamilton, and it serves as the basis for *Hamilton*. The musical takes several creative liberties, but is mostly accurate in its depiction of Hamilton's life because of its reliance on Chernow's biography. Serfilippi's piece is a deep dive into one of the more controversial aspects of Hamilton's life, so it does not require a narrative of his whole life. All three pieces require analysis and evaluation as part of the historical narrative surrounding Hamilton, and together they provide a more complete picture of him.

Hamilton as an Underdog

Alexander Hamilton by Ron Chernow is 731 pages long. Conquering such a book is no easy task, and Miranda's discipline in consuming such an enormous piece of scholarship is impressive. In the introduction to this mammoth work, Chernow makes the claim—in much more eloquent phrasing—that this is Alexander Hamilton's world and everyone else is just living in it. He states that “we have left behind the rosy agrarian rhetoric and slaveholding reality of Jeffersonian democracy and reside in the bustling world of trade, industry, stock markets, and banks that Hamilton envisioned.”¹ A parenthetical phrase follows this sentence, and in light of recent evidence it becomes a disputable claim: “Hamilton's staunch abolitionism formed an integral feature of this economic vision.”² Right off the bat, Chernow has set us up to expect differently of Alexander Hamilton than we expect of the other founding fathers. We can almost see an “us vs. them” scenario forming; Hamilton is an abolitionist immigrant, while the other founders are slaveholding citizens. “While other founding fathers were reared in tidy New England villages or cosseted on baronial Virginia estates,” Chernow says, “Hamilton grew up in a tropical hellhole of dissipated whites and fractious slaves, all framed by a backdrop of luxuriant natural beauty.”³ This juxtaposition is no accident, and this air of theatricality is present throughout Chernow's work. If Hamilton is in a category all by himself—if he is squaring off against the rest of the world—then he becomes someone to admire. He becomes an underdog. Chernow's Hamilton is “an immigrant, orphan” who exceeds all of the expectations for his life—including his life expectancy. At a young age, he loses everyone that he is close to, but instead of this tragedy coloring Hamilton's life it invigorates him. He wrote his way out of the Caribbean and seemingly became one of the first self-made men in the new nation. Hamilton's

¹ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 6.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 8.

success in the face of difficult odds is an inspiring story, especially when framed with Chernow's dramatic rhetoric.

Chernow establishes early on that Hamilton grew up around the institution of slavery, and the book's index has a myriad of page numbers discussing the different ways that it played into Hamilton's life. Hamilton's upbringing in a sugar colony and the fact that his mother's brother-in-law was a plantation owner meant that he "had extensive early exposure to blacks."⁴ Chernow also draws attention to Hamilton's proficiency as a businessman early in the biography, and he continues to do so throughout the course of the book. After Hamilton's mother died, he was a clerk for New York-based trading company Beekman and Cruger. Chernow says this "was the first of countless times in Hamilton's life when his superior intelligence was spotted and rewarded by older, more experienced men."⁵ One of Chernow's most striking statements gives us even more insight into just how deeply slavery was woven into Hamilton's story: "No white in the sugar islands was entirely exempt from the pervasive taint of slavery."⁶ The word "taint" has a negative connotation, and Chernow's use of it here makes it seem even more unlikely that Hamilton would be an abolitionist. Just in the first few pages of the book, Chernow has stacked the odds aggressively against Hamilton, giving us the impression that Hamilton must be a legend to have overcome them. While it is true that Hamilton faced difficulties, it is also true that he was a member of one of the most historically privileged groups. And while it is no small feat that Hamilton accomplished everything he did in the relatively short amount of time that he lived, he also had almost every opportunity to make the kind of social advancements that he did. Being able to work for a major trading company and being able to make it out of the Caribbean were

⁴ Ibid, 17, 22.

⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁶ Ibid, 8.

just the tip of the iceberg for Hamilton, but these were already years ahead of anything that women or people of color could achieve in colonial American society.

Wading further into Chernow's book, there is an intriguing entry in the index under the words "slavery, slaves." It says "AH's alleged ownership of" and then lists the page numbers that discussed this. Chernow's decision to use the word "alleged" is interesting, and it stands in line with his claims that Hamilton was an abolitionist. He asserts that "the memories of his West Indian childhood left Hamilton with a settled antipathy to slavery."⁷ The concerning thing about this statement is that there is nothing to indicate a note with a source for it. Chernow has seemingly made this assumption based on his research. By contrast, Jessie Serfilippi states in her report for the Schuyler Mansion that "there is no indication, either in documents from Hamilton's childhood or adulthood, that the horrors of slavery he witnessed on St. Croix turned him into an abolitionist."⁸ Since both Chernow and Serfilippi most likely had the same range of primary sources available to them, it is interesting that Chernow makes such a claim while Serfilippi asserts the opposite. Slavery was such a loaded issue that was a large part of Hamilton's livelihood as a lawyer that stating support or opposition to slavery could have cost Hamilton professionally and socially.⁹ Therefore, if Hamilton was as savvy a businessman as Chernow says he is he would have remained publicly neutral when it came to slavery in order to preserve his professional and social capital.

While Alexander Hamilton is more interesting as a historical figure because of his checkered upbringing and unconventional rise to the top, he also represents the lack of diversity that history has been prone to for years. And yet, billions of people have become enraptured with

⁷ Ibid, 210.

⁸ Jessie Serfilippi, "*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*": *Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History as an Enslaver* (Albany, NY: Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, 2020), 6.

⁹ Ibid, 7-13.

his story because of *Hamilton* and Lin-Manuel Miranda's ability to make a dime-a-dozen white guy seem like the unlikeliest of heroes. The musical's opening number "Alexander Hamilton" serves a similar purpose to the first twenty pages of Chernow's book. The song tells the insurmountable odds that Hamilton has already faced and will face over the course of the next two-and-a-half hours. It reinforces the idea that Hamilton should be considered legendary for overcoming the challenges that plagued him his entire life. Miranda does an interesting thing with Hamilton as a character, though. In "Aaron Burr, Sir" Hamilton is clearly unsure of himself, and this uncertainty carries into "My Shot."¹⁰ Hamilton becomes more and more self-assured, and watching his verbal sparring with Samuel Seabury is one of the first times the audience really becomes aware of this.

One of the only songs in the musical that paints a picture of Hamilton's professional life is "Non-Stop." It explicitly mentions Hamilton's role as a lawyer, but the only thing it references is his involvement in the Levi Weeks murder trial. While that was a pivotal point in Hamilton's career, it also does not reflect the cases that Hamilton most likely dealt with more often. Serfilippi provides several instances in which "Hamilton served as a consultant for legal clients on legal issues involving enslaved people."¹¹ The musical provides an incomplete picture of Hamilton's professional life, and it excludes a fact that would contradict both Chernow and Miranda's claims that Hamilton was an abolitionist. Of course, there are other factors to take into consideration—namely, the time frame of the musical. Hamilton not only wrote like he was running out of time; he lived like that, too. This could have been a result of losing the people he

¹⁰ *Hamilton: An American Musical*, directed by Thomas Kail (Walt Disney Studios, 2020), Disney+.

¹¹ Jessie Serfilippi, "As Odious and Immoral a Thing": *Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History as an Enslaver* (Albany, NY: Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, 2020), 11.

knew best when he was young, but it could also just be a part of his personality. He wanted to make a name for himself, and he certainly did.

Hamilton's story told through Miranda's compelling lyrics offers yet another opportunity to see Hamilton as an underdog. While Miranda's storyline is more condensed and some of its events overlap, the audience is aware of that fact. The soundtrack for the musical runs longer than the Disney+ film, and it would have taken another few hours to accurately re-tell Hamilton's life. Despite the condensation, the musical is fairly accurate as a timeline for his life and the lives of his contemporaries. *Hamilton's* creative storytelling has sparked a renewed interest in history for many people, which is why it is so important to view Chernow's biography and the musical with their purposes in mind. However, anyone who spends any amount of time with the musical is bound to start asking questions about the characters in it, and most will take a look at Chernow's book first because of its role as the basis for the musical. It is unlikely that many people have the free time on their hands to read all of the book, so Google becomes a second and much more viable option for researching these characters. And if people look at more recent sources about Alexander Hamilton, they will discover Serfilippi's piece that stands in stark contrast to the abolitionist Hamilton that Chernow and Miranda champion.

Hamilton as an Overrated Historical Figure

The article in *The New York Times* about Jessie Serfilippi's discovery that Alexander Hamilton owned slaves may not be as shocking of a revelation as it seems. Another not-so-shocking revelation is that even though John Laurens wanted to create an all-Black regiment in the Continental Army, he had a personal slave named Shrewsbury that accompanied him throughout the war.¹² It seems that no one who was exposed to slavery at a young age managed to escape its effects, and Chernow's statement about the "pervasive taint" of slavery in the sugar colonies rings true in a broader sense. Serfilippi's piece gives more context about why Hamilton owned slaves (without justifying his ownership), and it adds yet another layer of complexity to Hamilton as a historical figure. When he married Elizabeth Schuyler, Hamilton became part of one of the wealthiest families in New York. Chernow tells us that this "may have created complications in his stand on slavery."¹³ In the same paragraph, he mentions that "three oblique hints in Hamilton's papers suggest that he and Eliza *may* have owned one or two household slaves."¹⁴ But where Chernow saw a suggestion, Serfilippi saw a certainty. She analyzed Hamilton's books and papers and found a letter from Hamilton to George Clinton discussing a debt that he had to settle with Clinton. He mentions paying the value of a woman "Mrs. H[amilton] had of Mrs. Clinton."¹⁵ Serfilippi asserts that "to pay the value of the woman" implies Hamilton was paying Clinton for the woman. He did not say he was paying for the value of her labor as other historians have argued. Hamilton was exchanging money for the woman

¹² Gregory D. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 229.

¹³ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Jessie Serfilippi, "As Odious and Immoral a Thing": *Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History as an Enslaver* (Albany, NY: Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, 2020), 15.

herself.”¹⁶ She goes on to discuss that the timing of this letter was around the same time that Hamilton married Eliza Schuyler. Eliza would have needed someone to help her manage her household, since she grew up learning that from her mother and dealing with the Schuylers’ household slaves.¹⁷ Chernow agrees with the latter of those two facts, so maybe he could not draw a definitive conclusion about the presence of slaves in the Hamilton household.¹⁸ Since Serfilippi’s research is more comprehensive, cohesive, and current in this particular area of Hamilton’s life, it has the advantage of being perceived as more accurate. Chernow and Miranda wrote in a more business-minded fashion, while Serfilippi wrote her piece with the intent of uncovering and analyzing facts about a controversial topic. Delving further into Serfilippi’s research, she discusses the language that people during this time often used to discuss their slaves. This could also account for the inconclusiveness of Chernow’s research. Serfilippi states that Philip Schuyler always referred to his slaves as “servants,” and that “he was not the only person to use the word in this manner—it was common practice during the 18th century.”¹⁹ Studying language and how it changes is a valuable aspect of historical research, and Serfilippi utilized it correctly.

Another part of Serfilippi’s research concerns Hamilton’s involvement with the New York Manumission Society. Not only was he a member, but Hamilton served as legal counsel in different instances for the society. One of the most notable instances of this happened between 1796-1797, when a slave (Sarah) who was purchased in 1796 was given her freedom during one of the society’s meetings. Serfilippi actually discusses Chernow’s account of this incident, arguing that he gives Hamilton deferential treatment and that the situation was embarrassing

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 210.

¹⁹ Jessie Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”: *Alexander Hamilton’s Hidden History as an Enslaver* (Albany, NY: Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, 2020), 15.

because Hamilton had purchased Sarah for Angelica Schuyler and her husband and that it was an awkward situation. However, Serfilippi claims that “when Hamilton purchased an enslaved person for a friend or family member, he always recorded who the transaction was carried out for. Hamilton’s cash book reveals that the transaction made in 1796 was carried out for himself.”²⁰ Serfilippi’s analysis of the way that Hamilton recorded transactions and the distinction between the way that he catalogued purchases for himself versus purchases for others seems unimportant, but it actually gives her an edge over Chernow. This is not the first instance of Serfilippi’s meticulousness proving more helpful than Chernow’s generalizations; it is evident in her analysis of the language Philip Schuyler used to refer to his slaves and her note that Hamilton never stated his stance on slavery in any of his personal papers. Her ability to read between the lines and go beneath the surface-level facts that Chernow gathered adds to the accuracy and scholarliness of her essay.

Serfilippi was not the first or the only one to criticize previous depictions of Hamilton. In fact, Lyra Monteiro wrote a review of *Hamilton* in 2016 that criticized the language in the lyrics and casting choices. Monteiro took issue with the musical being touted as “the story of America then, told by America now” because “the idea that this musical ‘looks like America looks now’ in contrast to ‘then’.... is misleading and actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since.”²¹ Monteiro’s review criticizes the cast’s diversity along with the musical’s storytelling—but not for the reasons one would think. One of the points that Monteiro makes is about one of *Hamilton*’s most popular songs “The Room Where It Happens.” She points out that the lyric “no one else was in the room where it happened” erases the presence of the slaves Jefferson would have had serving dinner to his

²⁰ Ibid, 10.

²¹ Lyra D. Monteiro, review of *Hamilton: An American Musical*, directed by Thomas Kail, Broadway, *The Public Historian*, February 2016, 93.

guests.²² While this is a nuance that angered Monteiro, Aaron Burr was another rich, white man. This lyric, whether Miranda intended it this way or not, is actually somewhat historically accurate. It was a common idea that slaves should be invisible, so Burr not accounting for them in this line makes sense. Also, the probability that Burr would have questioned the slaves to glean information about what happened during the dinner is incredibly low. In terms of the cast, Monteiro points out that despite the diversity, the various musical styles that the characters sing in seem to match their ethnicities. “Among the actors playing the three Schuyler sisters, the one who sings the ‘white’ music of traditional Broadway (Philippa Soo as Hamilton’s wife, Eliza), reads as white (she is actually Chinese American), while the eldest sister Angelica who sings in the more ‘black’ genres of R&B and rap, is black (Renée Elise Goldsberry),” Monteiro asserts. “Similarly, King George III, who sings ‘white’ ‘60s Britpop is performed by a white actor (Jonathan Groff....).”²³

Another important aspect of Monteiro’s review is her criticism of *Hamilton*’s underlying message about the American Dream. To her, the musical “adopts the old bootstrap ideology” which is problematic “as it belies the ways in which structural inequalities block many people of color from achieving the American Dream today” and it was especially so during the time period that *Hamilton* is set in because “no matter how much harder they worked, the direct ancestors of the black and brown actors who populate the stage and sing these lines would never have been able to get as far as a white man like Alexander Hamilton could.”²⁴ Monteiro’s biggest criticism of the show is that it tells the same story that America has always told: hard work will get you everywhere—even when it very clearly gets you nowhere. Serfilippi and Monteiro give more accurate and critical views of Alexander Hamilton and *Hamilton*, which could be perceived as

²² Ibid, 94.

²³ Ibid, 91.

²⁴ Ibid, 96.

negative because of how Chernow and Miranda depict Hamilton. Reconciling these two views of Alexander Hamilton is no easy task, but the ability to look past entertainment value and see the facts is an important part of building a more complete and accurate history of his life.

Reflection

I have watched *Hamilton* at least four times over the course of the last six months, and I am breathless every time I watch it—in part because I am singing all of the different parts, but also because of what it means to me. *Hamilton* made me realize that history is more connected to the present than I realized, and that historical figures went through the same struggles that we still face today. I have the soundtrack memorized, and I could probably give a fairly accurate (but not necessarily good) one-woman performance of the show. But every time I watched it, I had to remind myself that Alexander Hamilton was not Puerto Rican and that he owned slaves. I had to think of the musical's casting as symbolic of the people behind the success of each of the historical figures the actors portray. It is an abstract idea that did not help much, but it allowed me to enjoy the musical without stressing over all of the larger inaccuracies. For entertainment purposes, *Hamilton* is truly an astounding piece of artistry. But as a piece of historical storytelling, it is lacking. Lin-Manuel Miranda's use of Ron Chernow's biography as the basis for the musical arguably contributed to the whitewashing *Hamilton* has been accused of. After all, Chernow is a white man who wrote about another white man. *Hamilton* harps on the greatness of America's founding in a way that highlights the founding fathers in the same generally positive light they have always enjoyed. Chernow's biography gives Alexander Hamilton a generous treatment, portraying him as an underdog and an abolitionist who has had to fight against insurmountable odds to emerge successful. Miranda portrays Hamilton in the same way, and *Hamilton* lifts him up as a man of great renown and a hero. But Chernow and Miranda got a couple of things wrong: Hamilton was not necessarily an abolitionist and he was not really a hero, either.

Jessie Serfilippi's treatment of Hamilton has the historical realism that is so prevalent today, and it is disheartening and refreshing all at once. Finding out that yet another founding father owned slaves is far from surprising, but knowing that Hamilton was not actually as inspiring of a person as the musical makes him out to be is disappointing. Serfilippi's expert analysis of Hamilton's personal papers and cash books gives us a more complete picture of his true relationship to slavery. Through her essay, we learn that Hamilton often served as a middleman for his relatives when they wanted to purchase slaves, he gave legal counsel concerning the slave trade and slavery, and he actually owned household slaves himself. In just 28 pages, Serfilippi shatters Chernow's claims that Hamilton was a staunch abolitionist. Her work is truly an amazing piece of scholarship and one that is necessary to understanding who Hamilton was as a historical figure. Along with Serfilippi, Lyra Monteiro also found flaws in the previous narrative about Hamilton, and her review of the musical carries the anger of someone who is tired of hearing the same exclusive history over and over again. Monteiro dissects the nuances of *Hamilton*, from lyrics that erase the presence of African Americans to casting that was not as diverse as it seemed. She even discussed that *Hamilton* followed the traditional historiography surrounding the American Dream and its accompanying ideology about hard work. Both of these women went beyond the face value of Hamilton's story to present hard truths about the man and the musical.

I have already made my peace with these conflicting ideas of Hamilton; I know that *Hamilton* is not meant to be a historical authority on Alexander Hamilton and that Chernow's book is sixteen years old. While Serfilippi and Monteiro initially seem a bit harsh, they are both giving a more critical and thought-provoking analysis—and that is incredibly refreshing. Without their challenges to my knowledge about Hamilton, I would not have been forced to think

critically about the information I was given. And their perspectives have altered mine—for the better. For all of the inaccuracies in *Hamilton*, it is still fairly historically accurate and incredibly entertaining. It is an inspiring story, and the world is definitely wide enough for another one of those.

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