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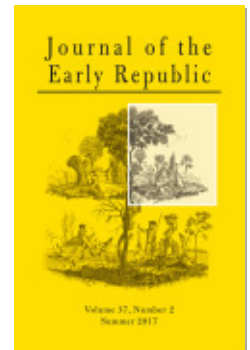
The American Revolution Rebooted: *Hamilton* and Genre in
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The American Revolution Rebooted

Hamilton and Genre in Contemporary Culture

ANDREW M. SCHOCKET

The American public has become enamored with stories of and about the founding period. *Hamilton: An American Musical*, while distinctive, engages with an emerging entertainment genre shaped by the culture industry (whether in Hollywood or on Broadway) for today's anxious United States audiences. Observant viewers can easily identify these productions' hallmarks: The setting can be instantly visually communicated; there are heroes with recognizable qualities but are nonetheless indistinct in the popular imagination, so writers can play with them; the villains are ethnically British, minimizing the likelihood of public-relations blowback; nobody likes slavery, the true brutality of which is never shown; and women can be strong characters while standing by their men. Plus, wigs, corsets, and breeches. The narrative outline of the American Revolution is familiar, but the details are fuzzy in the contemporary public mind, leaving writers and directors leeway for individual story arcs. These parameters, structured and permeable like those of any genre, render a show recognizable enough to be pitched and marketed successfully and to appeal to wide audiences but elastic enough to allow for invention—with the potential for outliers to provide intriguing counterpoints. Because of the popularity and prevalence of these productions, they also provide the plotting through which the general public increasingly understands the American founding. *Hamilton* was forged in the mold of this genre, and, despite its casting and hip-hop delivery, is more representative of it than we might think.

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Since the turn of the twenty-first century, and increasingly from 2010 on, the founding era—that is, roughly the 1770s through 1800—has become a familiar and profitable setting. “Founders chic,” the phenomenon of increased interest in the leading men of the American Revolution (partly in military history, but primarily focusing on the big six: Washington, Franklin, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison), has been described as primarily a publishing phenomenon. But as it turns out, the founding era has also found a home onscreen, and now onstage. We can count among the more prominent entries *The Crossing* (2000), *The Patriot* (2000), *Liberty’s Kids* (2002–2004), *Benedict Arnold: A Question of Honor* (2003), *Felicity: An American Girls Adventure* (2005), *John Adams* (2008), *Turn: Washington’s Spies* (2014–2016), *Sons of Liberty* (2015), *Book of Negroes* (2015), *Beyond the Mask* (2015), and now, *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015). Measuring overall audiences in an age of syndication and streaming is notoriously difficult, but by at least one metric, these productions have a considerable audience, having sold a combined 6.5 million DVDs. Given the copy-cat nature of Hollywood, more is on the way: The chief of a top independent studio recently credited “all of the excitement around ‘Hamilton’ and the story of our nation’s founding” as motivation for a new movie based upon a novelization of the life of Peggy Shippen, who married Benedict Arnold.¹

Given their similarities, these productions constitute a genre in their own right, which I call “American Revolution rebooted.” A “genre” constitutes a set of conventions in a particular place and time that a movie, novel, or musical is both shaped by and, perhaps, shapes. In other words, a genre is less a category than an ongoing conversation among writers, producers, marketers, and audiences that is rejoined with each new production similar to those that have gone before. The coalescence of the Revolution rebooted, especially since 2010, does not necessarily

1. Evan Thomas, “Founders Chic: Live from Philadelphia,” *Newsweek* 138, July 9, 2001, 48–51; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “Remembering the Revolution: Individual and Collective Memories in the Twentieth Century” (Organization of American Historians Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI, 2012); compiled from the Film Industry Database (filmid.academicrightspress.com). Sales figures as of Oct. 1, 2016. *Benedict Arnold* and *The Crossing* are not listed in the database. Dave McNary, “‘Traitor’s Wife’ Movie about American Revolutionary War in the Works at Radar,” *Variety*, Sept. 14, 2016, <http://variety.com/2016/film/news/traitors-wife-movie-benedict-arnold-radar-1201859855/>.

preclude our thinking of earlier works like *The Howards of Virginia* (1940), *1776* (1972), or *Revolution* (1985) as belonging to it, although we should note that those productions' creators and initial audiences may have thought of them differently, as "history films"—just as many 1940s films then considered melodramas or detective, mystery, or crime movies were only later lumped together as examples of *film noir*. In fact, *Hamilton's* intersections with previous screen and stage depictions of the American Revolution manifest its creators' admitted awareness of similarities across these productions, and, no doubt, subsequent shows (for stage or screen) will be made and experienced with *Hamilton* and these conventions in mind. Ultimately, despite the hoopla highlighting its deviations from previous productions, *Hamilton* is unlikely to transform the conversation.²

While American Revolution rebooted productions are in conversation with many generic conventions, three major ones predominate. First, the protagonist position of Patriotism is assumed of all Anglo Americans. The good guys are what dominant American culture has historically coded as *good guys*: heterosexual white men. Markers of Tory or British deviance as portrayed in these productions include cowardice, effeminism, and brutality. Accordingly, in the first season of the AMC series *Turn: Washington's Spies*, the two most prominent British officers are the passively ineffective Major Hewlett and the violence-craving Lt. Simcoe. As Alexander Rose, author of *Washington's Spies* and series consultant, notes about the need to communicate through shorthand, "history is complex and drama is simple." Second, Patriotism consists of a personal, libertarian view of "freedom," consistent with popular contemporary definitions of liberty (who is against freedom?) and easily explained quickly onscreen—much as Samuel Adams does in the climactic scene of the History Channel miniseries *Sons of Liberty*, urging the Continental Congress to declare independence in the name of "the freedom to live our lives the way we see fit, and the confidence that that

2. The scholarly literature on "genre" is vast. Celestino Deleyto articulated the definition of genre used here in "Film Genres at the Crossroads: What Genres and Films Do to Each Other," in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX, 2012), 218–36. For "history" as a film genre, see Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood*, (Lawrence, KS, 2002), 8–47; Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction*, Bloomsbury Film Genres Series (New York, 2013), 9–35.

freedom cannot be taken away from us.” That said, if a character becomes a Patriot, he (and it is usually he) does so in reaction to British violence, also quickly communicated in visual media. In the HBO hit *John Adams*, John becomes inspired to rebel not through trenchant analysis of the British constitution’s imperial contradictions, but by the series’ placing of him riding onscreen through the bloody aftermath of the British retreat from Lexington and Concord. Third, in American Revolution productions, conflict is resolved through unanimity among Anglo Americans that results from the expulsion of the deviant opposition. Thus *The Patriot*’s few loyalists eventually cower in the protection of British troops, rather than continuing to live in the general population. Just as the central tension in westerns is the use of violence to establish order, or in romantic comedies the surrender of individual independence to traditional monogamy, or in mobster films the tragic valuing of loyalty over law, American Revolution rebooted productions chronicle the establishment of consensus through exclusion.³

Hamilton does little to confound the generic conversation in any of its three major elements. The Revolutionary protagonists establish their heterosexual *bona fides* in the song “Winter’s Ball,” when Hamilton, Burr, and friends sing that they are “Reliable with the/Ladies.” These men, along with an imposing and sonorous George Washington, are contrasted favorably with the high-pitched and fearful Tory, Samuel Seabury, and against the flamboyantly dandy King George, who in tone and demeanor plays the queen. It may come as no surprise that *Hamilton* creator Lin-Manuel Miranda’s favorite scene of *John Adams* is when the title character meets King George III; as Miranda has admitted, “I’m just taking it as a given that everyone watched the *John Adams* miniseries.” Support for independence is assumed, with the opposition scared, foppish, and violent. Second, the heroes fight for an unambiguous libertarian strain of personal freedom. All of *Hamilton*’s protagonists either embrace abolition or remain silent on slavery. In “Cabinet Battle #1,” Alexander mocks Jefferson’s “civic lesson from a slaver.” After his death, Eliza claims that Alexander “could have done so much more” to fight for abolition had he not suffered an early death, which, if interpreted as

3. Alexander Rose, *Washington’s Spies, and Turn*, Museum of the American Revolution: Videos, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/AmRevMuseum/videos/vb.314212505331993/1045628185523751/?type=2&theater>.

the opportunity to exceed what very little Hamilton had accomplished regarding slavery during his lifetime, was certainly the case. Nor does *Hamilton* challenge the third convention, the establishment of a *united* states through the exclusion of deviant others. Seabury disappears after one song, and George III is left to cry into his tea about his empire's diminution. True, when Miranda first publicly performed the number that opens the musical, at the White House in 2009, he got laughs for introducing it as about someone who "embodies hip-hop, treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton," a sly nod that we do not expect the nation's founders to rap. But the creators of *1776* could have said the same thing about having the Continental Congress break into song and dance. Just as with *1776*, *Hamilton* is unlikely to transform the basic elements of the Revolution rebooted genre.⁴

This generic coalescence encompasses the appearance of productions that challenge the conversation, but ultimately do not affect a genre's overall trajectory. The convention that *Hamilton* most notably flouts (to acclaim and derision) is one less particular to Revolution rebooted productions rather than endemic to Hollywood and Broadway, namely, the casting of white actors. As many critics have noted, *Hamilton*'s intentional casting of people of color masks the musical's otherwise conventional, white-centric storylines. Consider two recent westerns featuring untraditional casting choices. Denzel Washington's star turn in *The Magnificent Seven* (2016) merely substitutes a charismatic black actor in a role previously inhabited by a charismatic white one, like *Hamilton*'s Christopher Jackson and Daveed Diggs as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, respectively. By contrast, Jamie Foxx's performance in the title role of *Django Unchained* (2012) represents plot choices that rethink the western genre premised upon an African American protagonist. The Revolution rebooted genre features an entry analogous to *Django Unchained*, far more subversive than *Hamilton*. Joint Black Entertainment Television (BET) and Canadian Broadcasting Company's (CBC) *The Book of Negroes*, based upon the Lawrence Hill novel, follows

4. Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical, with a True Account of Its Creation, and Concise Remarks on Hip-Hop, the Power of Stories, and the New America* (New York, 2016), 70, 218, 161. Lin-Manuel Miranda Performs at the White House Poetry Jam: (8 of 8), 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNFf7nMIGnE>.

the fictional Aminata Diallo, who escapes slavery, joins the black loyalists in Nova Scotia, sails to Sierra Leone, and testifies against the slave trade in England. *Book of Negroes* portrays an ambiguous American Revolution, one in which joining the British can result in freedom. Unlike *Hamilton*, in which Eliza wonders who will tell Alexander's story, as *Book of Negroes* lead actress Aunjanue Ellis points out, Aminata insists on writing her own story, a surpassingly daring act. Still, the miniseries includes a sympathetic character, "Black Sam Fraunces," who believes in the American Revolution's redemptive possibilities. And, like other entries in the founding genre, *Book of Negroes* emphasizes individual rather than collective liberty. Moreover, ratings and DVD sales suggest that *Book of Negroes'* overall impact, at least quantitatively, was minimal, nor did it earn major U.S. awards or make a splash among critics.⁵

Because of *Hamilton's* founding-era subject matter, we should not discount the effect that *Hamilton's* casting has had on its very diverse

5. More prominent critical evaluations include Joanne B. Freeman, "How Hamilton Uses History," *Slate*, Nov. 11, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/11/how-linemanuel_miranda_used_real_history_in_writing_hamilton.html; Annette Gordon-Reed, "Hamilton: The Musical: Blacks and the Founding Fathers," *National Council on Public History*, Apr. 6, 2016, <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/hamilton-the-musical-blacks-and-the-founding-fathers/>; Lyra D. Monteiro, "Review Essay: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*," *Public Historian* 38 (Feb. 1, 2016), 89–98, doi: 10.1525/tph.2016.38.1.89; Rebecca Onion, "A *Hamilton* Skeptic on Why the Show Isn't As Revolutionary As It Seems," *Slate*, Apr. 5, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2016/04/a_hamilton_critic_on_why_the_musical_isn_t_so_revolutionary.html; Ishmael Reed, "Hamilton and the Negro Whisperers: Miranda's Consumer Fraud," *www.counterpunch.org*, Apr. 15, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/04/15/hamilton-and-the-negro-whisperers-mirandas-consumer-fraud/>. "Aunjanue Ellis on Aminata Diallo," *BET.com*, <http://www.bet.com/video/the-book-of-negroes/2015/exclusives/aunjanue-ellis-on-aminata-diallo.html?cid=facebook> (accessed Oct. 3, 2016). *Book of Negroes* garnered a .5 Nielsen rating when first aired, and has sold 30,734 DVDs. Steve Baron, "Wednesday Cable Ratings: College Basketball Wins Night, 'Workaholics', 'Dual Survivor', 'American Pickers', 'Little Women L.A.' & More," *TV By The Numbers by zap2it.com*, Feb. 19, 2015, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2015/02/19/wednesday-cable-ratings-college-basketball-wins-night-workaholics-dual-survivor-american-pickers-little-women-l-a-more/>; "Film ID," [http://filmid.academicrightspress.com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu:8080/film_search/result?films\[\]=34004](http://filmid.academicrightspress.com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu:8080/film_search/result?films[]=34004) (accessed Sept. 21, 2016).

audiences—the cast album’s prodigious sales success, not least on the Billboard Rap chart; its inspiring countless internet mash-ups, its memorization by a generation of adolescents—and how, despite its conventional story, it allows for people of color to see themselves as belonging to the founding and vice versa. Similarly, *Hamilton*’s Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette’s anachronistically overt pride in their non-native status (“immigrants,” they brag, “get the job done”) brings contemporary foreign-born Americans into the Revolutionary era. Despite their anachronisms, these inclusions can change the perception of viewers concerning who belongs at the founding, and, no less importantly, to whom the nation’s founding belongs. Nonetheless, as an entry in the ongoing genre that is big-budget portrayals of the founders, *Hamilton* has not so much transformed the Revolution rebooted conversation as reified it.⁶

6. Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 121; Ishmael Reed, “‘Hamilton: The Musical’: Black Actors Dress Up like Slave Traders . . . and It’s Not Halloween,” *Counterpunch*, Aug. 21, 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/08/21/hamilton-the-musical-black-actors-dress-up-like-slave-tradersand-its-not-halloween/>. Robert Viagas, “Hamilton Broadway Cast Album to Hit #1 on Billboard Rap Chart,” *Playbill*, Nov. 16, 2015, <http://www.playbill.com/article/hamilton-broadway-cast-album-to-hit-1-on-billboard-rap-chart-com-371927>. Natalie Zutter, “Why Hamilton Is the Perfect Mashup for Every Fandom,” *Tor.com*, Jan. 27, 2016, <http://www.tor.com/2016/01/27/hamilton-mashups-perfect-every-fandom/>.