

“Let me be part of the narrative” – The Schuyler Sisters ‘almost’ feminist?

Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton: An American Musical* (*Hamilton*) (2015) has tapped into the current cultural moment, lauded as the ‘saviour of Broadway’¹. The show’s unique tour de force is the use of hip-hop to convey the story, reigniting the genre and attracting a new musical theatre audience. This musical idiom combined with *Hamilton*’s colour conscious casting has allowed Miranda to create ‘the story of America then told by America now’² exposing to critical view the whitewashing of history and the more questionable legacies of the Founding Fathers of America. The show is inescapable, dominating social media through its innovative #Ham4Ham and #Hamildrop initiatives³. Television shows are even cashing in on *Hamilton*’s cultural currency with references to the show appearing in *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, and *Gilmore Girls* (amongst others) as well as talk shows such as *The Late Show*. With so much exposure it is hard not to get swept up in the hype surrounding the musical.

Hamilton is closely associated with happier political times in America. Lin Manuel Miranda premiered an early draft of the opening number at the White House in 2009 and the Obamas were keen supporters of the show, even going so far as to introduce *Hamilton*’s 2016 Tony Awards performance. As if that wasn’t recommendation enough, Donald Trump is most definitely not a fan. When Mike Pence attended a performance after the election and was met with an impassioned

¹ Alexis Soloski, ‘Lin-Manuel Miranda: the bard behind Broadway’s Hamilton’, *Guardian*, 20 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/20/lin-manuel-miranda-musicals-hamilton-broadway-disney-hiphop> (accessed 21 May 2018).

² Lin-Manuel Miranda, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Paul Taylor-Mills, *Live At The Other Palace*, 21 April 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/TheOtherPalace/videos/1388878277817070/> (accessed 5 July 2018).

³ #Ham4Ham was initially conceived as a means to entertain the crowds waiting for the show’s weekly discount lottery whereas #Hamildrop is a yearlong programme of monthly releases of *Hamilton* related material during 2018.

curtain-call speech, Trump was quick to tweet his ire⁴. But is the show as groundbreaking as the publicity suggests, or as it appears, at first sight?

Explored within the current context of fourth-wave feminism and the quest for female equality and representation (as succinctly articulated by #timesup and the surrounding movement), the musical's revolutionary fervour diminishes. *Hamilton's* all-male creative team raises the question of whether this is another show 'controlled by men, subtly – or not so subtly – reinforcing a patriarchal view of society'.⁵ As female characters plead to be 'part of the narrative',⁶ we have to start to unpick and explore their representation within *Hamilton* to identify whether this fits in with the show's progressive label or reinforces regressive stereotypes and tropes. In his 2015 *New Yorker* article Michael Schulman contended that the ending of *Hamilton* was 'almost' feminist⁷. This turn of phrase felt like an apt description for the show as a whole - a piece of work in a state of flux, not able to fully escape the tropes of musical theatre and embrace more progressive female characterisation.

In her guest blog for *The Feminist Spectator*, Stacy Wolf highlights the importance of expanding discussion around musicals to explore how we can love musicals that also trouble us.⁸ She encourages musical theatre enthusiasts to keep talking and embrace ambivalence and contradiction in our spectatorship and fandom. Whilst

⁴ Trump, D. J. (@realDonaldTrump) "The Theater must always be a safe and special place. The cast of Hamilton was very rude last night to a very good man, Mike Pence. Apologize!" 19 Nov 2016, 5.56am. (Tweet)

⁵ Grace Barnes, *Her Turn On Stage, The Role Of Women In Musical Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2015), 16.

⁶ Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeromy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 110.

⁷ Michael Shulman, 'The Women of "Hamilton"', *New Yorker*, 6 August 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-women-of-hamilton> (accessed 19 April 2016).

⁸ Stacy Wolf, 'Hamilton', *The Feminist Spectator*, 24 February 2016, <https://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2016/02/24/hamilton/> (accessed 17 February 2018).

critical discourse (Monteiro, L.D., 2016⁹ & Gordon-Reed, A., 2016¹⁰) has begun to explore the presence, and absence, of race within *Hamilton* there has, as yet, been no in-depth academic exploration of gender representation, and the portrayal of the female characters. This is a significant omission in critical engagement with ‘the best-reviewed musical of the decade’.¹¹ Given the show’s status, fans are passionate in their defence of any perceived criticism – for example, when I recently articulated my perspective on the female characters within the show during a seminar a male peer was quick to shoot me down, declaring that I was wrong because the characters rap! This exchange made me consider the role that Hip-Hop music plays in the show’s gender representation, and question whether we have just swapped ballads for beats.

Hip-Hop is often configured as a cultural space dominated by masculinist identity interwoven with misogyny. Artists like Mary J. Blige, Beyoncé and Missy Elliott challenge and expand such a definition, reawakening Hip-Hop’s roots to confront dominant ideologies and call into question “taken for granted” knowledge and standards.¹² These artists refuse to be limited by the constraints of gender and continually disrupt the patriarchal hegemony at work within the industry – it is worth noting that the genre’s origins were more gender balanced, but the influence of capitalism has skewed this over time. By contrast, musical theatre is, at first glance, a cultural space dominated by women. They make up the majority of the audiences but are often absent or stereotypically represented on stage, forced to exist within

⁹ Monteiro, L.D. (2016) 'Review Essay: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*', *The Public Historian*, 38(1), pp. 89-98 [Online]. Available at: <http://tph.ucpress.edu/content/38/1/89> (Accessed: 6 July 2018).

¹⁰ Gordon-Reed, A. (2016) *Hamilton: The Musical: Blacks and the founding fathers*, Available at: <http://ncph.org/history-at-work/hamilton-the-musical-blacks-and-the-founding-fathers/> (Accessed: 6 July 2018).

¹¹ Terry Teachout, 'Why Musicals Succeed,' *Commentary* 141, no. 3 (2016), 50.

¹² Theresa Renee White, 'Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott and Nicki Minaj: Fashionistin' Black Female Sexuality in Hip-Hop Culture—Girl Power or Overpowered?' *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6 (2013): 607–26 (608–9).

the “taken for granted” cycle of ‘boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy finds girl’, and rarely passing the Bechdel-Wallace test.

Grace Barnes has highlighted the fact that female characters in musical theatre are ‘increasingly one-dimensional – victim/whore stereotypes – and women onstage are frequently denied their own identity or any complexity. Their function within the show is to allow the male story to progress.’¹³ In *Hamilton*, all of the four named female characters (Eliza, Angelica, Peggy and Maria) exist only in relation to the central protagonist, Alexander Hamilton. Eliza as his wife, Maria as his mistress, and Angelica and Peggy as his sisters-in-law. The fascinating realities of the Schuyler sisters are boiled down for musical theatre consumption to the muse (Angelica), the victim (Eliza) and Peggy - so unremarkable she disappears midway through the show with no further mention. Indeed, there is much discussion of Peggy’s second-act absence on social media, inspiring a host of hashtags (#andpeggy #justiceforpeggy), memes, and gifs.

These remarkable women exist in the world of *Hamilton* to help orient the audience’s understanding of the politics at play and humanise the male protagonist. Framed as an 18th century version of Hip-Hop super group Destiny’s Child with their close harmonies and sassy choreography, the Schuyler sisters embody what pop-culture critic David Swerdlick elsewhere calls ‘sistah grrrl power’.¹⁴ As with all girl groups, there is a tendency toward representational types: the fierce one (Angelica), the feminine one (Eliza), and the forgettable one (Peggy). Peggy is so unmemorable that she doesn’t ‘merit a musical motif’, so keeps having to reassert herself within

¹³ Barnes, 12.

¹⁴ Daphne A. Brooks. “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 180–204 (183).

their song ('And Peggy').¹⁵ Peggy's significance is further undermined by her character breakdown where she is described as 'The Michelle Williams of Destiny's Child'.¹⁶ Williams was the least popular member of the trio, a fact humorously exploited by the poormichelle.com, blog which celebrates all of the times Michelle got the short end of the stick in Destiny's Child.

The sisters' big moment is their 'I want' song, 'The Schuyler Sisters'. Traditionally, 'I want' songs provide the audience with a glimpse of a character's inner desires. Here the song is 'a love letter to New York',¹⁷ with the spotlight firmly on the 'Big Apple' rather than the sisters themselves. For all the musical and choreographic allusions to the independent women of Destiny's Child, this moment in *Hamilton* is not able to truly allow the sisters to shine, reinforcing instead their need for 'a mind at work' (read man) to exist.¹⁸

In *Hamilton*, the musical styles of the female characters contribute to their characterisation. The show's casting breakdown suggests parallel musical theatre and Hip-Hop personas (highlighting the show's duality). Angelica Schuyler, the eldest of the Schuyler sisters, is described as: 'Nicki Minaj meets Desiree Armfeldt'.¹⁹ If we ignore the reference to Armfeldt, Sondheim's 'fading actress and inveterate maneater'²⁰ and focus instead on Angelica's Hip-Hop alter ego, there is much to be discovered. Minaj is a fascinating character who has 'redefined her own sexuality, taken agency and written her own script.'²¹ In keeping with this idea Angelica is

¹⁵ Miranda and McCarter, 42.

¹⁶ *Hamilton* show guide, <http://stageagent.com/shows/musical/4417/hamilton> (accessed 21 May 2018).

¹⁷ Miranda and McCarter, 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44. Interestingly Miranda notes that he wanted to use this song to introduce the Schuyler Sisters 'outside the context of Hamilton and his future affections' (*ibid.*, 42).

¹⁹ *Hamilton* show guide.

²⁰ As described by David Rooney, 'A Little Night Music' (review), *Variety*, 13 December 2009, <http://variety.com/2009/film/awards/a-little-night-music-8-1200477886/> (accessed 21 May 2018).

²¹ White, 621.

presented as a character in control of her destiny, someone who is the intellectual equal of Hamilton.²² In 'The Schuyler Sisters' she espouses the views of a defiant feminist, demonstrating her political awareness in the song's most sophisticated section.

ANGELICA:

I've been reading Common Sense by Thomas Paine
So men say that I'm intense or I'm insane
You want a revolution? I want a revelation
So listen to my declaration:

ALL SISTERS:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident
That all men are created equal"

ANGELICA and (COMPANY):

And when I meet Thomas Jefferson (unh!)
I'mma compel him to include women in the sequel

WOMEN: Work!²³

Later in 'Satisfied', she raps some of Miranda's most intricate lyrics at a speed that Miranda himself can't match.²⁴ If we engage with Dvoskin's theory that 'a woman who sings loudly' - or in this instance raps fast - 'and demands attention in the public space of performance challenges normative ideas of gender',²⁵ then Angelica can be read as a character who, like her Hip-Hop counterpart Minaj, is taking agency and reframing ideas of gender. However, her disruption of gender norms is limited by her fleeting stage time -- and so she is 'almost' feminist - constrained by the tropes of musical theatre, never quite able to achieve her potential.

²² Miranda himself states that Angelica 'is a world class intellect in a world that does not allow her to flex it' (Miranda and McCarter, 83).

²³ Miranda and McCarter, 44.

²⁴ Miranda, quoted in Valerie Estelle Frankel, *Who Tells Your Story? History, Pop Culture, and Hidden Meanings in the Musical Phenomenon Hamilton* (LitCrit Press, 2016), 48.

²⁵ Michelle Dvoskin, 'Embracing Excess: The Queer Feminist Power of Musical Theatre Diva Roles', *Studies in Musical Theatre* 10, no. 1 (2016): 93-104 (95).

In contrast, Eliza Schuyler Hamilton is described as Alicia Keys meets Elphaba.²⁶ This pairing of a musical theatre powerhouse and the less adventurous Keys creates a conflicting dynamic at the heart of Eliza. Millie Taylor and Dominic Symonds have highlighted the prevalence of this contradiction within musical theatre, which often positions women and their voices in situations of strength even as their storylines cast them as weak or victimized.²⁷ Miranda exploits these incongruities most noticeably in Eliza's solo 'Burn', as Eliza vocalises her pain at the discovery of her husband's infidelity. Here, Miranda gives Eliza agency as she erases herself from the narrative by burning her letters to Hamilton, allowing Miranda to highlight the erasure of women's stories within history. From a musical theatre perspective, this moment refuses the conventional 'torch song' of unrequited love,²⁸ instead providing Eliza with a space to articulate her anger and desire for revenge. However, there is no escaping the fact that Eliza stays with Hamilton; and, read from a hip-hop viewpoint, the song conforms to what Treva B. Lindsey describes as the 'ride-or-die' ethos, which 'dictates that women support and love their men, regardless of their transgressions'.²⁹

The character of Maria Reynolds has been described as 'an archetypal femme fatale—sort of a sultry Rihanna type',³⁰ and her contribution to the story is part of an all too familiar cultural narrative of male destruction at the hands of a predatory woman. However, these descriptions are misleading. In fact, Reynolds has no agency; she is, 'helpless' as she sings,³¹ and we watch her husband effectively sell her to Hamilton. This disquieting moment is accompanied by a duet between

²⁶ *Hamilton* show guide, <http://stageagent.com/shows/musical/4417/hamilton> (accessed 21 May 2018).

²⁷ Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor, *Studying Musical Theatre* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 146.

²⁸ Frankel, 130.

²⁹ Treva B. Lindsey, 'If You Look in My Life: Love, Hip-Hop Soul, and Contemporary African American Womanhood,' *African American Review* 46, no. 1 (2013): 87–99 (92).

³⁰ Shulman.

³¹ Miranda and McCarter, 71.

Hamilton and Maria (an unwholesome reprise of the courtship of Eliza depicted in the earlier song 'Helpless'). Here, in classic Hip-Hop style, Maria sings whilst Hamilton raps about himself (this is also the case in 'Helpless'), while the other women in Hamilton's life powerlessly watch from the walkway above the stage, haunting the action. It is interesting to consider how this moment might have been dramatized had Maria's version of events been published. Maria Reynolds purportedly met Peter Grotjan, a merchant, and told him she had written her own pamphlet to share her version of events.³² Unfortunately, as this pamphlet has never been discovered we are stuck with Hamilton's description of events.

The intersection of musical theatre and Hip-Hop provides developmental possibilities for two of America's native art forms. This juxtaposition also brings contemporary debates about race and gender to the forefront. However, it is unfortunate that *Hamilton* is not as progressive in its treatment of gender as its deployment of colour conscious casting allows it to be about race. There are flashes of inspiration, but overall the show conforms to the reductive heteronormative conventions of musical theatre. The speedy correction when casting calls seemed to indicate gender blind casting would be considered for the Philadelphia production suggests that while Americans can accept an African American playing George Washington they are not ready to see a woman in his distinctive tricorne hat³³ - although Miranda has spoken about the possibility of gender blind casting in future amateur productions.³⁴ Fans of *Hamilton* have even suggested that Miranda write a sequel exploring the lives of the

³² Peter A. Grotjan, 'Sections from Memoirs of Peter A. Grotjan,' published in William Safire, *Scandal monger: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 485–6.

³³ Eva Kis, '[UPDATE] "Hamilton" issues gender-blind casting call for lead roles', *Metro*, 3 March 2016, <https://www.metro.us/philadelphia/hamilton-issues-gender-blind-casting-calls-for-lead-roles/zsJpcc---kJ75xYhYXcW5Y> (accessed 28 May 2018).

³⁴ Andrea Towers, 'Hamilton casting call wants women to play Washington and Burr', *Entertainment Weekly*, 3 March 2016, <http://ew.com/article/2016/03/03/hamilton-casting-women-washington-burr/> (accessed 28 May 2018).

Schuyler sisters in order to ‘include’ them more thoroughly.³⁵ In the interim we will have to console ourselves with Eliza’s most feminist moment, when she puts herself back in the narrative and takes centre stage at the show’s finale, and try to forget that, in Tommy Kail’s direction, this is orchestrated by Hamilton. This is the moment that Schulman defined as ‘almost’ feminist, as Eliza takes over the show’s narration demonstrating how integral she is to Hamilton’s legacy. Here she highlights all of the great work she achieved after Hamilton’s death and ponders:

And when my time is up

Have I done enough

Will they tell *my* story?³⁶

Sadly, not yet but perhaps Miranda will take Angelica’s advice and ‘include women in the sequel’.³⁷

³⁵ @_TimeOfMyLife (16 June 2017) A concept: @Lin_Manuel writes Schuyler: An American Musical based off the lives of the Schuyler Sisters that “include(s) women in the sequel”. Available at: <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/8-ways-schuyler-sisters-original-nasty-women> [Accessed 28 May 2018].

³⁶ Italics added by author. Miranda and McCarter, 281.

³⁷ Miranda and McCarter, 44.