



## Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism

---

Volume 12  
Issue 1 *Winter* 2019

Article 9

---

7-20-2019

### "Not Throwing Away My Shot"

Ryan Meservey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Meservey, Ryan (2019) "'Not Throwing Away My Shot,'" *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol12/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# "Not Throwing Away My Shot"

## *Bastards in Shakespeare and Hamilton*

*Ryan Meservey*

When perusing the online Shakespeare Insults Dictionary, you will find the word "bastard" in colorful variety. Entries like "bastard warriors!" to "bastardly rogue!" to "bastards and else!" suggest a common use: the word "bastard" in Shakespeare's time alludes not only to social status but also to a general persona (Novy 124). This use in regards to personality has certainly persisted into the present, popping up angrily in movies and on the Internet. Urban Dictionary, the Internet's de-facto pop culture dictionary, defines the term as "someone who disregards other people in pursuit of their own self-interest," and someone who is "narcissistic and unknowingly frustrating" (Entry 3, Entry 5). These definitions attest to the typical American experience with this word. Today, "bastard" is primarily used to describe self-centered people and less often used to describe children born out of wedlock.

This dissociation seems to have been less strong in Shakespeare's day, as evidenced by another use of the word in his plays. When capitalized, this word expresses an official title and character type for Shakespeare's characters, affecting everything from the characters' own actions, intentions, and interactions, as well as the manner in which the audience views them (Neill 275). Modern plays tend to avoid this type of "Bastard" character;

yet, it seems the character has made a resurgence through the Broadway hit *Hamilton* released in 2015.

In this paper, I analyze both bastards and Bastards, investigating the Bastard characters that took to the stage in Shakespeare and returned to the stage in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. In Shakespeare, these characters provide a springboard for understanding old and new connotations. Looking at *King Lear's* Edmund, as well as *Much Ado's* Don John and *The Tempest's* Caliban, we can understand the special villainy attributed to bastards in Shakespeare's day. In contrast, Miranda's lead character in *Hamilton* reveals a modern shift toward sympathy for bastards. Despite *Hamilton's* similarities with Shakespeare's characters, his bastardy comes across as heroic rather than villainous. Comparing Shakespeare and *Hamilton* exposes not only a shift in values, but also a pathway to more sympathetic readings of Shakespeare's Bastards. In this paper, I will examine this shift, comparing the older Bastards with the new. The comparison reveals a split between the powerful and the powerless, with the former valuing conformity and the latter valuing ambition. Ultimately, I will examine perspective's transformative power in the final stage of my paper through a modern Shakespearean monologue that emphasizes the possibilities of reimagining Shakespeare's most villainous Bastard.

## Bastards in Shakespeare and Elizabethan England

To best understand how Elizabethan audiences viewed Shakespeare's Bastards, they must be placed in their proper historical context. English bastards have a long history of discrimination in legal and moral codes. Just a few years prior to Shakespeare's penning of *King Lear*, the number of children born out of wedlock peaked, leading to religious and societal backlash against these "illegitimate" or "natural" children (Novy 125). Religious leaders feared the moral disorder caused by their growing numbers, and so they intensified their efforts to stigmatize bastards in the culture. Clerics made critical remarks such as: "Bastards inherit the wickedness from their parents" and "if a bastard be good, that cometh to him by chance, a special grace . . . but if he be evil that cometh to him by nature." Attitudes toward bastards stressed the natural element of their births. Because bastards were conceived "in nature" (outside of marriage), they were marked by nature as inherently flawed (Neill 276).

To justify the belief in bastard's flawed nature, religious leaders put forward two arguments. First, many believed procreation outside of marriage made bastards not merely "children of sinners" but "children of sin itself" (Neill 276). Second, religious leaders relied on scriptural descriptions about the oneness of marriage, as Renaissance scholar Michael Neill noted, "Bastards are un-whole because they are offspring not of 'one flesh' but of two bodies: there is an inherent and sinister doubleness about their begetting" (278). This religious dogma tended to reinforce social attitudes that already cast affairs and love-children in a sinister light. These cultural attitudes combined to give bastards a decidedly negative image in the eyes of the public, which image then curtailed a bastard's ability to move upwards within society and improve their reputation.

The public campaign against bastards created a collage of belittling character attributes that often played out on the stage. Michael Neill summarizes the character of the Bastard saying, "In drama bastards are typically presented as a special class of transgressive male" (275). This type of character contains a certain amount of disruptive energy attributed to the Bastard's birth within the heat of passion and against religious codes. His origin marks the Bastard as energetic and defiant toward the characters around him, often leading him to sexual liaisons or ambitious plotting against other characters. These attributes typically villainize Bastards, creating an presumption of maleficence whenever Bastards entered the stage.

Villainy, scheming, and disruptive energy all play out in Shakespeare's Bastard characters. In *King Lear* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, the Bastard characters operate as villains: they fiercely oppose the protagonists, frequently manipulate others, and make attempts to increase their social standing or lower the social standing of others. In *King Lear*, Edmund the Bastard frames his legitimate brother for conspiracy, betrays his father for power, and initiates sexual relations with two of the play's most powerful females. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John proves nearly as insidious when he attacks the honor of the play's heroine and encourages infighting to damage the honor of the other characters because it "better fits [his] blood to be disdained of all" (1.3 354-355). Both these characters typify Bastard villainy in Shakespeare through their energy and ambition.

Edmund and Don John also typify the association of bastards with nature in Elizabethan times. Both of these characters' Act I monologues emphasize their allegiance to nature, albeit in different ways. Edmund begins his

monologue worshipping nature, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess” (*King Lear* 1.2 334). He then uses his own conception “in the lusty stealth of nature” as evidence for his “fierce quality” (345). In these lines, Edmund embraces the wild aspects of nature connected to bastardy; for him, these qualities justify his claim to his brother’s land and his father’s power. Don John relates to nature differently in his monologue, namely by emphasizing naturality and authenticity. He states:

I cannot hide what I am:  
I must be sad when I have cause and smile  
At no man’s jests, eat when I have stomach and wait  
for no man’s leisure. (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.3 340–3)

Don John’s monologue lists several activities to make a point: regardless of the action, he will stay true to his nature and the natural order, thereby connecting himself to nature. Thus, in both Bastard villains, Shakespeare establishes a connection to nature.

In addition to the attributes already discussed—villainy, energy, ambition, and nature—Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* introduces a racial component to bastardy not yet discussed. One of the play’s side-characters Caliban is arguably one of Shakespeare’s Bastard characters. Not only does Caliban exhibit many of the attributes held by Edmund and Don John, but he is also ridiculed as a “demi-devil . . . a bastard one” because of his island birth to an evil witch (*The Tempest* 5.1 272). Many productions play into the text’s inherent tension between islander and colonist by using racial overtones, as in Julie Taymor’s 2011 film. These racial overtones also derive from the Elizabethan use of the word “bastard” to characterize entire populations as “dirty,” debased, and illegitimate (Neill 279). Disturbingly, these views are largely unquestioned in *The Tempest*, which ends with Caliban’s disgrace and the colonizer’s triumph.

Caliban, Edmund, and Don John serve as caricatures of the Bastard character in theatre and a window into the Elizabethan public’s attitudes toward bastards. With few exceptions, bastards in public or on stage rarely received positive portrayals. Due to the heavy negativity directed at bastards, one may be surprised by the defiantly positive portrayal of a Bastard in modern English theatre. Our analysis turns toward contemporary theatre, or more specifically, the status of Alexander Hamilton and his characterization in the play *Hamilton*.

## Hamilton: A Bastard Character?

“How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore // and a Scotsman . . . // grow up to be a hero and a scholar?” (*Hamilton* 1.1 1–5). From the opening lines of *Hamilton* to the end, the audience is reminded again and again of Hamilton’s status as a bastard (the opening refrain repeats at the beginning and end of each act). The other characters seem aware of Hamilton’s bastard status, and the play hints that his status was a matter of private and public insult; for instance, a character referred to him as a “creole bastard” to another character (*Hamilton* 2.11 11). Nonetheless, these signs alone do not make Hamilton a Bastard character. In Shakespeare, the Bastard character not only stood out due to his birth but also due to the character attributes previously established. How does Hamilton compare in this regard?

In ambition and “disruptive energy,” Hamilton certainly fits the bill. Like Edmund and Don John, Hamilton fights to change his social standing and in so doing changes the destinies of countless other characters. From the beginning, the play promises us “there’s a million things [he] hasn’t done, but just you wait” and “the world will never be the same” (*Hamilton* 1.1 26–27, 67). The play makes good on these terms. By the play’s end, Hamilton has immigrated to America, gained a national following, fought in the Revolutionary War, married up, wrote fifty-one pamphlets, had an affair, established a national bank, prevented his rival from attaining the presidency, and died in a gun duel. If the events of the play do not stress Hamilton’s ambition and energy enough, the existence of two songs trumpeting Hamilton’s ambition should be persuasive enough (“My Shot” and “Non-Stop”). The play begins and ends on the energy of its title protagonist.

In line with Bastard portrayals like that of Edmund, Hamilton also emphasizes its protagonist’s sexual energy. In a mixture of fact and fiction, the play establishes a love-triangle between Hamilton, his wife, and her sister in order to emphasize Hamilton’s allure. This allure remains a theme throughout the play, showing up in the courting sequences of Act I and in Hamilton’s affair in Act II. Curiously, Hamilton’s affair begins with his first and only invocation of his bastard status, singing weakly, “You never seen a bastard orphan // more in need of a break” (*Hamilton* 2.4 7–8). Apparently, he uses his own status as a bastard to justify his actions. Hamilton’s sexual prowess echoes that of Edmund’s with a consequential difference. Whereas Edmund’s actions add to his notoriety as a villain, Hamilton’s sexual

proWess earns him mostly praise. Even with Hamilton's affair, the negative consequences of his promiscuity fade into the background by the play's end, evidenced by his wife's impassioned eulogy to him in the final scene without mention of his infidelity. Unlike *King Lear*, *Hamilton* frames its Bastard character's sexual energy in a predominantly positive light.

Hamilton resembles Shakespeare's Bastard characters in another key respect through his connection to nature. Miranda's casting call clearly enunciates Hamilton's commitment to nature, stating "[Hamilton] speaks his mind, no matter the cost" (Herrera 26). In this attribute, we can hear an echo of Don John who implored "let me be that I am and // seek not to alter me" (*Much Ado About Nothing* 1.3 362–3). While Don John seeks to be true to his inner desires, Hamilton seeks to be true to his thoughts—though this trueness to nature does not exclude his manipulation of other characters on stage. Both these characteristics come to fruition in Act II Scene V ("Room Where It Happens"); in this scene, Hamilton states his desire to change the US capital honestly but also uses his wits to manipulate his political opponents. The result is a scene that commends Hamilton's forthcoming nature and his manipulative power.

Miranda's play addresses one more idea connected with bastardy: the idea that non-white races represent a type of bastard. By design, *Hamilton* casts a variety of races to play historically white persons. As Brian Herrera points out, Miranda wrote *Hamilton's* main character and most of its other characters as explicitly "Non-white" in his casting call descriptions (26). Similar to the portrayal of Caliban in dozens of productions, Hamilton uses race to emphasize the outsider status of its protagonist. However, unlike most productions of *The Tempest*, which make Caliban the lone symbol of a racial other through his decrepitness, deformity, or racial difference, *Hamilton* escapes this ostracization by portraying Alexander Hamilton as one race among many. Miranda's casting decision, apparent in the original Broadway performance, conditions the audience to enjoy the contributions of each character as well as their unique presence as Latinos/Latinas, Caribbean immigrants, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Black Americans. The result is a celebration of diversity at its finest.

In celebrating non-white and non-British characters, *Hamilton* celebrates the same attributes that were stigmatized in Shakespeare's plays. In terms of ambition, disruption, natural connection, sexual energy, and racial difference, Hamilton fits the mold of the Bastard character; yet, he receives

little or none of the shame and all of the praise. Ambition and manipulation mark Shakespeare's Edmund and Don John as evil deviants while the same attributes mark Hamilton as a role-model, one whom the other characters cannot help but sing for at the play's beginning and eulogize at the play's end. The stark contrast between the treatment of Bastard characteristics in these plays hints at a world of value difference from Shakespeare to Miranda that calls for deeper analysis and understanding.

## Perspective Differences and the Values of the Powerless

Although we tend to believe in the universality of values and virtues, the above analysis suggests huge value differences based on perspective. Shakespeare's plays appealed to the broader public of Elizabethan England, and so they often embodied the perspectives prevalent in that society (Novy 125). Due to the increasing stigmatization of bastards in Shakespeare's day, he may have felt consciously or unconsciously bound to abide by the negative coloring of their character, portraying them as villains or as inherently flawed people by nature. On the other hand, *Hamilton* has been championed as a "story of immigrants," told by immigrants and performed by groups that have been historically marginalized in the United States (Herrera 25). Because *Hamilton* comes from people who have historically lacked power, it makes sense that characteristics like ambition, disruption, and manipulation would be praised rather than disdained. Without the means of power, these attributes give people a pathway to social advancement. From the perspective of the powerless, Bastard attributes can become the best virtues.

Shakespeare demonstrates the moral differences caused by perspective throughout his plays. For example, in *Henry V* a disguised King Henry argues with his soldiers over the competing values of obedience and personal accountability. The two disagree largely because of their perspectives—the soldiers emphasize obedience because they do not want to feel the guilt of war crimes, and the king emphasizes personal accountability because he does not want to own the sins of his army (*Henry V* 1.4 127–185). However, this difference in position does not reveal perspective's power nearly as much as the comparison between Bastard characters. In comparing *Hamilton* with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*, we see that the perspective of the storyteller is powerful enough to flip values

and vices on their heads, leading to an embrace of values formerly cast as vices. The comparison of Bastard characters reveals a revolution far more intriguing than the prioritizing of values that occurs in Henry V.

## Conclusion

This revolution in understanding perspective opens up new possibilities for re-interpreting the Bastards in Shakespeare. Perspective's importance leads to questions like: How would Caliban's story change if it were told from an indigenous perspective? How might we understand Don John through the lens of children who grew up in foster care? How would Edmund's "evil" monologue change if reiterated by an immigrant?

Questions like these provide new fodder for sympathizing with Shakespeare's characters, a sympathy shown in Riz Ahmed's recent performance of Edmund's monologue. Redemptive interpretations like these can uncover our biases against certain values and help us to understand the experiences of people whose perspectives differ from our own. By opposing the typical associations with Bastard characters in theatre, *Hamilton* succeeds in creating greater empathy for those considered "illegitimate" or those born in a variety of disempowered positions. By rejecting Elizabethan tropes, *Hamilton* casts light on a new way to understand Edmund, Don John, Caliban, and other stigmatized persons in Shakespeare's plays.

# Works Cited

- Miranda, Lin-Manuel. *Hamilton*. Performed by Alex Lacamoire, and Ron Chernow., Warner/Chappel, Los Angeles, California; exclusively distributed by Hal Leonard Corporation, Milwaukee, WI, 2016.
- Neill, Michael. "'In Everything Illegitimate': Imagining the Bastard in Renaissance Drama." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 270–92.
- Novy, Marianne. *Shakespeare and Outsiders*. Oxford UP, 2013.
- "Shakespeare Insults Dictionary!" *The Education of William Shakespeare*, Infolinks.
- Shakespeare, William. *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, Oxford UP, 2016.
- Susman, Dan, director. *Riz Ahmed as Edmund in King Lear: 'Now, Gods, Stand up for Bastards'*. *Shakespeare Solos, The Guardian*, 3 May 2016.
- Truthtellerunc. "Bastard." *Urban Dictionary*, 18 Apr. 2010.

# Works Consulted

- Findlay, Alison. "Unnatural Children." *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama*. Manchester UP, 1994, pp. 85–128.
- Gilbert, Anthony. "'Unaccommodated Man' and His Discontents in King Lear: Edmund the Bastard and Interrogative Puns." *Early Modern Literary Studies: A Journal of Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century English Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2000.
- Herrera, Brian E. "Miranda's Manifesto." *Theater*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2017, pp. 23–34.
- McLeish, Kenneth. *Longman Guide to Shakespeare's Characters: a Who's Who of Shakespeare*. Longman, 1986.
- McWilliams, Nathan. Personal Interview. 3 June 2018.
- Richter, Natasha. "A Second Look at Don John, Shakespeare's Most Passive Villain." *Inquiries Journal*, *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 1 Jan. 2010.
- Slights, Camille. "When Is a Bastard Not a Bastard? Character and Conscience in King John." *Shakespeare and Character: Theory, History, Performance, and Theatrical Persons*, edited by Paul Edward Yachnin and Jessica Slights, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 214–31.
- Wilson, Jeffrey. "Bastards in Shakespeare." *Stigma in Shakespeare*, Harvard UP, 2018.
- Wilson, Jeffrey. "Edmund's Bastardy." *Stigma in Shakespeare*, Harvard UP, 2018.
- Young, Bruce. Personal Interview. 27 May 2018.