



All Theses and Dissertations

---

2017-06-01

# *Hamilton*: Publics Theory, the Rhetorical Impact of Theater and Reimagining the American Founding

Anna Sanford Low  
*Brigham Young University*

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

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

---

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Low, Anna Sanford, "*Hamilton*: Publics Theory, the Rhetorical Impact of Theater and Reimagining the American Founding" (2017).  
*All Theses and Dissertations*. 6428.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/6428>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

*Hamilton*: Publics Theory, the Rhetorical Impact of  
Theater and Reimagining the American Founding

Anna Sanford Low

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Brian David Jackson, Chair  
Grant Maurice Boswell  
Gregory Dallan Clark

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2017 Anna Sanford Low

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### *Hamilton*: Publics Theory, the Rhetorical Impact of Theater and Reimagining the American Founding

Anna Sanford Low  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Arts

In a time when our nation is particularly divided and confused about its identity, *Hamilton*, the Broadway musical created by Lin-Manuel Miranda has become an example of art's ability to unify disparate ideological, socio-economic and racial groups. The play's reception deserves study to understand how both liberals and conservatives can agree upon an interpretation of a musical that celebrates diversity in race and representation. Celebration and interpretation of the play has been so widespread that a public has emerged, furthering the influence of the play's ideas. This public is unique in a time when most people cocoon themselves in communities with shared identities and philosophies. But the public of *Hamilton* reflects the historical origins of a public: a group willing to shelve their personal interests to discuss a shared cultural artifact and experience. The argument then of this paper is two-fold: first, that theater is a cultural artifact worthy of rhetorical discussion since *Hamilton* evidences that art can have tremendous influence on changing the values and ideas of society; and second, that the best way to understand the impact and influence of a play is not by examining the artifact directly but the public and its discourse in response to the experience of encountering the play. This body of criticism provides better insight into the reception and interpretation of theater as a rhetorical and aesthetic work. Ultimately, it is difficult to determine the long-lasting influence of the play but the public discussion has shown that art can have a unifying rhetorical effect.

Keywords: *Hamilton*, Publics Theory, Rhetoric, Aesthetic, Theater

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I kind of felt like Miranda's Hamilton going back to school for a master's degree when everything in my life was already crazy and demanding, but I didn't want to throw away "my shot." And I am glad every day that I threw caution and reason to the wind and did this degree. The classes I have taken from my rhetoric professors have fed my soul and mind. I cannot thank Brian Jackson, Greg Clarke and Grant Boswell enough, who introduced me to texts and ideas that changed the way I think about communication, relationships, and rhetoric in society. Thank you to Audrey, Grant and Claire who know every word of "My Shot" and "Aaron Burr, Sir" and who have been my constant cheerleaders. And thank you to Clarke, who always believes in me and encourages my love of learning.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
<i>Hamilton: Publics Theory, the Rhetorical Impact of Theater and Reimagining the American</i> <i>Founding</i> .....	1
Publics Theory: A Discursive Group Emerges around a Cultural Artifact .....	3
Art, Theater, and Publics Theory: Theater has Rhetorical and Aesthetic influence.....	9
Redefining American Heritage: <i>Hamilton</i> Can Give an Old Story a New Look.....	13
Promoting Cultural Unity: A Play Promotes the Values and Sounds of Immigrants and Minorities.....	15
The Public Has Spoken: Examining Public Discourse to Understand the Interpretation and Influence of the Play .....	18
Outside the Theater: The Discussion of <i>Hamilton</i> is Unprecedented.....	21
Works Cited .....	24
Theory Sources .....	24
Hamilton Articles.....	24

*Hamilton*: Publics Theory, the Rhetorical Impact of Theater and Reimagining the American Founding

Almost daily *Hamilton* is the subject of discussion and critique. Its popularity and cultural impact is unprecedented for a Broadway musical. Rachel Syme, in an article written for *Fast Company*, a magazine that discusses business innovation, wrote: “Hamilton [. . .] is one of those rare cultural phenomena that reaches beyond its genre and infiltrates the broader conversation. Fourth graders love the show as much as 80-year-olds. Hip-hop fans and history buffs alike are giddy over its inspirational, intricately rhymed retelling of the founding father’s complicated relationships with Aaron Burr, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and more.” This quote reflects the reach of *Hamilton*’s influence in its statement but also in its publication. A business magazine is discussing a Broadway musical! The play’s cultural impact continues to evolve and grow among ideologically, socio-economically, and racially disparate groups. Part of the revolutionary aspect of this musical is that it combines the historic and revered founding story of America with a cast that reflects the diversity of America today. The visual rhetoric of diversity in a white dominated art form broadens the play’s appeal to a much wider audience. Even those who cannot physically sit in the theater have found access to the play through television: PBS aired “Hamilton’s America” giving the public an opportunity to view many of the numbers they had listened to and loved already. This media content created by PBS perpetuated *Hamilton* as a powerful influence in a diverse range of communities.

The power of the public fascination with *Hamilton* seemed to be institutionalized during the Tony Awards when *Hamilton*’s legacy was defined by the (then) President of the United

States and the First Lady. President Obama described the play as “the civics lesson our children can’t get enough of.” The play was being described not just as a re-fashioning of the history of the nation but a current lesson of the duties of citizens. The former president and First Lady described it as “the story of America”: “a place of citizenship, where we debate ideas with passion and conviction; a place of inclusiveness, boisterous diversity as a great gift; a place of opportunity, no matter how humble our origins, we can make it if we try” (Obamas’ introduction of *Hamilton* at the Tony Awards). This definition alludes to progressive ideology present in the play: immigration, diversity, and the American dream for all. But the play’s appeal extends far beyond the group that subscribes to these philosophies. Conservatives and liberals both attend, celebrate, and discuss the play, a rare phenomenon in current society where partisanship has become even more polarized and isolating.

In the midst of this constant struggle for political coverage and dominance on other issues, the discussion surrounding Lin-Manuel Miranda’s popular Broadway play has remained fairly unified in praise and promotion. The group that has evolved in defense of the play crosses political, gender, age and socio-economic boundaries. And while many may think that *Hamilton* is simply a cultural phenomenon, it is an example of the rhetorical power of art to shape identities and understandings of both historical and modern political ideologies. Theater, in modern discussion, is entertainment, a culturally elite pastime, and criticism often focuses on judgments—whether the play is good or bad entertainment. Rarely does a play inspire scholarly work to understand how the art experience shapes cultural, community, and societal identities and ideology. But *Hamilton* is an experience—an exchange and interaction between the play and the audience.

Scholarly work in rhetorical studies, in the occasional instances when it discusses art, especially theater, focuses on the ideas and ideals promoted by the play itself. But this is just one side of the equation of an art experience and ignores the interaction with the audience, their interpretation and power to extend the influence of the play's rhetoric. The criticism and discussion published evidences the powerful rhetorical effect of theater and warrants scholarly discussion. The argument then of this paper is two-fold: first, that theater is a cultural artifact worthy of rhetorical discussion since *Hamilton* evidences that art can have tremendous influence on changing the values and ideas of society; and second, that the best way to understand the impact and influence of a play is not by examining the artifact directly but the public and its discourse in response to the experience of encountering the play. This body of criticism provides better insight into the reception and interpretation of theater as a rhetorical and aesthetic work.

#### Publics Theory: A Discursive Group Emerges around a Cultural Artifact

Publics theory describes a common, frequent occurrence: groups collectively debate and discuss, both formally and informally to forge a mostly unified opinion on an issue. Gerard Hauser explains that this group has the "intent to influence its resolution" and argues that "publics are not fixed, they are not idealized constructs; they are emergences that arise from rhetorical experience" (85). "Rhetorical experience" is a broad, inclusive term that can include any written, artistic, spoken production that aims to inform or persuade citizens. Basically, people congregate to discuss and understand their world: their identities, their histories, the policies that will affect their daily lives and communities. These people often come together surrounding a common experience with an aesthetic event or artifact. With the availability of the



internet and the proliferation of social media, discursive communities—meaning groups that discuss an issue—can be created and perpetuated instantly. But publics existed much earlier and although their modes of communication were different, their aims were similar.

Jürgen Habermas first began defining publics theory in the late twentieth-century. He realized that publics arose as culture, written and spoken word, was decommissioned and made more accessible to a general public. Policy statements, laws, art were all first the purview of the elite, educated and wealthy. Eventually as art and literacy became more accessible, groups of average citizens began meeting to discuss. Habermas explains, “Inasmuch as culture became a commodity and thus finally evolved into ‘culture’ in the specific sense, it was claimed as the ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented subjectivity communicated with itself” (29). Thus art and writing was no longer held separate from the masses, elevated as a fine art or status symbol. This shift created a discursive space for art and writing. The discussion and interpretation of the art changed its value and meaning (Habermas 37). Habermas’s theory of the public sphere defines this discursive community. His definition presupposes a literate group of individuals, arguing that before the term “public” became widespread, this community was called ‘world of readers’ (26). This group operated outside the authorities’ realm but debated “basically privatized but publicly relevant” spheres of ideas (27). Today, we call this “public opinion.”

Public opinion is powerful and theorists who responded to Habermas sought to outline the real implications of publics. According to Nancy Fraser, public opinion shapes identities—both individual and community identities (68). In giving voice to some, it excludes and silences others (68). Often, a community alienates those who do not identify with the majority. Fraser pushes back against what she perceives in Habermas’s theories as the ability of a public to

temporarily shelve their personal interests in the desire to find a common identity and understanding. Access to public discussions and even the dynamics of those discussions often silences some minorities and others on the fringes of society. Thus, Fraser theorizes ways that those relegated to the outskirts of publics can affect change in opinion—often forming their own groups or working within a public to change perceived and prejudicial norms. This concept is perhaps harder to understand in our society where the internet has allowed many diverse voices to contribute to discussion. But, Fraser’s theory is particularly salient in our concept of the public surrounding *Hamilton* where those who typically would not participate in discourse about Broadway musicals or historical discussions about the American founding because they felt excluded from both have found themselves actively contributing to the emerging public of the play—shaping interpretation and conversation about its ideas and revolutionary impact.

In Fraser’s discussion she describes two types of publics: weak publics and strong publics (75). Weak publics form opinions but have no powers in decision making. Strong publics are both “opinion forming and decision making” (75)—where the opinion of the public affects the decisions of political leaders. Her definition of strong publics reflects a belief that weak publics, those that exist only for public discourse, have no effect on legislative changes. But due to the ubiquitous nature of public discourse in our modern society, it is often hard to determine long-term effects of publics. The reality of publics is often a bit messier and less delineated—most publics may begin as “weak” but have lasting and powerful effects on societal and governmental changes over time. Fraser argues,

Any conception of the public sphere that requires a sharp separation between (associational) civil society and the state will be unable to imagine the forms of self-

management, inter-public coordination, and political accountability that are essential to a democratic and egalitarian society. [. . .] A post-bourgeois conception can permit us to envision a greater role for (at least some) public spheres than mere autonomous opinion formation removed from authoritative decision-making. (76)

Our concept of publics today, unlike Habermas's more limited view of publics reflects Fraser's "hybrid" definition. Publics may begin weak, formed only to discuss and share ideas but often those ideas enact real change. Often, they become a mixture of weak and strong publics. Published discourse becomes the artifacts that reveal a public—a group actively seeking to contribute to the understanding and interpretation of a cultural artifact. This discourse shapes public opinion but also has more far-reaching influence on education, policies, and particularly individual and community identity.

Central to the mission of publics is the forming of identity—outlining who we are and often who we are not. Publics emerge because as humans we have a desire to congregate to delineate our identities, to share space with those who feel similarly. Naturally, we are divided by "interests and insights, social communities," beliefs and experiences (Burke RM 146). But we want to understand who we are in relation to others. This process of "identification" allows us to become "one" with another person or persons. Kenneth Burke, the esteemed rhetorician, describes identification as "one's notion of his personal identity may involve identification not just with mankind or the world in general, but by some kind of congregation that also implies some related norms of differentiation of segregation" (268). We have an inherent need to align ourselves in purpose and interests with other humans, and by doing so we distinguish ourselves from yet another group. But this shared sense of purpose and identity gives greater meaning to

our lives and helps us navigate our existence. We want community. But we also want to know who we are in relation to others—those in the group and those outside the group. David Blakesley in *Elements of Dramatism* explains Burke’s notions further, saying that we have a “desire for what he calls consubstantiality or ‘shared substance’ and represents an unconscious desire to identify with others [. . . ] Consubstantiality may be necessary for any way of life. And thus rhetoric, as he sees it, potentially builds communities” (15). Blakesley and Burke describe this common identification as “acting together” (16). We don’t simply find common ground; we work from that common ground. Rhetoric, then, prompts the establishment of publics and cultivates that shared identity within the public. The act of persuading someone, consciously or unconsciously, to find common ideology creates the discourse which establishes the public.

This discussion of publics makes them sound formal and structured but publics are often much broader in scope; they are not a club to which you must submit membership dues. Publics occur anywhere people are discussing and responding to ideas. Gerard Hauser argues, “a public sphere may be defined as a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them. It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings” (62). Citizens engage in publics with the goal of shaping social understandings, definitions, identities, and values. Rosa Eberly describes it “as much hope as it is reality” (1). This definition of publics formally describes what often happens informally—discussion erupts around art, culture, literature and this discussion shapes the identities of the discursive public.

Rosa Eberly brilliantly applies this theory of publics to literary criticism by private citizens in her book, *Citizen Critics*. She specifies the scope of her study as “literary public spheres.” This framing hearkens back to the definition of Habermas which emphasized literacy

and culture as the stuff of publics. She also echoes the theory of Habermas in her insistence that “private people can come together in public, bracket some of their differences, and invent common interests by arguing in speech or writing about literary and cultural texts” (9). The reflections and discussions of these citizens shape how art is interpreted, often even published and consumed. Literary publics frame society’s understanding of art, revealing the “polyphonic nature of texts as well as the widely divergent judgments of actual readers” (2). Art is used as rhetorical tools to mold the values of society. Culture constitutes identity, and often not in the way an author intended. But this is the discursive, rhetorical role of literary publics. Eberly’s approach echoes the theories of publics discussed earlier but diverges in its application: she amasses the body of criticism published in magazines and newspapers to understand the rhetorical influence of specific pieces of literature. She argues that the emergent publics’ discussions had greater impact in the promotion and/or censorship of the literary work. This novel approach reflects the interaction between the cultural artifact and its audience. It witnesses that the public discourse is often the best indicator of rhetorical effect.

Although Eberly seems to be the first to apply publics theory to specific literary texts to analyze the impact of public discourse on reception, she is not the first to establish the power of art and culture to mold identities. Before Eberly’s discussion, John Dewey, Susan Langer, and Kenneth Burke described art’s powerful rhetorical and aesthetic force. Aesthetic refers simply to art as a process of interaction and interpretation, wherein the rhetorical or persuasive force of identification occurs. Art accesses a language more universal and thus unifying. John Dewey explains that “the material of esthetic experience [art] in being human—human in connection with the nature of which it is a part—is social. Esthetic experience is a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization, a means of promoting its development” (339). He

further describes, “Works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own” (347). Art, which is expressive, emotive, and moving, has the power to bind us consubstantially to others in a way language cannot. It is little wonder then that art has been used for centuries rhetorically—to unite people, to inculcate values, and establish a community. Performative art, particularly, served to unite a disparate group of watchers around a common experience, hopefully inculcating a shared identity.

#### Art, Theater, and Publics Theory: Theater has Rhetorical and Aesthetic influence

Theater, particularly, is susceptible to inspiring a diverse public, a discursive group who come together around a cultural experience. Anciently, cultural experiences were used to shape and mold the values and identities of societies. Theater, particularly, has such tremendous rhetorical and aesthetic power because it frames actions and values in front of an audience. It is dependent on the interaction and interpretation of the watchers—enhancing the transformative power of the art. Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of *Hamilton*, understands the unique power of theater to unite a disparate group of people. In an interview with Terry Gross, a respected radio personality, he explains, “I think one of the things that makes theater special is, [. . .] it's one of the last places where we all have a common experience together.” This statement seems simple and obvious—a group of people with different beliefs and ideologies is *literally* sitting in a theater together, watching the Broadway play. However, the experience is far from passive. Watching is an interactive, transformative process. We watch those around us every day, striving to emulate and learn values and better understand better our own humaneness—theater just

formalizes a regular, necessary practice. Paul Woodruff, in *The Necessity of Theater*, explains that we need to find human actions worth caring about (22). Our society and democracy depend on watching; Woodruff explains that justice and politics need witnesses (23). Theater simply frames and stages human action for the watching audience. Because of this, it has rhetorical and aesthetic power to change attitudes and identities, to bind together a community. Woodruff defines theater as “the art by which human beings make or find human action worth watching, in a measured time and place” (18). He explains that “there is an ethical reason to practice the art of watching. Part of our need to watch theater grows from our need to care about other people” (20). We want to find connection with people in our society and in our history. We want to feel human connections and shared understandings.

Theater, according to Woodruff, provides the opportunity for us to watch human action on stage—the actions are “immediate” and “present to participants and audience” (17). Through this watching we learn more about our community and more about ourselves. This understanding provides a common “ground of experience” (McConachie 575). Despite differences of perspectives, class, race, and education, theater displays human actions in a way that allows audiences to find commonality with the actors and with each other, even if that commonality is simply the shared experience of watching.

Often, the theater experience allows the audience to identify with certain accepted values while persuading the audience to identify with other, less commonly held beliefs. John Dewey’s theory of art explains the phenomenon of shifting values and understanding. “The conception that objects have fixed and unalterable values is precisely the prejudice from which art emancipates us. The intrinsic qualities of things come out with startling vigor and freshness just because conventional associations are removed” (99). Theater, performative art, transcends

divisive barriers allowing the audience to find commonality with the actions and values on stage. At the same time, they are more open to new understandings of themselves and their values. And, if we can redefine our identities through the experience of watching art, it is conceivable that we can reshape the identities of historical figures. Art can transform previously held identities, ideologies, and beliefs simply because of the rhetorical power of watching art theater. By casting a traditionally understood historical American founding story as art, Lin-Manuel Miranda has utilized art theater's ability to liberate the story from fixed values and conventional understanding. Art allows freedom of understanding and expression while enforcing a new identity. John Dewey further elucidates the rhetorical power of art: "art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is" (17). Thus the American founding story can be shaped by the experience of watching and listening to *Hamilton*. The American founding story can be repurposed and rediscovered through the lens of current attitudes and needs.

Theater is not enjoyed in a vacuum, removed from interpretation and influence of the audience. It is not the property of the creator but is dependent on a relationship between the artist and audience, and in the case of theater, actors as well. Each group brings their own perspectives, emotions, and openness to their experience. For the artist, the process of creation fulfills needs and emotional expression that transforms their understanding simultaneously as the product is born. Miranda's words describe that process of recognizing and refashioning the story of Alexander Hamilton in a medium which he knew—theater. However, his creation was born out of an awareness of the needs of his audience. President Obama, in his introduction of Miranda and fellow cast members before a performance of some *Hamilton* songs at the White House, said of Miranda, "he identified a quintessentially American story. In the character of Hamilton—a



striving immigrant who escaped poverty, made his way to the New World, climbed to the top by sheer force of will and pluck and determination— Lin-Manuel saw something of his own family, and every immigrant family” (Klein). The President continues and describes the interpretation of the audience, obviously through the lens of his own understanding, “And in the Hamilton that Lin-Manuel and his incredible cast and crew bring to life— a man who is "just like his country, young, scrappy, and hungry"— we recognize the improbable story of America, and the spirit that has sustained our nation for over 240 years” (Klein). This introduction witnesses this interdependent relationship and interaction of art. Theater presents human actions but invites and expects the audience to understand and shape meaning. Identity is born through this process. Meaning is shaped by the artist but equally by the audience. And both the artist and audience emerge having a new understanding of themselves and their community through this shared experience.

This paper has examined the theoretical framework of publics theory and the rhetorical and aesthetic power of theater to help explain the cultural impact of *Hamilton* and the power of the play to unite a culturally, ideologically, and socio-economically diverse group of fans. However, to truly understand the breadth of that influence and its publics’ potential to impact change in societal values, we must understand some of the specific ways *Hamilton* has changed American historical consciousness among those Americans who have been able to experience the history it performs, whether by attending the play, listening to the music and/or viewing selections of the play on PBS or other media sites.

Redefining American Heritage: *Hamilton* Can Give an Old Story a New Look

*Hamilton* has cultivated a unified identity and identification with the founding story of America that has previously eluded historians and often excluded minorities and liberals. The American founding has been a story of privilege, exclusivity, accessible primarily to white men. It has been a banner of conservative ideals. But Miranda's innovative play has given voice and presence to historically overlooked individuals. By casting actors of color (Demby) and placing women in the foreground of the story (Schulman), *Hamilton* literally presents a more diverse picture of the founding story. The result of this inclusion is that audiences who typically wouldn't find much in common find a commonality in watching *Hamilton*. This is the beloved conservative story of America's founding but now it reflects the faces of Americans of the present day. Paul Woodruff explains, "Art theater can tell a kind of truth . . . about human issues" (26). And almost everyone in the audience can relate to the emotions and struggles of the characters—no matter what their coloring is. Suddenly, the play becomes about shared identities; the experience of watching binds together a diverse group who found something in the play worth emulating. Despite the color of the players or the gender of the characters, the play frames human actions and issues that all people regardless of ideology, race, or gender can identify with. The audiences' unique perspectives are not erased, nor is there a guarantee of continued harmony but for the duration of the play and while reflecting upon it, this consubstantiality binds together a community of watchers.

The most effective indicators of this influence are the words of the public. Published criticism describes the effects on community and public—*Hamilton* has allowed all citizens to feel pride and security in their Americanness. Tara Helfman, professor at Syracuse Law and

writer for *Commentary* magazine explains, “Hamilton is being performed as American institutions are being convulsed by a collective identity crisis over how to reconcile the realities of the past with the ideals of the present” (37). The play does not simply force Americans to ignore their controversial past but allows them to celebrate the inherent flaws and complicities of that past. Helfman continues, “Miranda’s masterwork captures in unlikely and innovative ways the electrifying synthesis that has animated American history since the Founding. To the extent that Hamilton succeeds in sending Americans back to their roots at a time when too many are quick to tear them up and cast them aside, this work of art accomplishes more than a formal work of history ever could” (39). The theories of art and theater previously discussed help to explain how a play could reframe historical understanding. Within the experience of art—in watching *Hamilton*—the exact history is emancipated from its traditional understanding. The spirit of the characters is accepted and a new identity that celebrates the diversity and determination of America evolves.

The historical inaccuracies of the play have been discussed by a relative few critics. Lyra D. Monteiro wrote the first discordant review of the play, arguing that *Hamilton* still upholds the “white narrative of the American past” (97). She explains that black characters are absent from the story—the play simply re-casts white characters with black actors. *Hamilton* “actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since” (93). Interestingly, she received more backlash than support for this argument. Although she is absolutely right. Casting actors of color does not change that the story of white founding men is still the story being seen on stage. So why didn’t Monteiro’s review resonate more prominently? This is where public theory and the power of rhetorical identity seem to offer an explanation. Like Burke described about human nature, humans want to find community and

identity. At a time when America struggles to find any common ground and polarity has become severe within politics, the public that has emerged around *Hamilton* wants to maintain its unified consubstantiality. In fact, President Barack Obama said that “it was the only thing he and Dick Cheney agree on” (Bresiger). Americans want to see themselves belonging in the founding, and thus, the community of the nation today. *Hamilton* has given them that opportunity to shift the traditionally accepted story and emphasize the diversity. And the discursive public continues to promote that inclusiveness, silencing those that detract from the unity.

### Promoting Cultural Unity: A Play Promotes the Values and Sounds of Immigrants and Minorities

For most critics, *Hamilton* provides hope for the future of America at a time when hatred and violence seem the answers to “making America great.” Citizen critics explain that the play re-establishes the American dream and re-defines the American hero. They equate the musical’s message with goals of protest movements like Black Lives Matter, to elevate and protect typically oppressed groups. A critic writing for “The Toast” states: “*Hamilton* arrives in the midst of a conversation about immigration that too often devolves into an Us vs. Them narrative – a framework that seeks to deny and outright dehumanize the full American immigrant experience. In Miranda’s show, Alexander Hamilton constantly reminds us that he too is an immigrant, looking to have an impact in his adopted country” (James). As evidenced before, Miranda not only depicts this message of immigrant contribution in *Hamilton* but in the interviews in which he interprets *Hamilton*. In a country where Donald Trump can threaten to build a wall to keep out immigrants, many citizens want to hope and declare the power and

influence of immigrants. Thus the story told about *Hamilton* continues to declare that the American dream is still alive for anyone willing to work and sacrifice. This is the civics lesson the Obamas identified. This is the story *Hamilton* defenders uphold; the interpretation they champion.

Miranda's *Hamilton* not only rethinks the story of the founding, but infuses the medium of Broadway with new sounds and visuals, further experimenting with the malleability of art. Miranda repurposed a very traditionally white art form—Broadway and a very traditionally white, conservative history—the American founding through a very non-traditional medium—hip-hop. Ben Brantley, who wrote one of the first and still most definitive reviews of the musical explains, "*Hamilton* is making its own resonant history by changing the language of musicals. And it does so by insisting that the forms of song most frequently heard on pop radio stations in recent years—rap, hip-hop, R and B ballads—have both the narrative force and the emotional interiority to propel a hefty musical about long-dead white men." Many critics have recognized Miranda's creative use of a variety of musical genres. His innovative musical approach appeals to a diverse audience. In an article for *The New Yorker*, Rebecca Mead writes, "Rooted in hip-hop, but also encompassing R. & B., jazz, pop, Tin Pan Alley, and the choral strains of contemporary Broadway, the show is an achievement of historical and cultural reimagining." By appealing to all, members of a diverse audience feel connected to the story being depicted on stage. Thus they are more open to new and disparate ideas being promoted. *Hamilton*'s creator and his team were careful to not label the play a "hip-hop musical" (Mead). This label, they understood, would relegate the play to a niche audience. From the beginning of *Hamilton*'s run, Miranda recognized the importance of getting a broad audience in the seats. Once there, he knew they would resonate with enough of the music and message that they would accept other ideas

typically outside their preference. Rebecca Mead summarizes, “Lin is telling the story of the founding of his country in such a way as to make everyone present feel they have a stake in their country.” The public of *Hamilton* is bigger and broader than even those suggested by Fraser and Hauser. Those discussing this play don’t have to find community simply with others who share their same racial or socio-economic or ideological preferences. There is enough in the play that appeals to diverse groups that they can come together in their support of the cultural influence it is extending.

If Broadway theater can be new and reflect modern society, Miranda suggests that perhaps the way we understand the American story can change as well. The result is that the audience can accept a new rhetorical understanding of history that better represents the people and America of today. Miranda explains, ““This is a story about America then, told by America now [ . . . ] and we want to eliminate any distance between a contemporary audience and this story”” (Delman). Dewey’s theory of art as emancipated from preconceived and fixed constraints explains *Hamilton*’s power to change the views of the audience. And Miranda’s words evidence that he understands this transformative power of art theater. They also evidence his awareness of an audience’s interpretation.

The public that discusses *Hamilton* continues to uphold and promote the themes of diversity and inclusiveness portrayed in the play. An article in *The New Yorker* by Erik Piepenburg describes the play: “A story of immigrants, from creators who are the children of immigrants, “Hamilton” has contributed to the national conversation about immigration.” Piepenburg explains that the line from the play, “Immigrants, we get the job done” gets such loud applause that the actors have had to stop and allow time for the enthusiastic response before resuming the play. This evidences overtly the interaction between the audience and the action on

stage. Other critics also recognize the impact *Hamilton* is making in depicting the importance in America of the immigrant. Edward Delman, in an article for *The Atlantic*, writes, “perhaps the most significant lesson the show might teach audiences, and one that has particular relevance today, is the outsized role immigrants have played in the nation’s history.” Delman’s article echoes the theories discussed above about the power of art to change perceptions of history, beginning with our rethinking the role of the immigrant. The reimagining of history also forces the audience to rethink their current values and ideologies. The overwhelming public, represented by the hundreds of articles discussing the play, continues to promote the ideas of the play ensures that *Hamilton*’s impact exceeds the run of the musical.

### The Public Has Spoken: Examining Public Discourse to Understand the Interpretation and Influence of the Play

Perhaps the strongest evidence for the lasting impact *Hamilton* will have on society is the inclusion of the play in school curriculum. At the end of *Citizen Critics*, Eberly argues that a public’s interpretation of an artifact has really landed when it becomes part of education. This expands the membership of the public as students discuss and interpret the play. In February of 2016, Zach Schonfeld published an article in *Newsweek* explaining how *Hamilton* was being used in “classrooms all over.” Schools in New York and Los Angeles had already begun to develop curriculum using the play’s music and themes. He describes one high school teacher who had created an entire unit about American history using *Hamilton*. Schonfeld declares, “For educators, the play’s success is ripe with untapped teaching potential. Yes, it takes creative liberties—the Founding Fathers didn’t really spit rhymes or use phrases like “John Adams shat

the bed”—but the story is historically sound.” High schoolers, like those watching the play in theaters across the country, will find values in the play worth emulating, as Woodruff describes. They will see themselves in the lyrics and the messages of *Hamilton* and begin to rethink their identity as Americans—a diverse and inclusive group. This process both reinforces the public’s discussion of the play and furthers its reach to a new generation.

Other articles evidence the tremendous rhetorical impact as diverse groups join the public discussion. Shortly after Schonfeld’s article was published, Brian Mooney, a high-school teacher in New Jersey, wrote an article describing the use of the play’s music in his curriculum. And in Utah, two politicians, Ken Ivory, a Republican and Jim Dabakis, a Democrat, sponsored a resolution encouraging teachers to use *Hamilton* in their classrooms to engage students in American history. Dabakis said, “There are not a lot of things that my friend Representative Ivory and I agree on. [ . . . ] in fact, We’re suing each other. But we both have found something we are passionate about and joined forces on HCR12 to honor Lin-Manuel Miranda, composer and star of ‘Hamilton.’” They set aside their differences to join the public because they feel the play “is changing the focus of high schools and their view of history” (Davidson). The public opinion of *Hamilton* is now penetrating the impressionable young minds of students, engaging them in history. It is simultaneously allowing marginalized groups to see themselves in the founding story and non-marginalized groups to embrace the diversity trumpeted in the play. It is also allowing these groups to enter the public and contribute discussion about this cultural piece.

The long-term effects of that influence of the public are yet unknown but will have a more profound impact on the future of our society than if *Hamilton* remained simply an entertainment, not an experience. But the vast amount of discourse generated by the public has spread the values of the play beyond its theatrical appeal. An article in *The Atlantic* titled “Will



Lin-Manuel Miranda Transform the Supreme Court?” asks and answers that question. Richard Primus, a professor of law at The University of Michigan Law School, explores the transformative power of this theater production on the rising generation of aspiring lawyers and judges. He argues:

First, *Hamilton* will prime people in the audience who interpret the Constitution for a living—law professors, judges, and others—to think, consciously or otherwise, that the historical sources will bear politically progressive readings. Second, and more importantly, it will change who is inclined to tell the story, rather than leaving that story for someone else. If liberals of all races become confident storytellers about the Founding, they will put their own spin on the sacred sources, consciously or subconsciously, and across a broad range of issues

*Hamilton*'s appeal spans a breadth of ages, and the continual promotion of its ideals through articles will extend its legacy far beyond what any Broadway show has done before. The founding story has been reimagined by the play and that reimagining is opening up new possibilities for the leaders and thinkers of the future. Whether or not this author's predictions materialize into what Fraser would consider strong public effects—legal changes—is hard to determine, but the inclusion of this article in *The Atlantic*, a prominent and widely-read and respected journal helps us understand the breadth of the public's discussion and indicates that although we cannot yet analyze the long-term effects of the play, many scholars are beginning to think about its lasting impact.

## Outside the Theater: The Discussion of *Hamilton* is Unprecedented

Art theater has not had that kind of transformative power in a long time. And there is no formula for predicting if another play can have this kind of power again because that kind of transformative power of art is born of necessity. It cannot be produced or manufactured without a mutual need between creator and audience. It is a phenomenon. Adam Gopnik described it: “But on rare occasions the American musical can still be central to what we should call our *ceremonial* culture. A song-and-dance show on Forty-sixth Street can occasionally touch so profoundly on some central preoccupation of a period that, even if relatively few of us actually get to see it live, it still becomes a kind of hearth at the center of a national celebration.” Gopnik is describing a rhetorical and aesthetic event—one that fulfills a community’s needs to better understand themselves and their society. His words almost sound religious. And indeed, the kind of transformation implied by Dewey’s and Woodruff’s theories feels more like a religious ceremony than the art for entertainment we typically imagine when describing theater. Art theater that Dewey and Woodruff imagine and Gopnik is describing leaves the audience changed and altered, leaves a community with an identity it could not have created or established otherwise. One reviewer grasps this process—the transformative process the audience experiences as it grapples with its previous understanding of the American story and the new values being presented on stage:

The crowning achievement of *Hamilton* is that it encourages the audience to treat the past not as a moral affront to the present, but as a challenge to it. It forces the audience to view the founding generation as neither heroes nor villains, but as individuals faced with

formidable choices in transformative times. What is more, it dares the members of the audience to imagine how they will continue the story that began in 1776. The signal achievement of *Hamilton* is that it invites the audience to be part of the creative synthesis that the production represents.

She just described an aesthetic and rhetorical experience. The play allows the audience to engage with meaning-making—both of historical understanding and current identity. And the review implies that this transformative experience is ongoing. It is a moving experience in the watching but just as important is the contemplation that occurs as the play continues to influence.

Understanding does not always happen during the play. Paul Woodruff explains, “But they will want to bring the play home later on, in reflection, and when they do this the play and some truth about their lives will be in their minds together, like the elements of a living metaphor” (202).

Inherent in this explanation is the organic nature of rhetoric and the aesthetic—that as we revisit our interpretation in both private reflection and particularly public discussion, our ideas and values change based on our perceptions and our needs. The play becomes a viable force of persuasion. This definition makes art dynamic. It makes art relevant to our everyday lives. This is an understanding of art that cultures and communities used to sustain but we have lost.

*Hamilton*, by evidence of the ongoing discussion, witnesses that our need for that kind of dynamic art has not perished. And understanding that need and how theater can fulfill it is best viewed through the conversation, the criticism, and articles produced by the public.

Art has always been part of everyday experience. Street performers, jazz, hip-hop all prove that even communities typically excluded from fine art feel the need, as Dewey describes it, to create and have aesthetic experiences. Thus when *Hamilton* introduced the art forms of the

street to the founding story of the nation, an aesthetic movement was born to a nation that desperately needs unity and cohesion. By casting actors of color, emphasizing the influence of immigrants, and utilizing fast-paced hip-hop forms, Miranda united raw materials into an experience that Americans needed and wanted. Of course, no play can magically and eternally unite a nation, but for those that watch or listen to *Hamilton* and who want to experience the play, and who allow that experience to change them, the resulting aesthetic and rhetorical experience has real power. Theater then can shape their ideas and attitudes about national history, community, and identity.

The literary publics theory helps to elucidate the earlier discussion of *Hamilton's* emergence as a powerful, influential art. The play's pervasive influence continuously extends through the public that has emerged. This public promotes and shapes the interpretation and reception of the play, broadening the power of the art and experience to persuade identities and attitudes. The plethora of articles and discussion about the musical ensures that the values it espouses continue to pervade societal identity and understanding but more importantly for scholars, the public discourse witnesses the rhetorical power of art and theater. As we try to examine rhetorical effects, the public provides a reliable source for viewing the impact of a cultural artifact through both the community composition and espoused identity.

## Works Cited

## Theory Sources

Blakesley, David, *The Elements of Dramatism*. New York: Longman Publishers, 2002.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. 1934. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

Eberly, Rosa. *Citizen Critics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000. Pp. 199.

Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" *Social Text*, No. 25/26: 1990. Pp. 56-80. Web.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

Hauser, Gerald. *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

Hauser, Gerald. *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1991.

McConachie, Bruce. "Doing Things with Image Schemas: The Cognitive Turn in Theater Studies and the Problem of Experience for Historians." *Theatre Journal*, Volume 53, No. 4, 2001, pp. 569–594.

Woodruff, Paul. *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Worthen, W. B. *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*. University of California Press, 2015.

## Hamilton Articles

Als, Hilton, "The Boys in the Band: A Musical About the Founding Fathers." *The New Yorker*. 9 March 2015.

Brantley, Ben, "Review: In Hamilton Lin-Manuel Miranda Forges Democracy Through Rap." The New York Times, 17 February 2015.

Davidson, Lee, "Utah's far right and far left join to honor rap musical 'Hamilton.'" Salt Lake Tribune. 12 March 2016.

Deignan, Tom, "Hamilton's problem with immigration, the Irish and Donald Trump." Irish Central. 18 June 2016.

Delman, Edward. "How Lin-Manuel Miranda Shapes History." The Atlantic. September 29, 2015. Web.

Demby, Gene. "Watching a Brown Hamilton with a White Audience." Code Switch. March 8, 2016. Web. 18 June 2016.

Gopnik, Adam, "'Hamilton' And The Hip-Hop Case for Progressive Heroism." The New Yorker, 5 February 2016.

Helfman, Tara. "Why Hamilton Matters." Commentary 141.2 (2016): 37-40. Academic Search Premier. Web. 15 June 2016.

James, Kendra. "Race, Immigration and Hamilton: The Relevance of Lin-Manuel Miranda's New Musical" The Toast. October 1, 2015. Web.

Mead, Rebecca, "All About the Hamiltons." The New Yorker. 9 February 2015.

Miranda, Lin-Manuel and McCarter, Jeremy. Hamilton: The Revolution. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016. Pp. 288.

Monteiro, Lyra D. "Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton." The Public Historian, Vol. 38 No. 1, February 2016, pp. 89-98. Web.

Mooney, Brian. "How 'Hamilton' helps me teach about Xenophobia and Immigration." PBS NewsHour. April 8, 2016. Web.

Paulson, Michael, "Hamilton Heads to Broadway in a Hip-Hop Retelling." The New York Times, 12 July 2015.

Piepenburg, Erik, "Why Hamilton Has Heat." The New York Times, 12 June 2016.

Primus, Richard, "Will Lin-Manuel Miranda Transform the Supreme Court?" The Atlantic. June 4, 2016.

Schonfeld, Zach, "'Hamilton,' The Biggest Thing on Broadway, is Being Taught in Classrooms All Over." Newsweek, 9 February 2016.

Weinert-Kendt, Rob, "Rapping a Revolution: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Others From 'Hamilton' Talk History." The New York Times, 5 February 2015.