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# Miranda's *Les Miz*

## ABSTRACT

*'I really got my Les Miz on in this score, like being really smart about where to reintroduce a theme', noted Lin-Manuel Miranda soon after Hamilton's off-Broadway opening in early 2015. Indeed, both in its techniques of thematic recurrence and in its continuous musicalization, Miranda's approach follows his acknowledged model. Yet, Les Misérables more deeply pervades Hamilton's dramaturgy than even Miranda has noted, as can be seen in several remarkable parallels between plot, characters and dramatic structure. Taken together, these and other analogies between the shows suggest that Hamilton retraces the dramatic and emotional arcs of Les Misérables, which Miranda has described as one member of the 'Holy Trinity' of Broadway shows.*

## KEYWORDS

adaptation  
Bechdel test  
Horatio Alger  
Hamilton  
*Les Misérables*  
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In his influential book *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bernard Bailyn demonstrated how the colonists revolted not as 'Americans' but as British citizens in thought and expression: 'the configuration of ideas and attitudes [of] the Revolutionary ideology', wrote Bailyn, 'could be found intact as far back as the 1730's' (1967: xi). Likewise, the so-called *Hamilton* Revolution (Miranda and McCarter 2016) comes from a writer with a strong identification with, and expressive fluency in, Broadway traditions dating from decades earlier. That is, Miranda writes not in revolt against Broadway but as one wholly embedded within it. As Jeremy McCarter writes, when Miranda wrote *Hamilton*, 'he wasn't just listening to their [earlier writers'] cast albums anymore: He was listening to *his actual forebears*' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 172, original emphasis). As Elizabeth Wollman has put it, the musical is 'more evolutionary' than 'revolutionary' and 'pushes the Broadway musical forward

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1. Miranda's reliance on Chernow has been seen as problematic for spinning an 'American immigration fantasy', for overemphasizing the uniqueness of Hamilton's disadvantaged background and for underemphasizing his relationship to slavery, among other things. See Hogeland in Romano and Potter (2018: 25–29).

in part by never forgetting its connection to the past' (Wollman in Romano and Potter 2018: 216).

Chief among those connections is *Les Misérables* (1987; hereafter *Les Miz*), a show Miranda has referred to as one of the 'Holy Trinity' that includes *Cats* (1982) and *Phantom of the Opera* (1988). 'I really got my *Les Miz* on in this score', he noted soon after *Hamilton's* off-Broadway opening in early 2015 (Mead 2015). Indeed, in its techniques of thematic recurrence, its continuous musicalization, its historical subject and its focus 'on basic human desires for freedom and forgiveness', Miranda's approach not only pays homage to his acknowledged model: I would argue that *Hamilton's* reuse of a stock of characters and scenic memes originating in *Les Miz* invites us to view the earlier show as structurally shadowing its successor and as a reincarnation of the megamusical – that 1980s phenomenon, exemplified by *Les Miz*, that continues to shape musicals well into the twenty-first century (see Sternfeld 2006: 1–2; 175–224). Jack Viertel has gone so far as to write that *Hamilton* is 'a direct descendant of *Oklahoma!*' in the sense of telling a show about its own time in a historical setting (2016: 267). Yet he asserts that the show is 'clearly more influenced by *Les Misérables* than by Rodgers and Hammerstein' (Viertel 2016: 16).

This is more than a case of mere 'influence', however. Adaptation theory is particularly useful for recognizing the import of *Les Miz* for *Hamilton*. In her seminal *Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon's capacious definition of *adaptation* as 'an extended, deliberate announced revisitation of a particular work of art' may not admit the connection proposed here (Hutcheon 2006: 170). The work more straightforwardly being adapted in Miranda's musical is Ron Chernow's biography, *Alexander Hamilton* (2004) – which the show's publicity credits as what 'inspired' the show.<sup>1</sup> Yet what I am proposing is that *Les Miz* gave Miranda a structural template that facilitated his choices of how to concisely and dramatically musicalize crucial events and verbal expression in the 731 pages of Chernow's detailed and exhaustive narrative. Hutcheon has written that adaptations are 'inherently "palimpsestuous" works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly' (2006: 6). Audience members who know *Les Miz* well, and there are millions, have access to its shadowing presence in *Hamilton*. In that sense, *Hamilton* may be comparable to the post-Beethovenian symphonies of composers such as Mendelssohn, Berlioz, Brahms and Mahler – works that would not be possible, or at least not the same, without their models (Bonds 1997). In specific ways, we can identify the resonances and models from *Les Miz* within *Hamilton*.

## New man, new land

An impoverished young man with no family or connections, directed by a strong moral compass and a spirit of service to others, works hard, confronts and overcomes adversity, achieves success and financial security. The adversity might stem from circumstances or human adversaries; the success may be abetted by an older male benefactor. The lines between heroes and villains are starkly drawn. This is the Horatio Alger Myth in a nutshell, and it resonates in both *Hamilton* and *Les Miz*. True, the source stories for both musicals precede Alger's popular late nineteenth-century writings, but the Alger myth became sewn into the American psyche. What one author has called its 'transcendent afterlife' remains widely appealing despite augurs of its death

since the 1960s (Llamon 1976: 11)<sup>2</sup> – and may explain why, as Barack Obama put it, “‘Hamilton,’ I’m pretty sure, is the only thing that Dick Cheney and I agree on’ (Fabian 2016). Undoubtedly the two politicians inflect *Hamilton*’s values differently, but both parties played variations on the Alger myth during Obama’s bid for re-election in 2012 (Rooks 2012).

The widespread appeal of both *Hamilton* and *Les Miz* shows that the Alger myth retains strong fascination, for the Alger trajectory with some modification serves as the dramaturgical backbone of both shows. *Hamilton*’s opening number offers a brisk, compelling summary of his indigent immigrant narrative and the possibility of becoming a ‘new man’ in a ‘new land’, New York (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 17), where he launches his career at nineteen (‘only nineteen but my mind is older’ [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 26]) – the same number of years Valjean, likewise indigent, served in prison as ‘a slave of the law’ (Behr 1989: 165), and the same number, too, that Philip echoes when he announces his age in ‘Blow Us All Away’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 245). Like Hamilton, Valjean grasps the opportunity to become a new man: ‘And now let’s see/What this new world/Will do for me!’ (Behr 1989: 165). Both, following the Alger myth’s trajectory, soon benefit from association with a wise father figure: the Bishop’s kind gesture sets Valjean on a new path as an ‘honest man’ (Behr 1989: 166), and Washington selects Hamilton as his ‘right-hand man’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 65). From there, however, much is made of the up-by-the-bootstraps, self-made-man narrative so fundamental to the Alger myth. Valjean renounces his past and even his name: ‘Jean Valjean is nothing now. / Another story must begin’ – and in the next scene we see him as the owner of ‘a business of repute’ and ‘the Mayor of this town’ (Behr 1989: 167). We witness more of Hamilton’s rise: a self-described ‘diamond in the rough’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 26), he urgently seeks higher education (‘an accelerated course of study’ [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 23]) and organizes a motley group of rowdy rebels into a determined cohort of leaders. He rises even further than Valjean, of course: from Washington’s most trusted aide, to major general and ultimately to Secretary of the Treasury. A strong moral core marks the Alger hero, and Hamilton and Valjean generally fit the bill – but not before they are tested, as we will see.

2. Llamon’s article takes as its starting point Jones (1967). A more recent critique, like Baraka’s focusing on the myth’s racist underpinning, appears in Dalton (1995: 127–35).

## The wide-enough world

Both shows thrive on the friction between two antagonists, each a foil to his counterpart; and both bring the two in regular contact. ‘We keep meeting’ (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 63), Hamilton and Burr say simultaneously when Washington tries to introduce them to one another. ‘We meet again’ (Behr 1989: 185) says Valjean when he encounters Javert bound behind the barricade after the rebels discovered his identity. Valjean releases him and Javert becomes enraged and ashamed by the debt he owes to his former captive. *Hamilton*’s dramaturgy adopts the Valjean–Javert template. Director Tommy Kail makes this explicit: “‘There’s a lot of Javert and Valjean in there”, he says. “*Les Misérables* is fundamentally about someone who says, ‘You have to play by these rules’, and somebody else who says, ‘Sometimes you have to break those rules’” (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 214). The encounters build tension to the point that one can no longer abide living in the same world with the other, so in the end one must die. ‘There is nothing on earth that we share, / It is either Valjean or Javert!’ (Behr 1989: 188) sings Javert before taking his own life so that he does not have to bear the indignity of Valjean’s mercy

any longer. In contrast, Burr wins his duel but lives the hell that Valjean sought to avoid through suicide: 'He may have been the first one to die, / But I'm the one who paid for it. [...] I should've known / The world was wide enough for both Hamilton and me' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 275).

Indeed, it is the moments of empathy and compassion, even self-knowledge and self-denial that arise from the antagonist, or between the protagonist and his opposite, that make their conflicts so compelling. The potential for reconciliation tantalizes the spectator and neutralizes the base tendency to wish the worst for Burr or Javert. Valjean's mercy and Javert's suicide accomplish this in *Les Miz*. *Hamilton* provides many more dramatic nodes for such empathy: Burr's early advice and assistance, the Hamilton–Burr camaraderie after Hamilton's wedding, the duet capturing their simultaneous awakening to fatherhood ('Theodosia'); Hamilton's request for Burr's advice because 'you're a better lawyer than me' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 138), and Burr's ultimate admission that the world was 'wide enough': all of this elicits our empathy for the antagonist, and our ability to envision a tolerant and tolerable peace. No wonder Hilton Als went even further in his *New Yorker* review and dubbed the Burr–Hamilton clash a 'bromance' that comprises 'the most meaningful love story in "Hamilton"' (Als 2015).

### The forgivable sin

Valjean's crimes of stealing a loaf of bread and pieces of silver hover over him throughout *Les Miz* and guide his actions, especially as Javert will not let him forget the stolen bread. Hamilton commits no crime, but his adulterous affair with Maria Reynolds taints his personal and professional activities until his death and beyond. Hewing to the righteous Christian resonance that pervades *Les Miz*, Valjean's crimes appear as Christ-like services to a higher cause compared to Hamilton's sordid betrayal. Hamilton's misguided attempt to exonerate himself from criminal activity by publicizing the details of the affair only serve to further expose his questionable judgment. Valjean's moral compass fails just once: not for the crime of which he was convicted (the bread), but for the crime for which he was forgiven (the silver), and the Bishop converts the lapse into a lesson learned for 'some higher plan', which Valjean duly accepts (Behr 1989: 166). In contrast, Hamilton learns the wrong lesson (he 'comes to *the wrong conclusion*', in Miranda's words [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 232, original emphasis]) and commits self-sabotage with the confessional 'Reynolds Pamphlet'. With this publication, Hamilton ensures permanent damage to his political ambitions ('Never gon' be president now', chant his foes Jefferson, Madison and Burr [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 234]) and to his marriage ('You forfeit all rights to my heart. / You forfeit the place in our bed. [...] I hope that you burn', sings Eliza while destroying all of Alexander's letters [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 238]).

Yet even Hamilton earns redemption within the show, as we bear witness to the tragic death of his son; his ongoing devotion to his wife; his principled, if punitive, public endorsement of Jefferson against Burr in the election of 1800 ('when all is said and all is done. / Jefferson has beliefs. Burr has none' [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 261]) and his musical soliloquy grappling with mortality and legacy (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 273) – thematically and structurally analogous to Valjean's final deathbed solo (Behr 1989: 191). In the end, it is Eliza who redeems Alexander with her efforts to preserve his memory: she interviews 'every soldier' who fought with him; with Angelica,

she 'tell[s] [his] story'; and she establishes an orphanage in whose children's eyes 'I see you, Alexander' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 281). Ultimately, Hamilton stands as the more flawed protagonist but thereby more transparently human – the show lets him off the hook by making his sexual compromise acceptable – compared to the melodramatic marbleized figure, hallowed by Christian self-renunciation, of Valjean. But both heroes are made more compelling by their forgivable sins.

### The righteous cause

Both are, moreover, magnified by larger social and political conflicts. The shows give us two revolutions, two outmanned armies fighting for freedom and democracy against a formidable opponent. A large, seething underclass populates the Paris of *Les Misérables*, including prisoners, poor factory workers, prostitutes and students – the miserable ones. The death of the populist General Lamarque, described in the show simply as 'the people's man' (Behr 1989: 178), serves as the catalyst for their uprising. The stentorian march 'Do You Hear the People Sing?' describes the rebels as 'angry' and as 'slaves' seeking 'the right to be free'. Those who will die for the cause will be 'martyrs' (Behr 1989: 178). Like their counterparts in *Hamilton*, they are scrappy ('There's gonna be hell to pay/At the end of the day') and, literally, hungry ('There's a hunger in the land') (Behr 1989: 167). The opening words of *Hamilton* quickly establish that the title character would be at home among the miserable ones: 'a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman [...] by providence, impoverished, in squalor' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 16). More than that, he and his newfound cronies have a passion for a righteous cause, whose time is ripe for action, as Hamilton quickly gets his cohort to sing together 'I am not throwing away my shot' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 30). The notion of martyrdom for the cause of freedom resonates with *Les Miz*, too, when Hamilton raps: 'I will lay down my life if it sets us free' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 26). In both shows, the righteous cause lends the hero an ennobling frame.

### Drink with me

Wars, cinematic and staged, seem to require quiet, intimate moments of male bonding as foils to the big battle. Consider, for a recent example, the long conversation between Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) and Private Ryan (Matt Damon) in *Saving Private Ryan* before the film's final violent conflict. Alcohol helps, as both *Les Miz* and *Hamilton* recognize. Both shows contain barroom scenes that evoke similar textures of feeling. Stentorian appeals to the cause – 'Have you asked of yourselves / What's the price you might pay?' (Behr 1989: 178) and 'I am not throwing away my shot' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 35) – mix with back-slapping banter about heterosexual romantic achievement – 'I am agog! / I am aghast! / Is Marius in love at last?' (Behr 1989: 178) and 'Well, I heard / You've got a special someone on the side, Burr' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 87). Both shows portray two pre-battle barroom gatherings in song: *Les Miz*'s 'The Red and the Black' and 'Drink with Me', and *Hamilton*'s 'The Story of Tonight' and its reprise. Such scenes have unmistakable links to the operatic *brindisi*, or drinking song, going back to the eighteenth century and particularly popular in nineteenth-century Italian opera. In both shows, the drinking song reinforces male camaraderie and offers a peaceful contrast to the ensuing battle.

3. Schönberg begins to speak at 1:53 at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6VeMbdgRAY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6VeMbdgRAY).
4. Miranda noted that the rap's recapitulation 'is almost cruel of me, but God it's effective' (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 246, n. 5).

### Master of the house

Selfish, scheming and not a little buffoonish: both *Les Miz* and *Hamilton* feature grasping male characters who comment on, and attempt to manipulate, the action in ways that provide comic relief. Monsieur Thénardier and King George fill these roles, and not coincidentally, they both play British stereotypes familiar to the American imagination: the Cockney and the Fop. So compelling are these characters that we hardly note our suspension of disbelief in accepting that a French tavern owner's voice so often resonates with lower-class London accents, and that a British royal is the only white principal in a musical dramatization of the American Revolution. One other minor character, Samuel Seabury, is also white. Tellingly, he is a Tory resisting the revolutionary tide. It is telling, too, that Thénardier's comedy is an invention not of Hugo but a deliberate conceit of Boublil and Schönberg 'to relax the audience' in the midst of a dramatic, 'sad' story, as Schönberg has put it.<sup>3</sup> Both are introduced with much fanfare. 'Silence! A message from the King!' sings the ensemble as King George arrives (Miranda and McCarter 2016: 49). And in *Les Miz*, various 'Drinkers' sum up Thénardier's greedy opportunism in several musical lines leading into his long monologue and 'Master of the House' (Behr 1989: 173). Moreover, that number and 'You'll Be Back' serve as musical calling cards for their respective characters throughout the show.

### The unimaginable

'He's aiming for Fantine-size tears', wrote a Broadway blogger immediately after the release of Rebecca Mead's extended *New Yorker* article on Miranda and *Hamilton* (Wontorek 2015). The claim simply expanded upon Miranda's general acknowledgment of his debt to *Les Miz*'s approach to thematic recurrence, but has more specific dramatic resonance when we consider the comparable impact of the pathetic, unnecessary and untimely deaths by gunshot of Eponine and Philip, not to mention Fantine's death that leaves Cosette an orphan but safely in Valjean's care. Both shows build sympathy for these young characters to make their deaths all the more tragic. We have followed Eponine's unrequited love for Marius, her successful disruption of an attempted robbery, her willingness to act as emissary between Marius and Cosette, which ultimately leads to her death in Marius's arms – after she sings two of the show's most affecting numbers planted early in Act 2: 'On My Own' and 'A Little Fall of Rain'. *Hamilton* likewise builds proprietary sympathy for Philip before his Act 2 death, especially through Hamilton's attachment to him, as expressed in 'Theodosia' and in Philip's charming attempts to learn to play piano and to rap in 'Take a Break'. Philip's utter devotion to his father builds through 'Blow Us All Away': with his misguided – but utterly understandable as Hamilton's son – attempt to stand up to a man who publicly insulted his father; the touching recapitulation of his nine-year-old rap and his fatal choice to follow his father's advice to delope – that is, to shoot in the air during the duel.<sup>4</sup> All of that is followed by a death scene, 'Stay Alive', that rivals Eponine's in its quiet musical intimacy. It even includes a duet with an unfinished final phrase signalling the moment of death (Eponine's 'And rain will make the flowers...' [Behr 1989: 184] and Philip's 'Un deux trois...' [Miranda and McCarter 2016: 249]).

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## Almost failing the Bechdel test

'One, it has to have at least two women in it [...] who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man'. In two panels of a cartoon entitled 'The Rule', Alison Bechdel, with credit to Liz Wallace, articulated what has become known as the Bechdel Test for films (Bechdel 1986: 22). Its popularity has grown to encompass all fictional media, drawing wider scrutiny to the representation of women on stage and screen. Both *Hamilton* and *Les Miz* nearly fail the test, but not quite. In *Les Miz*, in a stretch, we might point to the brief conversation between Mme. Thenardier and Young Cosette (Behr 1989: 172) in which the tavern owner scolds her ward. As Stacy Wolf points out in this issue, *Hamilton* passed the test by virtue of the number 'The Schuyler Sisters', which introduces Eliza, Angelica and Peggy out on the town in New York (Wolf 2018: 170). Eliza and Angelica sing about the city and the rise of revolutionary fervour ('look around, look around, / the revolution's happening in New York', Miranda and McCarter 2016: 43) while Peggy worries about disobeying their father's wishes ('Daddy said to be home by sundown', Miranda and McCarter 2016: 42).

The larger issue is how the shows portray their female characters. Although the parts are perennially attractive to female performers, they tend to represent recognizable types, all defined chiefly by their relationship with children or men, or both. Both shows have even elicited a similar critique by Stacy Wolf. She notes the female stereotypes of *Les Miz*: 'the mother who sacrifices herself to the death [Fantine], the two women who love the same man [Cosette and Eponine], and the woman who desires a man in a different class [Eponine]' (Wolf 2012). In *Hamilton*, 'the women are lumped together and only exist to serve the romance plot(s) of the musical' because Angelica, Eliza and Maria all chant together a single line: 'Me? I loved him' (Wolf 2018: 169).

In the end, then, the three [principal] women in the musical occupy the most conventional and stereotypical roles – muse, wife, whore – which is all the more troubling since *Hamilton* goes such a long way to dismantle stereotypes of race and masculinity.

(Wolf 2018: 177)

As Wollman has put it, 'the musical fails to challenge gendered assumptions buried deep in traditional narrative, contemporary commercial staging, and modern pop' (Wollman in Romano and Potter 2018: 216). If *Hamilton* fails its women, part of the explanation might be that it drew on *Les Miz* uncritically.

All of these similarities cannot conceal obvious differences between the shows: the race-conscious casting of *Hamilton*<sup>5</sup> and the race-blind (but mostly white) casting of *Les Misérables*; the linguistic virtuosity of *Hamilton*'s hip hop vs the archaic and rather stilted religiosity of *Les Miz*'s diction; *Hamilton*'s rap and R&B-driven musical style vs *Les Miz*'s quasi-operatic grandiloquence; and *Hamilton*'s metatheatrical emphasis on storytelling, historical narrative and the passage of time, all lacking in *Les Miz*.<sup>6</sup> Yet *Hamilton* seems to be designed to trigger the same kinds of emotional responses through comparable characters, relationships, scenes and numbers, woven together by continuous musicalization and webs of recurring motifs and themes. In that sense, we may view the *Hamilton* 'revolution' as building, reverently and adaptively, from a work that appears to be its principal model.

5. The original production's 'race-conscious' and 'compositional' casting, and its impact, have been the subject of much commentary and trenchant analysis (See Monteiro 2016; Herrera 2017; and Herrera in Romano and Potter 2018: 229–34).
6. It may be that even *Hamilton*'s emphasis on storytelling – and how, by whom and to whom stories are told – has seeds in *Les Miz*, as when Valjean tells Marius his 'story [...] Of slavery and shame/ That you alone [and not Cosette] must know' (Behr 1989: 189), and when Valjean offers another story to Cosette: 'my last confession [...] a story/ Of those who always loved you' (Behr 1989: 191).

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