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“My First Friend, My Enemy”: *Hamilton*, Mimetic Desire, and the Sacrificial Crisis

And? If we win our independence?
'Zat a guarantee of freedom for our descendants?
Or will the blood we shed begin an endless
cycle of vengeance and death with no defendants?
— Lin-Manuel Miranda, “My Shot”

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H*amilton*: wildly popular on a breadth and scale rarely seen in the 21st century, the show follows the life of Alexander Hamilton through his rise, fall, and tragic demise. The tragedy of *Hamilton*, however, does not lie solely in Hamilton's death, nor in Burr's guilt and regret; rather, its painful telos is in exposing the fragile and arbitrary nature of sacrificial scapegoating, as well as the self-sacrificing consequences of reciprocal violence. The world of *Hamilton* serves as an allegory for a society in sacrificial crisis, as outlined by René Girard in his *Violence and the Sacred*, where he claims that a community without a common enemy will always destroy itself with violence, unless and until a system of literal or symbolic sacrifice can be put into place. As *Hamilton* goes on, the differences between Hamilton and Burr are steadily erased, and vengeance reigns in a nation previously united against a common enemy. Hamilton and Burr are caught in a web of mimetic desire, converging again and again over desires that drive them farther and farther apart; the more alike the two become, the more each despises the other. Their relationship is punctuated by a series of reversals; they occupy the same position at different times until eventually both must be removed from their society—a sacrifice of sorts—to make way for a larger peace and resolution, but one that comes at a cost, and a double cost. The first of these is not that we *could* turn against ourselves—our doubles, our friend/enemies—but that we *will*. When we sacrifice, we are in danger of sacrificing ourselves, and of being sacrificed. The second: that this peace and resolution props up an American consensus, an omnipresent mythos, and one that is both sinister and nearly inescapable, as Sacvan Bercovitch discusses in *The Rites of Assent*. Numerous critics have questioned the value of rehashing the stories of these “Dead White Men” at all. Representation affirms value, and however subversive *Hamilton* is, or wants to be, the question remains whether anything framed within the popular ideology can ever truly undermine it. Perhaps it is enough that *Hamilton* demonstrates the dire costs of the consensus; perhaps its falling-back on appeals to progress through “American” language merely weakens and confuses its appeals. Whatever the strength of the message, the message remains, clearly: if

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sacrifice, whether literal or symbolic, can solve the problems of a community and can bring peace through consensus, it is always at a cost.

Hamilton and the sacrificial crisis

Throughout the first act of *Hamilton*, all of the revolutionaries' aggression is directed outward. Yet, by the end of the act, they have purged the common enemy. The revolutionaries have won, and King George wisely asks his former colonies: "What comes next?" (Groff, "What Comes Next?"). Girard claims that what must happen next is that "Neighbors who had previously discharged their mutual aggressions on a third party, joining together in the sacrifice of an 'outside' victim, now turn to sacrificing one another" (43). True to this statement, Act II of *Hamilton* shows a nation in turmoil. Revolutionaries turn on each other; public opinion waffles wildly; political alliances shift for seemingly little reason. It seems at first that the differences between individuals are growing—especially given the formation of various political factions—but the fact that individuals like Burr can glide effortlessly between these factions betrays the fact that the nation is now in a sacrificial crisis, "a crisis of distinctions" in which differences are effaced and categories dissolve—and, as Girard writes, "Wherever differences are lacking, violence threatens" (49, 57). Hamilton and Burr serve as the most visible example of this. Their relationship is most amicable when they are most different, and it is competitive, violently so, when they are most similar, and desire similar things. There is perhaps no quote more indicative of the Hamilton-Burr relationship than this, of Girard on mimesis:

The model, even when he has openly encouraged imitation, is surprised to find himself engaged in competition. He concludes that the disciple has betrayed his confidence by following in his footsteps. As for the disciple, he feels both rejected and humiliated, judged unworthy by his model of participating in the superior existence the model himself enjoys. (146)

This competition—and the accompanying

feelings of betrayal, rejection, and humiliation—culminates eventually in Hamilton and Burr's duel. Long before then, however, reciprocal violence already threatens to consume the community. At the beginning of Act II, there is an immediate indication of the impending internecine violence when Burr introduces Jefferson: "Someone came along to resist [Hamilton]. / Pissed him off until we had a two-party system" (Diggs et al., "What'd I Miss"). Federalist Hamilton is quickly put in opposition to the Democratic-Republican Jefferson—as well as to James Madison, with whom Hamilton had previously allied to pen the Federalist Papers (Odom, Jr. et al., "Non-Stop"). A series of betrayals and vengeance follows throughout Act II. Burr himself becomes a Democratic-Republican, then teams up with Jefferson and Madison in a plan to extort Hamilton. Hamilton exposes his own affair with Maria Reynolds purely to deprive Burr of the chance; subsequently, Hamilton's wife, Eliza, feels betrayed, and sings of her own desire for revenge in "Burn" (Miranda, "Hamilton [Original Broadway Cast Recording] – Act 2 Booklet"). Washington, a figure of paternal wisdom throughout Act I, warns twice against the threat of reciprocal violence—as if understanding, as Girard writes, that "One and the same process of violent reciprocity engulfs the whole" (49). Washington punishes Hamilton for engaging in a duel with another revolutionary soldier and warns against partisan fighting. Yet even Hamilton, Washington's closest follower, cannot heed these warnings in the end (Miranda, "Hamilton [Original Broadway Cast Recording] – Act 2 Booklet").

Though Burr serves as a model for Hamilton through most of the first act, like many classical pairs of protagonists—or antagonists—their relationship throughout the play is further structured by a series of reversals of fortune. Girard writes, "in tragedy the differences between the antagonists never vanish entirely, but are constantly inverted. In such a system enemy 'brothers' can never occupy the same position at the same time" (158). At the outset of the play, Burr and Hamilton are similar in many regards—both intelligent men, revolutionaries, and orphans—but still they have clear

differences. Burr is rich, coming from a “legacy” that he feels obligated to “protect” (Odom, Jr., and Original Broadway Cast of Hamilton, “Wait For It”). Hamilton, in contrast, is a “bastard,” the “son of a whore and a Scotsman,” and an immigrant (Odom, Jr. et al., “Alexander Hamilton”). Their personal philosophies, too, differ fundamentally. Hamilton is eager to seize opportunity, while Burr waits for the safe path to success. This difference is established and reinforced early. When Burr and Hamilton meet in “Aaron Burr, Sir,” Hamilton’s frantic and wordy rapping is contrasted with Burr’s: measured, slow, politely conversational. Hamilton initially identifies Burr as a model, but Burr, seemingly put off by Hamilton, tells him to “talk less, smile more,” and warns him that “fools who run their mouths off wind up dead”; Hamilton reacts to this advice with derision (Miranda et al., “Aaron Burr, Sir”). Hamilton and Burr are clearly established as being different, but despite—or, in Girardian terms, *because of*—these differences, Hamilton and Burr immediately consider each other friends.

Yet, in Act II—and in the absence of the common enemy—they begin to draw closer, and undergo a series of reversals. These reversals are marked by dialogues, versions of what Girard identifies in classical drama as “stichomythia, in which the two protagonists address one another in alternating lines” (44). Hamilton and Burr exchange alternating lines many times—all evocative of their original dialogue in “Aaron Burr, Sir”—but two exchanges stand out as indicating reversal and a convergence of desire that leads almost immediately to an act of revenge: “The Room Where It Happens” and “The Election of 1800.” Throughout Act I, and into Act II, Hamilton climbs the social and political ladders, while Burr stalls, or falls. Burr’s impending jealousy is first made explicit in “Wait For It,” when he sings,

What is it like in his shoes?

Hamilton doesn’t hesitate.

He exhibits no restraint.

He takes and he takes and he takes

and he keeps winning anyway. (Odom, Jr., and

Original Broadway Cast of Hamilton, “Wait For It”)

The first reversal comes in Act II’s “The Room Where It Happens,” after the first of the two critical “stichomythia.” Hamilton confides that he will take Burr’s recurring advice to “talk less, smile more,” delivering the line in an imitation of Burr’s voice (Odom, Jr. et al., “The Room Where It Happens”). Hamilton gets the last word in their dialogue, ignoring Burr’s protest; subsequently, Burr is made jealous. Later in the song, prompted by the Company’s urgently asking “What do you want, Burr?” he admits that he wants to “be in the room where it happens” (Odom, Jr. et al., “The Room Where It Happens”). Burr and Hamilton have converged, and this convergence must result in competition and violence: “[wherever] differences are lacking, violence threatens” (Girard 57). The very next song is Burr’s revenge: he takes the Senate seat previously occupied by Hamilton’s father-in-law. This prompts anger in Hamilton, and Hamilton’s and Burr’s roles are now reversed. For the majority of Act II, Burr is the successful politician while Hamilton suffers a series of downfalls (Miranda, “Hamilton [Original Broadway Cast Recording] – Act 2 Booklet”).

The second reversal, and the second significant stichomythia, comes in “The Election of 1800.” Mirroring the structure of “The Room Where It Happens,” here Burr gets the last word in the exchange, leaving Hamilton angry, and Hamilton, like Burr was before, is prompted by the Company:

Jefferson or Burr?

Choose,

Choose,

Choose! (Diggs et al., “The Election of 1800”)

The reversal-revenge pattern accelerates. Now, at the very moment when they have converged again, Hamilton immediately takes his revenge, swinging his support to Jefferson for the presidency. Once again their positions are switched. Burr is cast down, bereft of any of his former allies, while Hamilton has regained the favor of both the public and of his former

adversaries. What results in the next song is what Girard calls the “tragic dialogue”:

the core of the drama remains the tragic dialogue; that is, the fateful confrontation during which the two protagonists exchange insults and accusations with increasing earnestness and rapidity ... The adversaries match blow for blow, and they seem so evenly matched that it is impossible to predict the outcome of the battle. (44)

The exchange here comes in the form of letters between the two men, culminating in Burr’s challenging Hamilton to a duel. By the time “Your Obedient Servant” has ended, neither has yet won; they are evenly matched; the victory of one over the other is delayed.

Resolution toward the consensus

Duels feature prominently in *Hamilton* as a supposed outlet for aggression, a means of halting reciprocal violence and securing satisfaction—one that fails, with increasingly severe consequences, every single time. Girard identifies “compensatory measures” and “trials by combat” as a method of “harnessing or hobbling [vengeance],” but one whose “curative effects remain precarious” (20-21). The first of the play’s three duels, instigated (but not executed) by Hamilton, does not and cannot satisfy him, because the duel itself is a product of misplaced aggression. Hamilton claims to be angry at Lee for slandering Washington’s name. When Burr tries to talk Hamilton out of the duel, however, Hamilton mentions the deaths caused by Lee’s inexperience. It is hardly Lee’s fault that he was inexperienced; it is, instead, Washington’s for promoting an inexperienced man, and for promoting him to a position that Hamilton himself had coveted. Hamilton is angry at Washington; this is why, although Laurens is satisfied at the end of the duel, Hamilton cannot let go of his anger. The duel has failed in its supposed purpose. Later, in addition to the “ten duel commandments” the audience has already received, we are now introduced to a new rule, given by Hamilton to his son:

Alright. So this is what you’re gonna do:

Stand there like a man until Eacker is in front of you.

When the time comes, fire your weapon in the air.

This will put an end to the whole affair. (Ramos et al., “Blow Us All Away”)

This attitude seems inconsistent with Hamilton’s character, but “Blow Us All Away” comes *after* Burr and Hamilton’s first reversal. Burr is now in Hamilton’s position, and Hamilton is in Burr’s—having also now, it seems, his non-confrontational proclivities. As Girard writes, “in tragedy each character passionately embraces or rejects vengeance depending on the position he occupies at any given moment in the scheme of the drama” (15). In this duel, we once again see that the instigator, Philip, does not gain his satisfaction and is killed when Eacker violates the rules of the duel twice over, once by firing early, and again by firing after Philip has raised his gun into the air (Ramos et al., “Blow Us All Away”).

Oddly, in the wake of his son’s unjust death, Hamilton does not seek vengeance. In fact, George Eacker completely disappears from the narrative. Perhaps this is, again, because Hamilton occupies Burr’s position; perhaps it is because Philip’s death has taught Hamilton—for the moment—the price of revenge. Or perhaps, just as Eliza is able to forgive Hamilton in “It’s Quiet Uptown,” Hamilton is, somehow, able to forgive Eacker. Such a thing seems incomprehensible—but the incomprehensible nature of *any* forgiveness is made explicit by the Company as they sing, over and over, “Forgiveness. Can you imagine?” (Miranda et al., “It’s Quiet Uptown”). This comes on the precipice of “The Election of 1800” and the Burr-Hamilton duel; the Company’s singing, then, might be seen as a plea: forgiveness, if possible, could heal the community, could halt the cycle of reciprocal violence. Yet Burr and Hamilton, as monstrous doubles, cannot forgive each other. Sacrifice is the only other solution. It will, at the cost of life, “restore harmony to the community...reinforce the social fabric” (Girard 8). Because Hamilton and Burr are doubles, however, the cycle of violence cannot halt unless both are expelled from the community. Although Hamilton is

the only one to physically die, Burr is exiled after Hamilton's death—if not explicitly, then implicitly, through the structure of not only what follows the duel, but of everything that has come before. Burr has haunted the margins of the play like a ghost throughout, narrating from an uncanny, unsettled position. He moves between addressing the audience as narrator and participating in scenes as present character. His temporal position is uncertain—does he speak as a ghost from our past to our present? Does he speak from his present to our future? Does he bring us into a past, into the present of the characters? He glides between tenses and temporal positions, as in this introduction to “What'd I Miss?”:

Treasury Secretary. Washington's the President,
 ev'ry American experiment sets a precedent.
 Not so fast. Someone came along to resist him.
 Pissed him off until we had a two-party system.
 You haven't met him yet, you haven't had the
 chance,
 'cause he's been kickin' ass as the ambassador to
 France
 but someone's gotta keep the American promise.
 You simply must meet Thomas. (Diggs et al.,
 “What'd I Miss?”)

Burr's ghostly figure throughout the play tells the audience that there is some fundamental way in which Burr is different; he will not end up belonging; he will not be laid to rest in the epilogue like the other founding fathers are (Miranda, “Hamilton [Original Broadway Cast Recording] – Act 1 Booklet” & “Act 2 Booklet”).

Burr takes the time of the duel itself—the fragmented reprise of “Ten Duel Commandments”—to entrench himself further in his anger. Only three of the “commandments” are repeated in full. The first is “Most disputes die and no one shoots,” a line that has picked up heavy irony by this point; the second is “Your last chance to negotiate. / Send in your seconds, see if they can set the record straight” (Odom, Jr. et al., “The World Was Wide Enough”). This negotiation time is now used by Burr to reinforce his own anger, and to attempt to justify what he is prepared to do:

They won't teach you this in your classes,
 but look it up, Hamilton was wearing his glasses.
 Why? If not to take deadly aim?
 It's him or me, the world will never be the same.
 I had only one thought before the slaughter:
 This man will not make an orphan of my
 daughter. (Odom, Jr. et al., “The World Was
 Wide Enough”)

The last commandment repeated is the instruction for the violence itself: “Look him in the eye, aim no higher. / Summon all the courage you require” (Odom, Jr. et al., “The World Was Wide Enough”). When Hamilton is struck, the narrative flies apart; Burr removes himself and the audience from the present moment, and fast-forwards through Hamilton's death and his own implied expulsion from the community:

When Alexander aimed at the sky,
 he may have been the first one to die,
 but I'm the one who paid for it.

I survived, but I paid for it.

Now I'm the villain in your history. (Odom, Jr.
 et al., “The World Was Wide Enough”)

Hamilton aimed at the sky and Burr still shot him, violating the terms of a just duel. Burr is a murderer and Hamilton a martyr; Burr is exiled from the community, and together, they serve as a sacrificial figure. When they are gone, peace reigns. As Girard writes, “The death of the individual has something of the quality of a tribute being levied for the continued existence of the collectivity. A human being dies, and the solidarity of the survivors is enhanced by his death” (255). Jefferson and Madison are free to praise Hamilton's financial system. Eliza tells the audience of her life of productivity after her husband's death. This is the tone that the play ends on. America—the fictional story-America of *Hamilton*—is no longer in sacrificial crisis; it is secure, productive, peaceful, and *in consensus*, no longer at war with itself. Still, the audience feels the loss of Burr and of Hamilton more acutely than any of the gains, which are

given as exposition, as epilogue, from a distance (Original Broadway Cast of Hamilton, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”). If loss—if sacrifice—is necessary to a society, it is shown in *Hamilton* as a heartbreaking loss. The message here is clear: if sacrifice can solve the problems of a community, it is always at a cost.

The consensus within and without

Girard writes of Greek drama that “if we see tragedy in terms of a fire used to combat fire, it is clear that its purpose is to protect the community against its own violence” (292). The fact that *Hamilton* is an immigrant is repeated, over and over again; it is used by his enemies as an insult, an othering that carries the heavy weight of the world outside the story. Music critic Greg Kot writes, “This is less a textbook dramatization than an ode to immigrant pluck, impudence and ambition.... The relevance of that message in today’s fractious world of ‘extreme vetting’ and Islamophobia makes ‘Hamilton’ an unusually potent piece of theater” (Kot). Most pointed is Hamilton’s explicit vision of what America could or *should* be:

America, you great unfinished symphony, you
sent for me.
You let me make a difference.
A place where even orphan immigrants
can leave their fingerprints and rise up. (Odom,
Jr. et al., “The World Was Wide Enough”)

As well, *Hamilton*’s is a cast that omits, almost entirely, white actors. “It [feels] appropriate,” one critic writes, “that the ultimate dead white men of American history should be portrayed here by men who are not white. The United States was created, exclusively and of necessity, by people who came from other places or their immediate descendants” (Brantley). Yet Gene Demby, in “Watching A Brown ‘Hamilton’ With A White Audience,” writes, “Even as *Hamilton* exceeded my impossibly high expectations, I felt a vague unease sitting there that night, like I was at a hip-hop show where my favorite group was performing, but I might get shushed for rapping along too loudly.” He describes the audience of *Hamilton* as overwhelmingly white, and the

Broadway culture as one that has a long and complicated history with race: “Theater has a long history of segregated seating and plays chock full of racist caricatures that meant black folks, in particular, never warmed to Broadway” (Demby).

Lyra Monteiro takes this criticism further. “With a cast dominated by actors of color,” she writes, “the play is nonetheless yet another rendition of the ‘exclusive past,’ with its focus on the deeds of ‘great white men’ and its silencing of the presence and contributions of people of color in the Revolutionary era” (Monteiro 90). She argues that *Hamilton*, venerated and advertised as the “story of America then, told by America now,” erases the “role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since” (93). Essentially, Monteiro says, *Hamilton* reinforces by its very existence the long-held cultural idea that the stories of white men are the only stories that matter. This is the consensus in action, the “universal” American symbology that traces through “Puritan errand, national mission, manifest destiny, [and] the [American] dream” (Bercovitch 8). The key to consensus, Bercovitch argues, is that anything “un-American” can be *made* American, through rituals of exclusion and absorption, a being-reframed in the context of the American way (50-51). American culture, in other words, is a constant move toward homogeneity:

In one form or another, [the leaders of American society] have always insisted that America is the last, best hope of mankind—meaning by *last* both telos (as in the Puritan sense of “latter days” or the Whig notion of a revolution to end all revolutions) and final choice, one last chance to redeem humanity. Both versions carried the same message. *Last* plus consensus (i.e., the United States as “America”) meant *best*; *last* without consensus (i.e., the United States as just one more nation in the Americas, like Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil) meant catastrophe. The point was not to offer alternatives but to induce a sense of anxiety, an apocalyptic sense of urgency, that would enforce compliance. (61-62).

So goes the sacrificial crisis: a time of anxiety and urgency resolved by compliance, the cultural

agreement to sacrifice. In this way *Hamilton* both demonstrates the consensus constructed—through a story of the resolution of the sacrificial crisis, the peace born of violence—and reinforces the consensus by reinforcing to an American audience the American mythos, the story of the “revolution to end revolutions” which “obviated the need for any further American uprisings” (39). Monteiro writes,

it is concerning that the play adopts the old bootstrap ideology of the “American Dream,” with the second line in the play hailing how Hamilton, despite his humble origins, “got a lot farther by working a lot harder, / by being a lot smarter, / by being a self-starter.” This may account for the universal acclaim Hamilton has received from conservative commentators. (96)

Famously, at one showing of *Hamilton*, the cast noticed Mike Pence in the audience, and “[urged] him and Mr. Trump to ‘uphold our American values’ and ‘work on behalf of all of us’” (Healy). But whose American values? Who is “all of us”? Do they mean those represented by the cast, or by the majority-white audiences? Do they mean Hamilton-as-immigrant, or Hamilton-as-Founding-Father? For whom do they speak, when they speak from a stage that “[silences] the presence and contributions of people of color in the Revolutionary era”? (Monteiro 90). We are forced to wonder at these recursions into “American” logic; as Monteiro says, “Whenever a historical story is shared, it has an ideological component. What ideology is being inculcated by a show like this, at the same time that it engages its audience?” (98) At a time of urgent political unrest, what are the effects of a story like *Hamilton*, a story that re-traps us in the American consensus even as it attempts to subvert it—a story that aims, perhaps, to inspire political and social revolution through the re-telling of the revolution that ended revolutions? What can it truly accomplish, and how?

Conclusion

The popularity of *Hamilton* is undeniable. It holds the record for the most money grossed in a single week by a Broadway show (and also for

Broadway’s highest-ever premium ticket price); it holds eleven Tonys; its cast recording debuted at number twelve on the Billboard 200, and took number one on the Billboard rap chart (Paulson; “Hamilton’ wins”; Caulfield; Estevez). A message has been disseminated to millions, and through tracking the desire-conflicts, the reversals of the tragic protagonists and enemy brothers, and the cycles of violence and how they are halted or not halted, the devastating message is revealed: in any act of violence—be it revenge or sacrifice—you are at risk of harming your double, your first friend/enemy. Ultimately, it may be fitting that *Hamilton’s* audiences tend to be white, and affluent: who better to be shown this lesson in a political landscape rife with scapegoating, and in a society ready to sacrifice its most vulnerable? Whether they *learn* this lesson is another question entirely. If the efficacy of these messages is reduced by *Hamilton’s* outward adherence to the consensus, though, its internal demonstration of the *construction* of the consensus may yet still prompt us to wonder: is a consensus born through such sacrifice one worth upholding? If we are mired within the consensus—Bercovitch argues that we are—it is only because we have already lost our first friends, our doubles, *ourselves* to the rituals of exclusion and absorption; it has all been a sacrifice to the myth of the American dream. In the last line of *Hamilton*, the company asks, “Who tells your story?” (Original Broadway Cast of *Hamilton*, “Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story”). But it is a story that has already been told: it is history and myth. The stories we tell are the stories of ourselves, past, present, and future.

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