



# A Necessary Evil: The Benefits of Both Following and Breaking Feminine Stereotypes in *Hamilton*

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LIN MANUEL MIRANDA'S *HAMILTON* has been lauded by some for its inclusion of two women who play the roles of early feminists in America, Eliza and Angelica Schuyler. In their first big song, "The Schuyler Sisters," the two are introduced with their younger sister Peggy as free thinking and confident; Angelica even quips that she's been "reading *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine," making "some men say that [she's] intense or [she's] insane." Stacy Wolf describes the women as "politically savvy" and "perceptive intellectual[s]" that are boldly set up to be front and center (171). However, along with other scholars, Wolf goes on to notice that Eliza and Angelica still fall into the stereotypical, romance-centered roles of the good, obedient wife, and the diverting muse, respectively. These roles are ever present and somewhat disappointing considering how distinct and independent the sisters are at the start of Act I. This is not necessarily all negative, however. Although it's clear that these feminine tropes exist and diminish the strength of the feminist undertones in *Hamilton*, Eliza's character development and eventual reveal as the true star of the musical would be impossible without her initial setup as Hamilton's rather ordinary wife.

Essentially, Eliza enters the story as Hamilton's love interest. She sings a song entitled "Helpless" where she describes her loving relationship with Hamilton. Hamilton himself sings that "my love for you is never in doubt," illustrating that the two are very much dedicated to each other. As time goes on, Eliza and Hamilton have a child, and Eliza takes up the role of a domestic mother and wife. In these roles, she is relegated to somewhat common stereotypes seen in women, and her character isn't fully fleshed out. However, near the middle of Act II, Hamilton's dealings with Maria, his mistress, are exposed, prompting Eliza to distance herself greatly from her husband, even singing that he "forfeits [his] place in our bed." The strength that she exhibits in later scenes to control her true emotions and yet to still stand by Hamilton's side is very moving, and begins the decay of those initial feminine tropes that constrained her. She is no longer just a wife

or a mother—she is a woman who has the ability to stand in the face of immense pain and suffering and still pursue her goals. In fact, in the ending of the musical, Eliza stops "wasting time on tears" and completes some enormous feats; she gathers stories and history surrounding Hamilton, organizes his writing, raises "funds in D.C. for the Washington monument / [speaks] out against slavery," and establishes the first private orphanage in New York City. She is essentially credited as the central reason for the musical's existence. Eliza is a woman deserving of respect and admiration, and Miranda used her achievements to develop her character into a wholly feminist and trope-defying woman.

Coming back to Wolf's scholarly article entitled "Hamilton's Women," Wolf claims that the presence of feminine tropes and stereotypes makes the production "almost feminist." In her words, "*Hamilton* puts women on the sidelines and relegates them to the most obvious and time worn stereotypes." Angelica's short-lived brilliance on stage, Maria's shallow role as a seductress and stumbling block for Hamilton, and Peggy's near non-existence are all disappointing to witness. Nonetheless, Eliza is where this line of failures in writing female characters ends. She begins as Hamilton's prize, a stepping stone used for him to achieve wealth and status in a society that didn't respect those who "don't have a dollar to [their] name." As Hamilton continues to overwork himself and ignore Eliza and their child, Eliza becomes the voice of reason, urging Hamilton to "decide to stay" at home more often. This is where Eliza's role as the "good wife" slowly begins to morph; as Hamilton is painted as irrational and unsympathetic towards his wife, Eliza is seen as wise in contrast.

This view isn't held by everyone. According to Wolf, Eliza "pesters" and "harangues" Hamilton in an effort to "domesticate" him (175). In other words, Eliza is the nagging wife put there to be a frustrating roadblock Hamilton must overcome to achieve greatness. While it is understandable that Eliza's actions may be interpreted

to be overbearing and negative, this outlook overshadows her importance and overwhelmingly positive character traits. Once again, these moments where Eliza speaks to Hamilton and urges him to spend more time with his family are not put in there to make the audience sympathize with Hamilton, but rather to reveal how selfish and careless he is when it comes to his family. Part of the production's point is to prove that the founding fathers were flawed men; when one views gentle, wise Eliza next to reckless Hamilton, it's clear that Hamilton is the true issue here; while Eliza repeatedly asserts her commitment to Hamilton, singing that "I'm not afraid / I know who I married," Hamilton avoids her pleading and turns all his attention on his work. In addition, it's not very feminist to imply that a woman who desires domestication is of less value, or is herself less feminist. Eliza was in the right when urging her husband to take up more responsibility and show more respect as a member of the household.

Claire Chandler is another scholar who has written on the feminine roles in *Hamilton*, commenting that "these remarkable women exist in the world of *Hamilton* to help orient the audience's understanding of the politics at play and humanise the male protagonist" (2). Her article focuses on Hamilton's lack of progressive action concerning gender—an example she gives is that the casting could have been gender-blind and yet still resorted to "the heteronormative conventions of musical theatre" (3). It's true that these women only exist within the play in relation to Hamilton himself—however, that could be said about every character in the musical. Hamilton has his friends (Marquis de Lafayette, John Laurens, and Hercules Mulligan), his allies, such as George Washington, and his rivals (Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson). These people are given some depth, but overall the performance is not about them. The characters revolve around Hamilton and his life because he is the main protagonist. The same can be said about the female characters as well. More importantly, their intrinsic value as women does not diminish merely because of their romantic relationships with Hamilton. These characters are representations of real women who made real, independent choices concerning romantic relations with men. This doesn't make them any less feminist.

It can even be argued that Eliza's relationship with Hamilton humanizes *her* rather than him. Her roles as a wife, sister, and mother lead to the cultivation of the audience's empathy, causing her reveal as the true author of the story to be much more poignant. In her solo "Burn," Eliza takes complete control of her future by erasing

valuable information that could have saved or redeemed her husband from his scandal, as well as erasing information concerning her own reaction. She sings, "I'm erasing myself from the narrative. / Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when you broke her heart." Even though Hamilton betrayed her, Eliza isn't some self-pitying damsel in distress. She forges the future in spite of her pain and forces Hamilton to face the consequences of his actions—she is anything but the meek "good wife" trope here, and Miranda wants us to see her strength and power; Eliza grows from a mere love interest into the driving force behind the whole musical.

Overall, it's necessary to point out the failures within art, especially art that gains as much traction and support as *Hamilton* has. Eliza stands as a very well written woman who represents many ideals of feminism. The audience walks away from the musical not admiring Hamilton, but rather feeling like they want to live as audaciously as Eliza and have the power to make lasting changes in our world. Even so, whether or not one agrees on Eliza's breakage of traditionally confining feminine stereotypes, there were still failures in the development of the three other women in the musical. Through and through, *Hamilton* is "almost feminist," and one well written woman does not change this fate. Wolf and Chandler brought up valuable points that were previously overlooked, and by doing so their ideals run parallel to those held by Eliza; when something needs to be addressed, these women are unafraid to make that change—whether that be writing an article or building an orphanage, women can get a job done.

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