

## Have You Really Seen *Hamilton: An American Musical*?

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In this article, So investigates the history and the creation of *Hamilton* through ISU's pedagogical cultural historical activity theory, or P-CHAT.

### Introduction

Do you know who Alexander Hamilton is and what he has done for our country? Well, you might have heard about him if you are interested in US history and the stories surrounding the origins of the United States, but you may also have heard about him because of the musical that came out in 2015 all about his life, called *Hamilton*. Since the musical came out, many people have learned about this lesser known founding father, and Alexander Hamilton now has a large pop culture presence that recognizes him as equal to other important historical figures in US history.

The idea for the musical *Hamilton* was first introduced at the White House when Lin-Manuel Miranda made his debut, on April 2009, with the rap song about the forgotten founding father which would later become the song "Alexander Hamilton." This song would ultimately become the song that introduces Hamilton, the first song of the first act in the musical. The musical premiered January 20th, 2015. Three months later Miranda would come back again to the White House to perform with the original Broadway

cast of the musical, because the musical had made its name and become very popular nationwide.

Using **P-CHAT, or Pedagogical Cultural Historical Activity Theory**, we can explore the evolution of an idea to a song to a world-famous musical, as well as many other **genre remediations**. We can also explore some of the historic texts and ideas that Alexander Hamilton, this historical figure, was involved with. P-CHAT is a framework used by Illinois State University's Writing Program to examine literate activities and how people navigate literate activity systems and how they produce and use texts as part of these systems. Specifically,

P-CHAT will help us look at *Hamilton* by looking at all the different activities, thinking, and tools that went into creating *Hamilton*. This musical is not just an entertaining story. It also works to remediate history through the genre of modern music. I will be using P-CHAT concepts to investigate this process, and even though I am no historian, I will also be using P-CHAT to discuss some of the historic texts that were a part of Alexander Hamilton's story.

## Alexander Hamilton

The first thing you need to know about the Broadway musical *Hamilton* is that Lin-Manuel Miranda, the author and star of the musical, was inspired by the biography, *Alexander Hamilton*, written by Ron Chernow. The fact that Miranda was inspired by the book to make a musical about the forgotten founding father Alexander Hamilton, is an example of **Genre Remediation**, which is a process through which a text is altered for a new purpose, allowing it to have a new trajectory or situating it within a different activity system (Tidmarsh). The musical features details of Hamilton's whole life story—his personal life, his involvement with the beginning of the US democracy, and his work as the first secretary of the treasury, as well as lots and lots and lots of writing. For example, in the musical Miranda includes as one of the song lyrics, "I wrote my way out" because of how Hamilton literally did. He wrote his way off the island he was from and got a scholarship that took him to New York City. Miranda's interactions with the author of the biography, Ron Chernow, can be considered through the P-CHAT term **socialization**. Socialization involves looking at how humans interact with texts and with other humans, sometimes in complex ways (Giovagnoli), and this concept can be seen in an interview with Miranda. Miranda had said that he had interacted with Chernow about some ideas he had for the play,

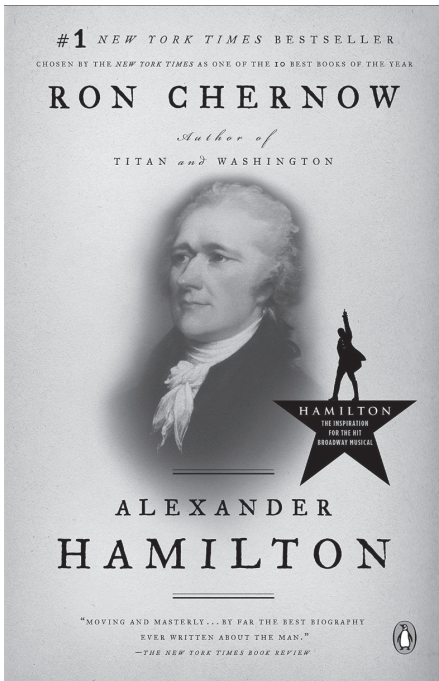


Figure 1: Alexander Hamilton's autobiography written by Ron Chernov.

as well as fact-checking to make sure he had the whole story right. So even though Miranda is the author of the musical, Chernov is involved in the **socialization** of ideas about Hamilton, which in turn were important to the creation of the musical.



Figure 2: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Okieriete Onaodowan in Hamilton (<https://www.vox.com/21308627/hamilton-movie-review-disney-2020>)

This process of remediating the book into the musical also brings up two more components of P-CHAT which are **production** and **activity**. **Production** involves specifically the processes involved in producing a text (Giovagnoli), while **activity** involves all kind of other things that happen throughout the entire life of a text as it is produced and moves around in the world. I would like to say these two components go hand in hand, as the production is the planning and making, and the execution of these plans involves all kinds of peripheral activity. Production can be seen as part of the process through which Miranda chose sources and decided what parts of history he thought were most relevant to add into the musical, and activity would include the work to actually create the musical, which would also include the times when he talked over the subject with Chernow. The production process also included a lot of remediation as the content of the book morphed into the musical. Later on, I will talk about the Reynolds Pamphlet and you will see that I go over some parts that Miranda kept out of the musical because he knew that he couldn't possibly fit all of Hamilton's life into a two-hour and forty-minute musical. Well, he could have, but that musical would have been very hard to make and would probably have been very long and boring.

## The Federalist Papers

*The Federalist Papers* are a series of eighty-five essays produced by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison in in 1787 and 1788 (Library of Congress Research Guides). This document Hamilton contributed a lot of his time to, was created to encourage the ratification of the new constitution that would replace the Articles of Confederation. This new constitution is the same United States Constitution we still use today.

The song "Non-Stop" from the musical goes over how Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison wrote *The Federalist Papers* during the Constitutional Convention. Hamilton had written fifty-one out of the eighty-five letters to defend to ratification of the new US Constitution by introducing a new form of government. The crazy thing about this is that I know all this information only because of the song, and because of how many times I have listened to the two-hour and twenty-three-minute original Broadway Cast *Hamilton* album. It could also be because of the **representation** of this work, as Miranda emphasizes it in the song. **Representation** is a P-CHAT term that deals with the understanding and intentions related to a literate activity—or how the people involved in producing a text understand what it will or might be or how users might understand or use it (Giovagnoli). In this case, the song really emphasizes how much more energy Hamilton had put into

*The Federalist Papers* compared to John Jay and James Madison. Here are the actual lyrics from the song:

Alexander joins forces with James Madison  
 And John Jay to write a series of essays  
 Defending the new United States Constitution  
 Entitled *The Federalist Papers*  
 The plan was to write a total of 25 essays  
 The work divided evenly among the three men  
 In the end, they wrote 85 essays  
 In the span of six months  
 John Jay got sick after writing five  
 James Madison wrote 29  
 Hamilton wrote the other 51 (Miranda, 2015, track 23)

In this part, Leslie-Odom Jr. who portrays one of the main antagonists in the musical, Aaron Burr, is narrating this part in the song, but when it gets to the last line he sings with a lot of power, emphasizing how much work Hamilton had put into *The Federalist Papers*. Now we can take a look at **reception** which is how the audience interprets a piece of text (Giovagnoli). In this case the audience is me, and I interpreted it as Hamilton putting in the most work based on the lyrics of the soundtrack.

There is a very small detail that Miranda put into the lyrics, and I didn't realize until I actually did the research behind *The Federalist Papers*. My reception of the last three lines in the lyrics above John Jay had gotten sick of writing. My reception of John Jay was that he must have not been as enthusiastic or didn't have as much motivation as Hamilton, but he did in fact actually get sick. John Jay had to stop contributing to *The Federalist Papers* due to rheumatism. Rheumatism, as defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary is "any of various conditions characterized by inflammation or pain in muscles, joints, or fibrous tissue," which led to John Jay only writing five out of the eighty-one essays, not because he didn't care as much as Hamilton, but due to an illness (History.com).

## The Reynolds Pamphlet

The *Reynolds Pamphlet* was a crucial document in Alexander Hamilton's history because the story surrounding and leading up to its publication was a scandal that led to the end of his political career. We can use P-CHAT to analyze the complicated situation surrounding this text's production and distribution. But we can also use the concept of **trajectory** to help us understand how this text evolved. According to Tidmarsh, trajectory is "what texts do and how they move around in the world," and it can also

help us to think about how a text moves in the process of production. There are five songs in the musical that deal with the Reynolds scandal, explaining it from beginning to end, but of course not all of the history behind the scandal is included because all history can't be explained in just one musical. I mean it could be, but it wouldn't be as entertaining for an audience unless it was a bunch of historians.

The first song that deals with the beginning of the scandal is "Say No to This" which goes over how Mariah Reynolds shows up to Hamilton's house asking for help. Hamilton and Reynolds begin a love affair, but as it turns out, the whole scene has been set up by Reynolds' husband, James Reynolds, who both encourages the continuation of the affair and blackmails Hamilton over it for a about year beginning in 1791. But before I get into the second song, I have to explain some context that isn't covered in the musical. James Reynolds would be arrested towards the end of the year of 1792, and in trying to deflect the consequences of his arrest, he accuses Hamilton of financial crimes, which are especially serious since Hamilton was secretary of the treasury at the time.

This leads us to the second song, "We Know." In which Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Aaron Burr confront Hamilton about the accusations that he has embezzled funds from the federal government. Hamilton proves these accusations wrong by providing the letter from Reynolds that outlines the blackmail and the payments Hamilton has been making, and by documenting that he had been using his own money and not the government's to make these payments. However, the letters between Reynolds and Hamilton end up getting leaked to the press. At this point, in an attempt to clear his name, Hamilton produces the Reynolds papers, a ninety-five page document, with seven pages of explanation and another



Figure 3: Mariah Reynolds and Alexander Hamilton from the play

fifty-eight pages of documents. He intends these documents to be semi-private (given only to specific people) but they are also leaked, and the resulting scandal creates a great deal of pain for his family and effectively ends his political career. This whole story has a lot of connections to P-CHAT and literate activity concepts. For example, **production and activity** are both involved, as well as trajectory, in tracing how the affair, the original letters between Reynolds and Hamilton, the accusation of embezzlement, and the Reynolds papers are all activities and texts that are intertwined. The various productions of different texts are a response to certain situations, but then they end up influencing each other as well as subsequent events and activities. Ultimately, Hamilton writing the *Reynolds Pamphlet* is the result of all of the previous activities and texts, providing an excellent example of trajectory. Hamilton writes the papers in an effort to get a particular result, but the text ends up going to places and being read by people he didn't anticipate. And while the text does have one intended effect, which is to prove that he hasn't done anything treasonous, there are also a lot of unintended (by Hamilton) trajectories which have negative results.

Another literate activity concept that the Hamilton saga allows us to consider is the way the musical remediates the story—changing some of the historical events and leaving others out. I mentioned before that Miranda couldn't possibly have included all of the details, but he also changes some of the facts in order to make the story in the musical work better. In the musical, Miranda has Jefferson, Madison and Burr confront Hamilton, but in fact, James Monroe, Abraham Venable and Frederick Muhlenberg were the ones who initially confronted Hamilton about the embezzlement accusations (Wikipedia). Monroe is actually the one who “leaked” information about the sex scandal to Thomas Jefferson, who was an enemy of Hamilton's, and Jefferson gave copies of the documents and letters to a journalist, James Thomson Callender, who printed a pamphlet including this evidence of Hamilton's affair with Reynolds and the hush money he paid to her husband (Wikipedia). Alexander Hamilton would then blame James Monroe for the pamphlet getting out and would almost get into a duel over this. But these details aren't provided in detail in the musical, although Miranda does have

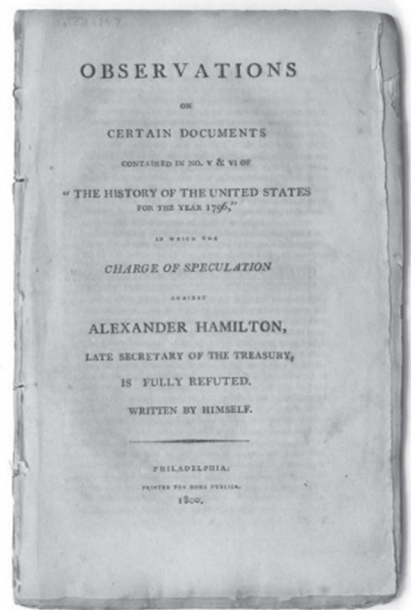


Figure 4: A picture of the front of the *Reynolds Pamphlet*. (<https://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/the-reynolds-pamphlet-fully-titled-observations-o-99-c-0124fbc959>)

the character Aaron Burr allude to it at the end of the song “We Know,” when he says,

Alexander, rumors only grow  
and we both know what we know

The third related song in the musical, “Hurricane” offers a look at Hamilton’s thought process about whether to publish and release the *Reynolds Pamphlet* to the public in an effort to protect his reputation, or to avoid ruining his relationship with his family and not releasing the *Reynolds Pamphlet*. He looks back at the past and thinks about how the truth has done good for him in other situations, and he proceeds to release the *Reynolds Pamphlet* to the public. The P-CHAT concepts of **distribution**, **reception** and **socialization** are all important here. Hamilton distributes the text, supposedly to only a few people, but it goes public. So the distribution of the text is already out of control, exceeding his expectations. The text is then **socialized**, as people read it and talk about it. **Reception** comes into play as people in the government, and Hamilton’s family, are impacted significantly, although in different ways.

All of this leads us to song four “The Reynolds Pamphlet” which involves the result of the published sex scandal. Hamilton isn’t ruined completely because he’s proven that he isn’t an embezzler, but his political ambitions are at an end, and the scandal would also ruin his relationships in his family. In this song, **representation** and **reception** are both involved. Representation comes into play in an interesting way because Hamilton clearly has a particular representation of what releasing the *Reynolds Pamphlet* will do. He had hoped that the people would see that he was not committing any crimes affecting the nation but instead was paying off James Reynolds with his own money. Reception is certainly happening in the song, as we see how Hamilton’s wife and his wife’s sister react. In the fifth song in this part of the musical, “Burn,” Eliza Schuyler Hamilton is basically narrating how their lives are ruined because of this affair (Prokop). Significantly, she burns his letters to her, saying

Let future historians wonder how Eliza reacted when you broke  
her heart  
You have torn it all apart, I’m watching it  
Burn

In this song, Eliza is denying Hamilton the chance to use distribution, reception, and socialization to further protect his reputation by using his letters to his wife to prove he was a loving husband.



## Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story

*Hamilton: An American Musical* is a “text” that we can definitely use to think about **Trajectory**. Like the *Reynolds Pamphlet* the story of the musical became very famous, very fast. In addition, Miranda was asked to participate in a huge range of printed interviews and new stories, as well as appearances on show like *The Late Late Show* with James Corden or *Late Night* with Seth Meyers. There are also many other forms of further distribution, spreading themes and ideas from the musical even further, such as bringing Miranda into TV shows like *SNL* or even on *Drunk History*. If you haven’t heard of *Drunk History*, it is a show where they retell history from a drunk perspective. I would take a look at the episode about Hamilton because Miranda tells you the history with funny reenactments while he’s explaining the history behind *Hamilton* while he’s—you guessed it—drunk. These multiple forms of distribution increased and sped up the reception of *Hamilton*, and performances of the musical also expanded, moving beyond the Broadway production.

The musical would end up touring in London, Chicago, San Francisco, Milwaukee, and even Philadelphia, and other cities as well (broadway.org). However, with this increasingly diffuse distribution, the representation of the musical would change as well because representation would differ as new casts performed the show for different touring destinations. With this new cast Miranda might not get the same reception he had worked for when he was with the original Broadway cast in New York because different actors would perform the roles and songs differently. This is especially interesting since Miranda not only created the musical but played the starring role in the



Figure 5: A scene from *Drunk History*.

Broadway production. Therefore, in these productions you could argue he had a lot of control over **representation**, but as other casts play the roles his control diminishes. Additionally, in an interview, the director, Thomas Kail, even brought up how they wouldn't change anything about the show based on a stage and/or venue size in different locations. I don't know if the size of the stages changed drastically by the location, but Kail's statement shows that they were definitely making efforts to represent the story consistently, so that audiences in different venues could have a similar reception. (Heim).

When I was planning to see the show live in Chicago, I at first thought the original cast would be coming to Chicago as well as to all the other cities, but I soon realized that it is impossible if their shows are playing at multiple cities at the same time. It would be a different cast for Chicago and every other city, and because of that, the reception was different for me, seeing the show in Chicago, than for people viewing the show in other cities. And even if I were to compare to people watching it in the same city, my reception would still be different due to the fact that I have listened to the original Broadway cast recording beforehand.

This brings up the idea that the album is also another source of distribution, as well as being a **genre remediation**, because it allows people to listen to the album without watching the show. Their reception would change based on watching the show first and then listening to an album or vice versa. For me specifically, and others like me, who couldn't afford to watch the show, we will have listened to the album and will have a different reception because of how we aren't getting the full story. We have to make the image in our own heads compared to people actually watching the show. Finally, since Disney+ now offers a video of the live performance, this would count as still another genre remediation, since people can see something that, in many ways, looks like the original production, with Miranda in the starring role. However, many of the other physical elements of seeing the show live would be different. This brings up the final P-CHAT term I want to use, which is **ecology**, or "the physical, biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of any text we are producing" (ISU Writing Program). This is an important concept that helps you think about how many differences there would be in seeing the show live vs. seeing it in the theater. Certainly someone seeing the show live would have a different reception than someone who watched almost the identical cast performing the musical in a video.

**SPOILER ALERT!** For example, from only listening to the album, I wasn't aware that John Laurens, who is an ally to Hamilton, dies. Now that I've been able to watch the show live and on Disney+ there is a song

not included the album called “Tomorrow There’ll Be more of Us” where Hamilton gets a letter from John Laurens’s Father. Here is a part of the lyrics in the song entailing what the letter had said:

On Tuesday the 27th My son was killed in a gunfight against the British troops retreating from South Carolina. The war was already over. As you know, John dreamed of emancipating and recruiting 3000 men for the first all-black military regiment. His Dream of freedom for these men dies with him. (Miranda 2015)

The album also acts as a different kind of genre remediation based on whether audiences have already seen the show or not. If they’ve already seen the show, their reception of the music is going to be different because they’ll have a memory of the live performance, with actors moving and talking, and they’ll know more details than they would if they had just listened to the album alone. This is a genre remediation of a remediation, you could even say a double remediation.

The mixtape of the musical would be released soon after the premiere of the musical which would spread around the world. This is another example of distribution, since the text is getting to an audience wherever this mixtape is available, such through music platforms like Spotify or through online purchase, or even in physical stores where they might sell music such as Target. This mixtape consists of covers from famous people, like Sia, Queen Latifah, John Legend, etc, and songs that were cut from the original production. The remediation can also be seen in this situation. A possible purpose of this remediation is opening up the target audience to an even bigger population, as there are famous people on the mixtape might get more people to give the music a listen. This might even lead them to listen to the original album with the original cast, which would further the distribution of the musical. And speaking of distribution, if you haven’t watched *Hamilton* or listened to the music, I recommend you listen to the original Broadway cast recording or even watch the musical if you have Disney+. If you’re ever in New York City, you could of course buy tickets and watch it live, which I highly recommend.

*Hamilton* has become so popular that its distribution has grown in the years since the show has come out, and because of that, Alexander Hamilton, the historic figure, is becoming more known by our society as one of the founding fathers. People have even been inspired to remediate their own versions of Hamilton, such as a student writing a song on Abigail Adams’s perspective set in the same time period.

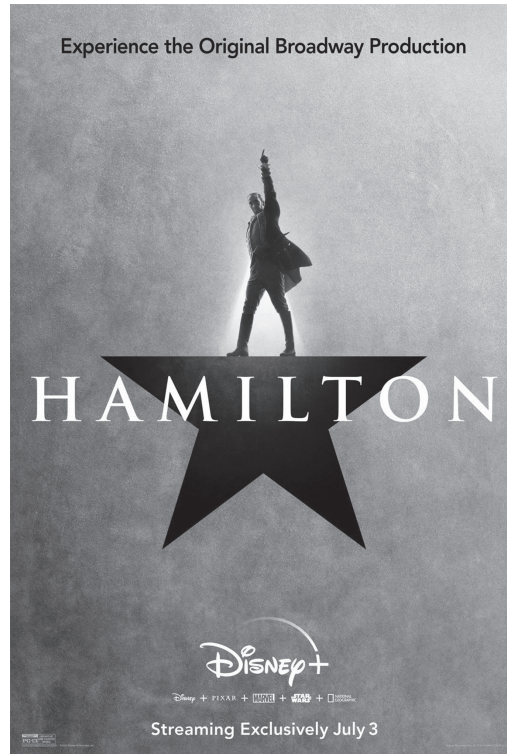


Figure 6: Thumbnail for *Hamilton* as it appears on Disney+.

## The World Wasn't Wide Enough for Both *Hamilton* and P-CHAT

With all of this information I hope you are able to see how intricate and complex P-CHAT can be as a tool for looking at complex literate activities. With *Hamilton*, I could go on about the elements of P-CHAT present in the actual history, and the many more ways the different P-CHAT components are involved in the creation of this musical, but I hope that I was able to show you how intertwined this theory already is in our everyday activities. To conclude, I encourage you to go listen to the original Broadway cast album on YouTube, Spotify, Apple Music, or even go watch the show live or through a streaming platform such as Disney+. My favorite song is “Non-stop.” If you are a *Hamilton* fan, I hope you enjoyed the song references, and some of the background history that I’ve provided.

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