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The Dialogical Ethics of Romance: Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*

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Abstract: Because romance puts comic plots in dialogue with tragic ones, it is especially well-suited to the exploration of complex ethical questions. This paper supports this argument by examining Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*, but it does so in consideration of rhetorical ethics more broadly. Like comedy, public communication is socially purposed, created to build and maintain communities, but because public communication is also a tragic instrument of the imperfect mortals who govern, it must come to terms with their individual failings. Miranda's *Hamilton* exemplifies how the "creative uncertainty" that results from such an ethical dialogue can sustain what Ronald C. Arnett calls "tenacious hope" (2022). This romance enables us to see how the motives that give rise to Hamilton's tragic overreaching bespeak the abuses of power that tempt those who govern, but the convergence of this tragic plot with a comic one also enables us to see the democratic possibility of these same motives.

Keywords: rhetoric, romance, Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton*, tragedy, comedy

Introduction

Every narrative is a kind of ethical dialogue, and each of the four narrative modes (comedy, tragedy, irony, and romance) will tend to manifest this in its own way. The characters typically put in conversation in a comedy reflect the societal divisions characteristic of some milieu, and, by symbolically overcoming these, its plot will envision a more perfect world. Tragedies, by contrast, examine human limits, often ethical ones, by putting conflicting motives in conversation. Tragedy makes visible the "determined shape" of some actor's chosen life, as Northrop Frye describes this, in "implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life" envisioned for this character (1957, 212). A more complicated ethical dialogue transpires in irony and romance, the two narrative forms that interweave the comic and tragic. On its comic side, an ironic narrative will envision some proposed remedy to the divisions and disfunctions of society, but because irony has a tragic ground, its comic meaning will be subordinate to its tragic theme. For instance, the social engineering pitched by the narrator in Jonathan Swift's *A*

Modest Proposal (1729) is its comic vision, but we cannot listen to this without putting it in dialogue with a tragic counter-narrative. The fantastical absurdity of the narrator's plan to cannibalize Irish children bespeaks the self-deception of some imagined power, perhaps a parliament so benumbed by its distance from the misery of its subjects and by its own contrivances of abstract reason that it has lost the capacity for human feeling. Once recognized, this unspoken tragedy belies the speaker's motives and enables the reader to recognize the ethical blindness of Britain's leadership.

Romance, the mixed story type I will explore here, is the inverse of irony, "a comedy which contains a tragedy" (Frye 1976, 92). On its tragic side, the story's protagonist will manifest some superior but fallible quality, but this attribute will ultimately find a comic expression, a resolution to the societal division at the heart of the narrative. The protagonist's heroism for this reason is typically set against some backdrop of societal decay. If, for instance, the protagonist is especially courageous, the story will also make us aware of some absence of the same in society's current leadership that accounts for its divisions. But because this is also a tragedy, this attribute will occasion an inward struggle that the protagonist must work out en route to the story's comic resolution. We will perhaps discover that courage is somehow also the protagonist's folly, that while it promises to redress society's disorder, it can also manifest some imprudence or impulsiveness that compounds the dangers that beset this community. Thus, as the problems of society mount in the course of the story, so do the protagonist's failures. But at the story's climax these tragic and comic storylines will converge; the climactic act that culminates its tragic storyline will double as a comic *anagnorisis*, a discovery about the protagonist's fatal heroism that enables it to bring about society's redemption.

All four narrative types are capable of expressing ethical meaning, but because the mixed modes integrate and reflect both the personal and social dimensions of human experience, they are capable of offering more complex ethical insights. Because of its tragic basis, irony invites ethical introspection by fostering what Paul Ricœur has called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (1970). Ironic narratives, by enfolding comic plots into tragic ones, enlarge awareness of hidden failings that undermine societal aspirations. The inversion of these comic and tragic roles in romance, by contrast, can sustain a "hermeneutics of faith." By enfolding a tragedy into a comic plot, a romantic narrative can face up to human limitations without foreclosing upon hope. Because it puts the comic and tragic in dialogue, this is to say, romance is the narrative mode best able to sustain the "unity of contraries" that makes "tenacious hope" possible (Arnett 2022).

Romance is by no means intrinsically ethical. A narrative form capable of sustaining tenacious hope might just as easily support the careless optimism that Arnett associates with modernity. I am merely arguing that romance has the greatest capacity for ethical expression. We can only do good if we also see paths of action capable of achieving the good, and comedy is the narrative form that envisions such pathways. Conversely, however, we can only pursue the good if we are also mindful of the human failings that are inevitably intermixed with these societal aspirations, and tragedy makes such awareness possible. Comedy without tragedy tempts false idealism, proposed actions that are not grounded in self-

awareness. Tragedy without comedy may invite a paralyzing pessimism. Because romance puts tragedy and comedy in dialogue, it can enable a more cautious self-awareness that constrains but does not block corrective action. This, in fact, seems to be what Kenneth Burke envisioned as the ethical outcome of his proposed "comic frame," a narrative perspective that could "enable *people to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*" ([1959] 1984, 171).

My goal here is to support this argument by exploring the ethical dialogue that unfolds in Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton*. I do so as a rhetorical critic interested in practical public discourse. I operate upon the assumption that narrativity is a vital component of practical public discourse as well as of literature, film, television, and drama, and thus I am especially interested in what *Hamilton*'s romantic structure might suggest about public discourse that is similarly structured. Miranda's story has special application to public life because it explores an ethical dilemma that is forever at issue in rhetoric: how governing powers that are necessarily wielded by an imperfect few might nevertheless serve the interests of the many. Governing power is socially purposed, ceded to some in the expectation, as Thomas Paine famously wrote, so that it may be a "blessing" to society, but because governing power necessarily excludes others, it is also a "necessary evil." It advances propositions that purport to foster societal ends, but it does so necessarily through oligarchical means, through the actions of a subset of individuals who wield powers denied to all others. Such powers are delegated for the sake of the whole, but the actions of those so entrusted are always subject to the individual failings and interests of the powerful. In narrative terms, one might thus say that both comic and tragic exigencies forever need to be rationalized in public discourse. Political actors advance policies on the comic assumption that these will repair some imperfection of society, but because these policies are enacted by select individuals, the imperfections of human judgment, the usual stuff of tragedy, are just as perennially at issue.

For this reason, rhetoric will tend to put tragic and comic concerns in dialogue, and since romance and irony are the forms that do this, rhetorical narrativity is likely to manifest one or the other of these patterns. In the arena of deliberative rhetoric, one should expect messages intended as rebuttals to have an ironic cast and those intended to advance policies to have a romantic cast. With respect to epideictic, perhaps the genre of speech most like narrative art, we should expect to find romantic narrativity in speeches of praise and ironic narrativity in speeches of blame. Speeches of praise, especially when they engage in historical reflection, are likely to affirm some newly victorious or otherwise established power by showing how it has overcome a tragic propensity (Frye 1957, 186). Speeches of blame inevitably challenge the societal vision of those in power by exposing the tragic imposture of their comic pretensions.

As a musical celebrating one of America's founders, Miranda's *Hamilton* is akin to romantic epideictic, a comedy of praise that explores the part played by Alexander Hamilton in establishing the United States. As such, it offers a representative anecdote for democratic leadership. But as a tragedy of blame, it explores how the personal ambition that makes Hamilton's heroism possible is

also a perennial danger to good government. The musical's ethical potential lies in its capacity to put its comic and tragic themes in dialogue and, by doing so, to sustain an understanding of public virtue that is also tempered by an understanding of the inescapable vices that tempt those who govern. In my judgment, Miranda has risen to this challenge, and in the remaining pages of this essay I will explore how the musical's romantic grammar makes this possible.

Analysis: Dialogic Character Development in Miranda's Romance

We usually think of dialogue as any interaction that sustains a consciousness of self and other, and typically this is signaled by a communication episode's interactive quality, how effectively its actors both speak and listen. The narrative counterpart to this, which Bakhtin called "heteroglossia," is achieved by bringing characters into interaction to reveal "specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (1981, 291). These interactions contribute to the meaning or theme of a story by enabling us to interpret its plot, its grammar of action. Characters, so to speak, are a narrative's semantic elements, a story's key terms. Plot is a story's syntax, the narrative grammar that orders characters' actions into a meaningful whole. When character A acts in relation to character B, the points of view expressed by these characters are set in motion as well, and because these actions and counteractions fill out the story, this interaction of perspectives will shape its thematic meaning.

As a romance, *Hamilton* is at base a comedy that explores how this founder's heroic attributes and actions helped build America, but the musical is also a tragic exploration of the personal failings that threatened these efforts. These two parallel narratives simultaneously unfold to enact an ethical dialogue. Hamilton's extraordinary energy, intelligence, and democratic fervor are forever bent upon establishing and sustaining the nation, but the personal aspirations and political necessities that also drive him often contradict these aims. The musical refrain that marks the onset of Hamilton's political career, "I'm not throwin' away my shot," expresses his determination to contribute to the democratic cause, but as an expression of his restless ambition, this utterance also has a tragic aspect. As comic heroism, his "shot" has exceptional societal promise, but it also gives rise to hubris. As much as he is intent upon securing the blessings of society, his efforts are inevitably also expressed in ways that do not, either because pragmatic political concerns compel him to exclude others and thus to exert undemocratic power, or because his personal aspirations sometimes conflict with his public responsibilities.

The words and actions of the musical's supporting characters externalize and enlarge upon this protagonist's inward struggle. Being either for or against Hamilton, they sustain what Frye calls the form's "general dialectic structure," and for this reason they do not offer much "subtlety and complexity" (1957, 195). As "stylized figures," they "expand into psychological archetypes," that give

romance "a glow of subjective intensity" and sustain its "suggestion of allegory" (1957, 304). While such formulaic characterizations frequently subject romance to charges of sentimentality and imaginative excess, this is precisely the rhetorical feature that enables it to get at ethical complexities that attempts at realism tend to obscure. The familiar character archetypes of romance are "indications and signals" that enable us to understand "how it is properly to be used" (Jameson 1975, 135). This is especially true of the protagonist-antagonist opposition in *Hamilton*. From the moment they are introduced, we know that Hamilton and Aaron Burr are moral opposites, that Hamilton aspires to serve society and Burr to exploit it. Once Hamilton's heroism is fixed in our minds, there can be no letting go. We are decidedly on his side. However, his simultaneous identification with Burr creates a "unity of contraries" (Buber 1966, 111). In this, Miranda has also drawn us into an ethical dialogue. Because we side with Hamilton, we want his heroism to triumph, but because he is also a version of Burr, we find ourselves joining in with this hero as he searches for a way out of his moral conundrum.

As in other romances, Hamilton's antagonist also plays a key role in the story's resolution, and so I will discuss his relationship to Burr at the end of this analysis where that climax and resolution is treated. I will first look at the similar dialogues that develop out of Hamilton's linkages with the three main characters who support his quest: Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, her sister Angelica Schuyler, and George Washington, who is Hamilton's mentor. The heroic qualities that we come to recognize in Hamilton over the course of the story are also projected onto these characters, and they manifest in each instance in ways that help to illuminate Hamilton's moral struggle.

Eliza Schuyler and Hamilton

In her role as wife and family matriarch, Eliza Schuyler is the character who most purely manifests the comic aspirations that are undermined by Hamilton's hubris. In allegorical terms, one might say that she is society. Constantly preoccupied with the concerns of family, she is largely immune to the individualistic aspirations that divert Hamilton from his quest, but this also makes her the chief victim of his affair with Maria Reynolds. When he decides to publish a pamphlet detailing the affair in order to salvage his political career, he forces Eliza to withdraw from the public sphere by "erasing" herself "from the narrative." Her public humiliation in this instance symbolizes the civic alienation forever promulgated by political corruption.

Hamilton's inability to recognize such failings is treated in the scene just prior to the Reynolds affair. Here, he is writing to Eliza's sister Angelica about the political contest that consumes his attention, his struggle to get his debt plan through Congress. My enemies "think me Macbeth, and ambition is my folly," and that "Madison is Banquo, Jefferson's Macduff," the rivals to the Scottish throne who are vindicated by Macbeth's tragic fall. There is a subtle irony here. In rejecting these comparisons, Hamilton has acted the part of this Scottish king. Like Macbeth, Hamilton's yearning for power has blinded him to the prophesy that

warns of his own doom. He is so certain of his virtuous leadership that he fails to recognize the egoistical follies that inevitably come with it.

The contrasting innocence that makes Eliza Miranda's archetype for society is dramatized just prior to Hamilton's affair. Ever-mindful of the family's well-being, Eliza urges Hamilton to "take a break" from work and spend time with them in upstate New York. Hamilton begs off by insisting that an analogous public interest must take priority, but his private affair with Maria Reynolds soon diverts him from this course. This episode is the musical's tragedy in parable. It is Hamilton's public-mindedness that makes him receptive to the pleas of the destitute Reynolds who is fleeing an abusive husband. Just as he wants to help America, he wants to help her, but personal interests instantly have him in her bed. These motives are again conflated when the husband then begins to blackmail him. Even as he pays Reynolds off to cover up this personal indiscretion, he is ever-mindful of his public image and scrupulously records each transaction to protect himself against the charge that he has misappropriated public funds. Ultimately, the personal becomes public and the public personal when he is exposed and compelled to clear his name by detailing the affair and blackmailing in the *Reynolds Pamphlet*.

The civic harm of the Reynolds affair finds its allegorical expression in the destructive effect it has upon Eliza. The episode ends with Eliza alone on stage, burning Hamilton's love letters. She now understands the warning spoken by Angelica at the onset of their courtship: "Be careful with that one, love. He will do what it takes to survive." As artifacts of *eros*, his letters expressed the personal love that gave rise to the collective bonds of family. You "built me palaces out of paragraphs, you built cathedrals," Eliza says, but now she tells us, "I'm erasing myself from the narrative" as she sets them afire. Hamilton's personal falsity has compromised the family that symbolizes his public ends. Eliza recognizes this in his apologetic *Reynolds Pamphlet*. The "palaces" and "cathedrals" of his earlier love letters are gone. Instead, we have the "paranoid" sentences of someone so "obsessed with [his] legacy" that he willingly tells "the whole world" how he "brought this girl into our bed." "In clearing your name," Eliza says, "you have ruined our lives."

Angelica Schuyler and Hamilton

The weddings that frequently occur at the close of romances symbolize the societal redemption wrought by a completed quest. In *Hamilton* this is the marriage of Alexander and Eliza which occurs, not at the end, but rather, in keeping with historical chronology, thirty-five minutes into the musical. The scene is nevertheless able to fulfill this traditional function because it has been brought about by an act of heroism that is clearly analogous to the one Hamilton will perform at the musical's climax—in this instance Angelica Schuyler's act of sacrificial heroism that has made this marriage possible.

Miranda links Angelica's sacrifice to Hamilton's by closely identifying these characters. When Angelica first meets him at a New York ball, she finds in his radiant intellect and revolutionary zeal the "mind at work" she has been looking

for, but when she then introduces him to her sister Eliza, Hamilton falls in love with her instead. We only become aware of the enduring depth of Angelica's love for Hamilton during the subsequent wedding when her toast to the newlyweds, "May you always be satisfied," induces a reverie, a "rewind" of the earlier exchange. Upon being introduced to her at the ball, Hamilton says, "You strike me as a woman who has never been satisfied." Angelica thinks Hamilton is merely flirting, but in fact he has recognized a deep kinship. "You're like me," he says, "I'm never satisfied." Angelica has the same insatiable need for identity, and because of this, she understands Hamilton's tragic struggle, that his are "intelligent eyes in a hunger-pang frame." The intelligence that later enables him to build the nation's financial system may direct his appetites, but it is not their source. Like Angelica's awakened *eros*, Hamilton's all-consuming ambition is rooted in his insatiable desire for identity. "And when you said 'Hi,'" she remembers, "I forgot my dang name. Set my heart aflame, every part aflame," and because she, too, can never be satisfied, she also recognizes that "this is not a game." Like him, she is captive to a desire capable of destroying herself and others.

Angelica's response to this tragic self-awareness prefigures the sacrifice that resolves Hamilton's inward confusion—the fact that his identity needs are entangled with his civic desires. The analogous desires at war in Angelica are romantic love and family love—*eros* and *philia* (Lewis 1960). *Eros* pulls her out of society. "I wanna take him far away from this place," she says. In intimacy, the self is discovered in the other. But familial love intrudes. "Then I turn and see my sister's face and she is . . . Helpless." Eliza is in love with Hamilton too, and Angelica realizes that she cannot satisfy her personal desire without also harming her sister. She must choose between *eros* and *philia*, between her love for Hamilton and her love for her sister, and realizing that Eliza would make the same sacrifice for her, she steps aside:

> I know my sister like I know my own mind. You will never find anyone as trusting or as kind. If I tell her that I love him she'd be silently resigned, he'd be mine. She would say, "I'm fine." She'd be lying.

Angelica does what she knows her sister would do. Something higher than *eros* has intruded to stay her hand, a sacrificial love that transcends the natural ones. Like the shot that Hamilton throws away at the story's climax, Angelica's choice is tragic. She knows she will "never be satisfied." But the wedding scene we now return to signals the comic redemption that her sacrifice, like Hamilton's later one, makes possible.

George Washington and Hamilton

The dialogical work that Angelica and Eliza Schuyler perform as alter egos to Hamilton is supported by metaphorical or allegorical imagination, the viewer's ability to think about the erotic and familial love expressed by these sisters *as if* these corresponded to the personal and societal aspirations that make Hamilton both tragic and comic. By comparison, the understanding of Hamilton that arises when he is put in dialogue with George Washington has a typological basis—more

like that produced by synecdoche. The follies of his own youth that Washington recalls as he tries to curb the similar ambitions of his younger protégé invite us to see him as a type for the tragic Hamilton. For the same reason, the idealized Washington of public memory plays an opposite role as the image of what Hamilton is destined to become should he complete his quest.

That Washington would stand in for both the tragic Hamilton of the present and the comic redeemer that Hamilton may become is consistent with what one sees in other stock characters of this kind—the wise elders who guide romantic heroes and heroines (Frye 1957, 195). In his interactions with Hamilton, both aspects of Washington's character are made visible. The constant danger that personal ambition will undermine Hamilton's public service is foreshadowed in Washington's references to his own youth. But as a wise counselor who has completed his quest, Washington transcends his own past and is able to prefigure Hamilton's comic destiny.

Both patterns are visible in their first meeting during the American War of Independence when General Washington offers him a clerical position on his staff. Hamilton resists. He wants a combat role that will win him instantaneous fame. Per the signature refrain that introduces him in the musical, he will not throw away his "shot," and whenever this theme recurs, it is because Hamilton's yearning for identity threatens to compromise his leadership, the intelligence, creative energy, and administrative genius that he brings to building the new republic. In the language that Frye uses to describe tragic protagonists, this first exchange reveals the "determined shape" of Hamilton's chosen path in "implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life" that we also envision for him (1957, 212). However, the possibility that the protagonist might yet realize this uncreated potential is made possible by Hamilton's simultaneous identification with his mentor. Washington understands Hamilton's tragic desire because he shares it: "It's alright, you want to fight, you've got a hunger. I was just like you when I was younger. . . . Head full of fantasies of dyin' like a martyr." Hamilton instantly agrees with this representation, but then Washington's other identity fires back: "Dying is easy, young man. Living is harder." He sees Hamilton's desire for glory in wider perspective. Bravery is a virtue since those who lead must encounter risks, but Hamilton's identity aspirations have misapplied it.

Hamilton's identity yearnings persist even as he accepts the job. When Washington calls the question by holding out his writing quill to the young officer, the chorus voices his inward divide by chanting his signature phrase: "I'm not throwin' away my shot," and when this crescendos, Hamilton shouts the same defiant words even as he snatches the quill from Washington's hand and goes to work. He is of two minds. The tragic ambition that links him to the young Washington of the past abides amidst the comic hope that links him to the present one.

In their next dialogue in which Hamilton's commander reprimands him for his part in a duel between John Laurens and General Charles Lee, Washington performs the public-mindedness that Hamilton's conflation of the public and personal undermines. Hamilton claims to have acted in the public's interest, that he was defending Washington's leadership against Lee's insults. "Charles Lee,

Thomas Conway," he says, "take your name and they rake it through the mud," but when Washington answers, "My name's been through a lot, I can take it," we discover Hamilton's real sore spot. "Well, I don't have your name. I don't have your titles. I don't have your land," but "if you gave me command of a battalion, a group of men to lead, I could fly above my station after the war."

These dueling public and personal motives are symbolized by a terminological dispute that also unfolds in this scene. Washington three times calls Hamilton "son," and each time Hamilton rejects this appellation. In the first instance Hamilton fires back with "Don't call me son," refusing to accept the societal role this familial term imposes upon him. He reacts as though Washington has patronized him, forced a role identity upon him that is not his to assign. But insofar as the public role he has already agreed to play is analogous to this familial one, Hamilton's outrage is unwarranted. Thus, when Hamilton reacts more vehemently the second time Washington calls him this, his commander cautions him to watch his "tone."

The tragedy of Hamilton's personal ambition is that it threatens to undermine his unique talents. He is "willing to die" if that means personal fulfillment, even though this will deprive the infant nation of his gifts. "We need you alive," Washington says, and when Hamilton brushes this aside, the general drives this point home a third time, again by couching this in personal terms: "Your wife needs you alive, *son*, I need you alive." But Hamilton is defiant. He shouts in Washington's face, "Call me son one more time!" Like the prodigal son of Luke's Gospel who strains against the bonds of family, Hamilton thinks that Washington's public demands will deprive him of personal happiness. And like the father in Christ's parable, Washington responds at the end of this scene as only he can, by sending Hamilton away.

Although Hamilton's conflicting motives are still visible in the closing months of Washington's presidency, their ultimate harmonization is foreshadowed in their final meeting. When the president tells him that he needs a "favor" now that Thomas Jefferson has resigned his cabinet post, Hamilton immediately reads this as an opportunity for personal advancement. Assuming that his hated rival has committed some wrong, he gleefully offers to retaliate. But Washington has an opposite purpose. Washington is stepping down, and Jefferson has resigned so he can run for this office. The president wants Hamilton to help him to surrender power, not to exert it. He means to teach his successors "how to say goodbye," how to relinquish personal interests for the public good. As Hamilton helps him to formulate this message, we see him beginning to become like Washington, and in anticipation of this, Miranda subtly reconfigures their relationship. No longer playing the part of a father struggling to rein in a rebellious son, Washington now reaches out to Hamilton as a friend. They act as companions and equals, citizens drawn together by a common civic interest. "One last time," he says to Hamilton, "relax, have a drink with me one last time. Let's take a break tonight, and then we'll teach them how to say goodbye. You and I." As friends, as C. S. Lewis would say, they stand "side by side; their eyes look ahead" toward "the same truth" (1960, 66)—in this instance the civic future they have collaborated to bring about.

As this scene unfolds, Hamilton's perspective gradually merges with Washington's. Hamilton raises various objections to the other's decision, but each of the president's responses envisions some broader public benefit. In answer to Hamilton's fear that Americans will think him "weak" if he steps down, Washington says "they will see we're strong." When Hamilton protests that his "position is so unique," Washington says that "I'll use it to move them along." Hamilton's reasons are plausible enough. Good government should be sustained, and it could be if Washington continued as president. But Washington sees the other side of this, a public responsibility that can only be fulfilled by relinquishing power: "If I say goodbye, the nation learns to move on. It outlives me when I'm gone."

Just as the societal meaning of Angelica's sacrifice is found in the home made possible by her sister Eliza's wedding, the meaning of Washington's retirement is found in the domestic peace prophesied by Micah (4:4):

> "Everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid." They'll be safe in the nation we've made. I wanna sit under my own vine and fig tree, a moment alone in the shade, at home in this nation we've made. One last time.

After repeating this a second time, Washington again performs the gesture that inaugurated their professional collaboration. He holds out his writing quill to Hamilton, and in this moment the younger man transcends the tragic individualism expressed in his earlier defiance. Their identities converge as he repeats Washington's words "one last time," and as the scene continues their voices speak together the words of the first president's farewell address.

Aaron Burr and Hamilton

In dialogue with the musical's protagonist, each character profiled thus far in some way enlarges understanding of the ethical tension at the story's center. Because these allies move in step with the protagonist, their choices inform the struggles he faces in his dual quests for public service and self-advancement. Aaron Burr, the story's antagonist, contributes to this process by providing a purer representation of Hamilton's tragic aspect. Just as George Washington and Angelica Schuyler typify Hamilton's sacrificial heroism, Burr for the most part typifies the tragic self-interest that Hamilton must learn to transcend. In the language of Carl Jung, Burr is Hamilton's "shadow." He brings to our attention a destructive aspect of Hamilton's personality that lies outside his awareness (Jung 2001, 139–40). For the same reason, this antagonist plays a crucial part in the execution of the story's plot. Hamilton's tragic destiny is filled out in his fatal duel with Burr, but this climactic moment also gives rise to the comic revelation that enables him to overcome.

The shared ambition that ultimately brings about this death-struggle is manifest when these characters first meet on stage. Burr has already begun to make a name for himself, and Hamilton, who is desperate to do the same, wants his advice. In spite of the public services both actors will eventually perform, at

the story's onset their preeminent aspirations are personal. While Hamilton desires a military appointment because he is fired with enthusiasm for the political ideals of the coming revolution, he is just as determined to parlay public service into personal advancement. Given a chance on the battlefield, he tells Burr, "we could prove that we're worth more than anyone bargained for." Burr has similar ambitions, but his stratagem for fulfilling them shows his greater willingness to compromise his public responsibilities. If you want to "get ahead," Burr tells him, "talk less, smile more, don't let them know what you're against or what you're for." When Hamilton scoffs at this, Burr turns the tables with an ominous warning: "Fools who run their mouths off wind up dead." Burr's tactical evasiveness may seem self-interested, but the heated polemics that later pour from Hamilton's pen betray the same motive. This becomes progressively more visible as the story unfolds. At one moment Hamilton is fertilizing the soil of the sprouting American democracy with civic wisdom, and at the next fouling it with a poisonous egotism.

Burr's habit of circumventing public deliberation makes him appear to be Hamilton's moral opposite, but as Hamilton rises and evolves, we soon find him employing the same tactics. This reaches a critical point in the scene depicting his battle, now as Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, to push his debt plan through Congress. When Burr asks how he plans to do this, since Jefferson and Madison mean to block him, Hamilton answers by saying, "I guess I'm gonna have to finally listen to you: Talk less, smile more, do whatever it takes to get my plan on the Congress floor." Like Burr, Hamilton's ends seem to be public, but his means show his willingness to subvert democratic deliberation—in this instance through a quid pro quo. In exchange for the votes he needs, he promises to get the nation's capital located in the South, just across the Potomac River from Jefferson and Madison's Virginia. He is willing to sacrifice his democratic principles in order to win a political battle that to his enemies smacks of self-interest—a deal that will ensure Hamilton's wealth by making his own city of New York the nation's financial center.

Burr's rage when he gets wind of this is voiced in the scene's musical refrain: "No one else was in the room where it happened." Having attained political power, Hamilton is as willing as Burr to subvert the democratic process to the exclusion of others. After the same pattern is repeated in the election of 1800, Burr's hatred takes a murderous turn. To break the tie between Jefferson and Burr who each hold seventy-three electoral votes, Hamilton swings the contest in Jefferson's favor. Even though he has "never agreed with Jefferson once," Hamilton manipulates the process to keep Burr out. The same amoral instrumentalism that Burr has displayed throughout the story has been turned against him.

When their fatal showdown arrives, it has become clear that the aspirations that have brought Hamilton to the brink of extinction are the same ones that have made Burr a villain. This tragic identification is reviewed in the soliloquy spoken by Burr as the two men make their final preparations for the duel. He voices the frustrated ambition he is about to act out. He means to kill the man who "poisoned my political pursuits," and since he knows that Hamilton is driven by the same motive, he assumes his similar intent. Why else, Burr says, would Hamilton put on glasses to inspect "his gun with such rigor" and "methodically fiddle with the

trigger"? His enemy means "to take deadly aim," and so Burr will too. "It's him or me."

But as with other romantic protagonists, Hamilton's is a "fortunate fall," as Milton would say. His tragic death-struggle also brings about a comic revelation, a symbolic corrective for his flawed leadership. When the opponents raise their pistols, Hamilton steps out of time and contemplates his next action as though from an eternal vantage point. This marks his "point of epiphany," as Frye calls it, the "point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment" (1957, 203):

> I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory. Is this where it gets me, on my feet, sev'ral feet ahead of me? I see it coming. Do I run or fire my gun or let it be? There is no beat, no melody. Burr, my first friend, my enemy, maybe the last face I ever see. If I throw away my shot, is this how you'll remember me? What if this bullet is my legacy?

The first line of this speech repeats the utterance that, when spoken at the onset of Hamilton's quest, marked the tragic onset of his frenetic race against death—against the despoiling effects of poverty, disease, slavery and lawlessness that overshadowed his childhood on St. Croix. What weighs upon him now in that statement's reprise is the realization that his actions will outlive him. If he kills Burr, he may prolong his mortal life, but he will poison the life of the society that lives on. Hamilton's warning to his son Philip on the eve of his own fatal duel bespoke this danger: "You don't want this young man's blood on your conscience." Like Philip who has already died after throwing away his shot, Hamilton understands that he has a moral responsibility that extends into the future. His "legacy" is not his own.

> Legacy, what is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. I wrote some notes at the beginning of a song someone will sing for me. 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.

The meaning of Hamilton's life exceeds his individuality and thus also its mortal span, and so at the close of his life he sees it in eternal perspective, from some vantage point outside of time:

> I catch a glimpse of the other side. Laurens leads a soldiers' chorus on the other side. My son is on the other side. He's with my mother on the other side. Washington is watching from the other side. Teach me how to say goodbye. Rise up, rise up, rise up, Eliza! My love, take your time. I'll see you on the other side. Raise a glass to freedom.

Like Angelica's wedding speech, Hamilton's final toast to freedom coincides with a sacrificial act. When time begins again, he discharges his pistol into the air, allowing himself to be fatally wounded. The fate prophesied in Angelica's toast has come to pass: "He will never be satisfied." However, the same act by which he

abandons his striving creates a legacy of peace that gives society a shot at realizing its collective aspirations.

The story's epilogue is spoken by Eliza. As the family matriarch, she personifies society and thus is the character best suited to envision the redeemed world made possible by Hamilton's sacrifice. Her crowning achievement as she carries on his work for another fifty years is the establishment of the first private orphanage in New York City, an institution that symbolizes both the familial aspirations and inevitable imperfections of society. In the eyes of these orphans, Eliza says, "I see you Alexander. I see you every time." Like Hamilton, these children are parentless and thus without identity, and in some sense, the same may be said of every member of society. As citizens we are orphans, members of a kind of pseudo-family, an unnatural societal contrivance. Like Hamilton and Washington, "we have no control who lives who dies who tells our story," and yet in growing up we may surpass the limits of these circumstances.

Concluding Thoughts

This exploration begins an effort to explore one of the public implications of an observation first set out in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) and expanded upon two decades later in his *Secular Scripture* (1976). When Frye introduced the subject of romance in his *Anatomy*, he made the provocative observation that in every age since the Middle Ages, "the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance, where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy" (1957, 186). If this is true for literary fiction, it seems reasonable to suppose that it might also be true for the narrative patterns that shape public address.

Frye's observation suggests only that romance has some special capacity to rationalize power, but if we assume that the appearance of ethicality is a vital ingredient of such rationalizations, we might also ask what ethical advantage is likely to be gained when public discourse is romantically structured. My answer is that romance's integration of comedy and tragedy enables it to more fully address the ethical complexities of rhetorical situations. Every policy problem involves both tragic and comic concerns, but the partisan dispositions of political actors incline them to set one concern against another. Those arguing the affirmative side of a policy are likely to privilege comic concerns—the policy's societal benefits. Opponents, conversely, will privilege the policy's tragic aspect, the abuses of power it is likely to make possible.

Were we to consider this kind of imbalance merely as a deliberative challenge, we would say that this is why political discourse should be dialogical, why all points of view should be heard, but from a narrative standpoint this would mean that policy proposals should be able to fit the tragic and comic together in some plausible way. They should mindfully acknowledge the dangers at stake in any proposal while expectantly exploring societal solutions. Political actors whose messages are unbalanced in either of these ways cannot carry out their ethical

responsibilities. Those whose messages are purely comic will likely fail to satisfy their obligation to address serious dangers that may arise from any exercise of governing power. Those whose messages are purely tragic are likely to tempt cynicism and so to abdicate their responsibility to hope.

I suspect that those speeches that outlive their historical moments and continue to speak to the American conscience are likely to be romantically narrativized, that their comic hopefulness springs from tragic honesty. This, I surmise, is why we continue to resonate to the ethical nobility of Lincoln's second inaugural. The speech's closing call for "malice toward none" and "charity for all" is plausible and desirable only because the message also recognizes the tragic futility of any form of ultimate justice. Were "every drop of blood drawn with the lash" to be paid for "by another drawn with the sword," every war would continue ad infinitum. No peace can undo every wrong. Justice is a righteous demand, but no reprieve from violence can come without forgiveness.

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