

Hamilton: Act II Discussion Questions
Honors English 12

Part 1 We already addressed these questions in class. It seems so long ago!

Songs: What'd I Miss, Cabinet Meeting #1, Take a Break, Say No to This, The Room Where It Happens

Discussion questions:

This act transitions into the establishment of the U.S. What conflict drives this section?

What do you think of portraying discussions in Washington's cabinet as a rap battle?

How do these songs depict Thomas Jefferson?

What aspects of AH's personal life are developed? How do these developments influence our understanding of his character?

"The Room Where It Happens" points out that much of politics happens behind closed doors. How important is transparency in politics?

These songs make it clear that statesmen's actions are driven by a combination of ambition, personal motivations, and political ideals. What do you think of this? Does personal ambition compromise political integrity?

Burr continues to be the narrator for AH's life. How is his character developed in this section?

HW: Fact check: Read about one of the events/topics/relationships depicted in this section.

1. Select at least 2 credible online sources. Use the CRAP test to consider your sources' limitations if there are any.

Record the source information in MLA format and provide notes about the topic.

Consider: How accurate is LMM's depiction of events?

Part 2 We started these on Friday, 3/13, but we didn't get through all the songs or the questions, so I'm repeating the songs but posting slightly different questions.

Songs: Schuyler Defeated, Cabinet Battle #2, Washington on Your Side, One Last Time, I Know Him

Discussion questions:

Burr's choice to change political parties aggravates AH. How does Burr act as a foil in this instance? With whom do you agree?

Consider the suggestion that Washington favored AH over others that is built into these songs. Is this favoritism any different from the advantages and opportunities that Burr sings about?

What tension does "One Last Time" point out about creating and running a nation?

How does the portrayal of King George III justify the actions of the Revolutionaries?

What significance can we see in the casting of parts in the original production? The Americans are played by people of color, while King George III (and Samuel Seabury) are played by the only white actors in lead roles. Does this challenge racial stereotypes or reinforce them?

Several of the actors have reflected on the challenge of depicting white slave owners. They have also commented on the inclusive power of becoming a part of the story of the nation's beginnings, that it has made them feel more connected to a heritage that their ancestors were unable to take a part in. How do you feel about people of color playing characters who oppressed and enslaved their ancestors? What conversations does this evoke?

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HW: Start considering the topic of your position paper. We will all begin with the same prompt, but everyone will choose a topic and then narrow that topic into a clear position. We will work on this in the coming weeks, but it would be helpful to consider what direction you will go.

Your prompt: *Does Hamilton: An American Musical reinforce or challenge the status quo? The show has been labeled revolutionary from the get go. Do you agree?*

Possible topics: history, war, immigration, race, women, music, musical theater, politics, story-telling

Part 2 Start here on Monday, 3/23.

Songs: Schuyler Defeated, Cabinet Battle #2, Washington on Your Side, One Last Time

Discussion questions:

We started this discussion point with the last group of songs. What is the line between ambition/personal gain and opportunity that you are comfortable with? Think of the way the characters use their influence with other people and work for both their careers and their beliefs. Use references to the songs in this section to help illustrate your points.

Throughout the musical, George Washington appears as a father figure (although AH resists this relationship!) not only for AH, but for the revolutionaries and for the new nation. Choosing to resign after two terms as president must have been a difficult decision. What benefits might there have been for the nation if Washington had continued? What benefits did his resignation bring? How does this struggle relate to the ongoing process of creating democracy?

The casting and music of *Hamilton* draws attention to the multi-ethnic face of America today. There has been a lot of conversation about people of color playing the parts of slave-owners and other historical people who participated in a culture of oppression. In addition, critics claim (as we read) that some of the abolitionism claimed on behalf of these individuals is inflated and unsubstantiated. The creators of *Hamilton* ended up dropping "Cabinet Battle 3." Listen to the demo or read the lyrics to the rap battle. What do you think of the choice to drop this battle from the show? Does it add any additional comment to the "race conscious casting" of the musical?

Audio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fh4Xh29zNk>

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Lin-manuel-miranda-cabinet-battle-3-demo-lyrics>

Part 3

Songs: I Know Him, The Adams Administration, We Know, Hurricane, The Reynolds Pamphlet

Discussion questions:

This section of the musical shows the ugliness of politics and power. What do you think of the characters' actions in this section? Be as specific as you can. How do you think characters should have reacted to the situations they found themselves in? Now is a good time to stop to reflect upon the fact that *Hamilton* is historical fiction . . . these are characters developed, not real human beings! Much of these thoughts and words are invention!

Hamilton claims that he has "reason for shame," but he hasn't "committed treason or sullied" his good political reputation through his affairs with James and Maria Reynolds. What do you think? Should a politician be held accountable for his private life as well as his public life? The

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musical makes it clear that at least Jefferson and Burr also engaged in extra-marital affairs that never seem to have made it to the public's attention.

Hamilton is confident that writing will be his salvation once again. This question is an outside-the-text question: is writing still powerful? Or have images supplanted writing?

For fun: Here is the link to the scenes in the HBO mini-series *John Adams* in which John Adams learns to bow and meets the King of England as the first ambassador to England from the United States. Lin-Manuel Miranda refers to this introduction in the song "I Know Him."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82H5Rqnx3rw>

Part 4

Songs: Burn, Blow Us All Away, Stay Alive (Reprise), It's Quiet Uptown

Discussion questions:

These songs move from AH's political life to his personal life. They make me think of a quiz I took at the National First Ladies' Library. By answering a series of questions, I was able to find my First Lady match (from a very small group of options). One question that made a decisive difference in my match was whether I would have my own politics or stand quiet behind my husband's politics and actions. I know Eliza isn't the First Lady, so this is not a clear parallel, but in this song she chooses to ERASE herself from the story. What do you think of this choice? What do you think of Lin-Manuel Miranda's choice to characterize Eliza this way?

I can't quite figure out how to phrase this next question, so I'm just going to write and hope you get it. Listening to these songs in the medium of rap and hip hop, I am struck by the parallel between the "honor" system of dueling and the "honor" system of violence in modern gangs. (I found some references to this line of thinking online, so I know I'm not just making something of nothing!) Moreover, the musical ("Blow Us All Away") suggests that Phillip learned this response from his father. Do you think the musical glorifies or criticizes this type of honor code in which the individual seeks his or her own independent route to honor and glory rather than trusting legal channels and authorities? Is it impossible to get away from this attitude in a country built by rebels? Is this part of our legacy from our fathers?

We haven't discussed the amazing lyrics or brilliant musicianship of the musical much. "One Last Time" stands out to me for the idea to use the words from Washington's actual farewell address and to make this a duet that reflects AH's career writing for Washington. AH helped write this farewell address, too. I love the lines about the vine and the fig tree and "safe in the nation we've made." What songs and lyrics stand out to you? Try to explain what you enjoy or appreciate about a song or its lyrics. Choose anything from the musical's score!

Part 5

Songs: The Election of 1800; Your Obedient Servant; Best of Wives and Best of Women; The World Was Wide Enough; Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story

Discussion questions:

"The World Was Wide Enough" may be about the antagonism between Burr and AH, but we can also draw a parallel to political conflict between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, etc. in our own time. IS the world wide enough? Can we have our own beliefs and values as well as allow others to have theirs?

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Eliza laments that her husband does not become one of the founding fathers whose story is told and retold as the myth of America's founding. Instead, her husband is relegated to the story of his duel with Aaron Burr. For many of us, *Hamilton* alone has given a greater (albeit fictionalized) context to AH's life. Is there any danger in telling these individuals' stories as though they are (tragic) heroic characters rather than real, historical people?

Eliza's final song shows that, after AH's death, she lived a long life involved in politics and social reform. In the song, Eliza describes this life as telling her husband's story, and she insists that he "could have done so much more." Does this song challenge or recreate traditional ideas about women and their contribution to the world?