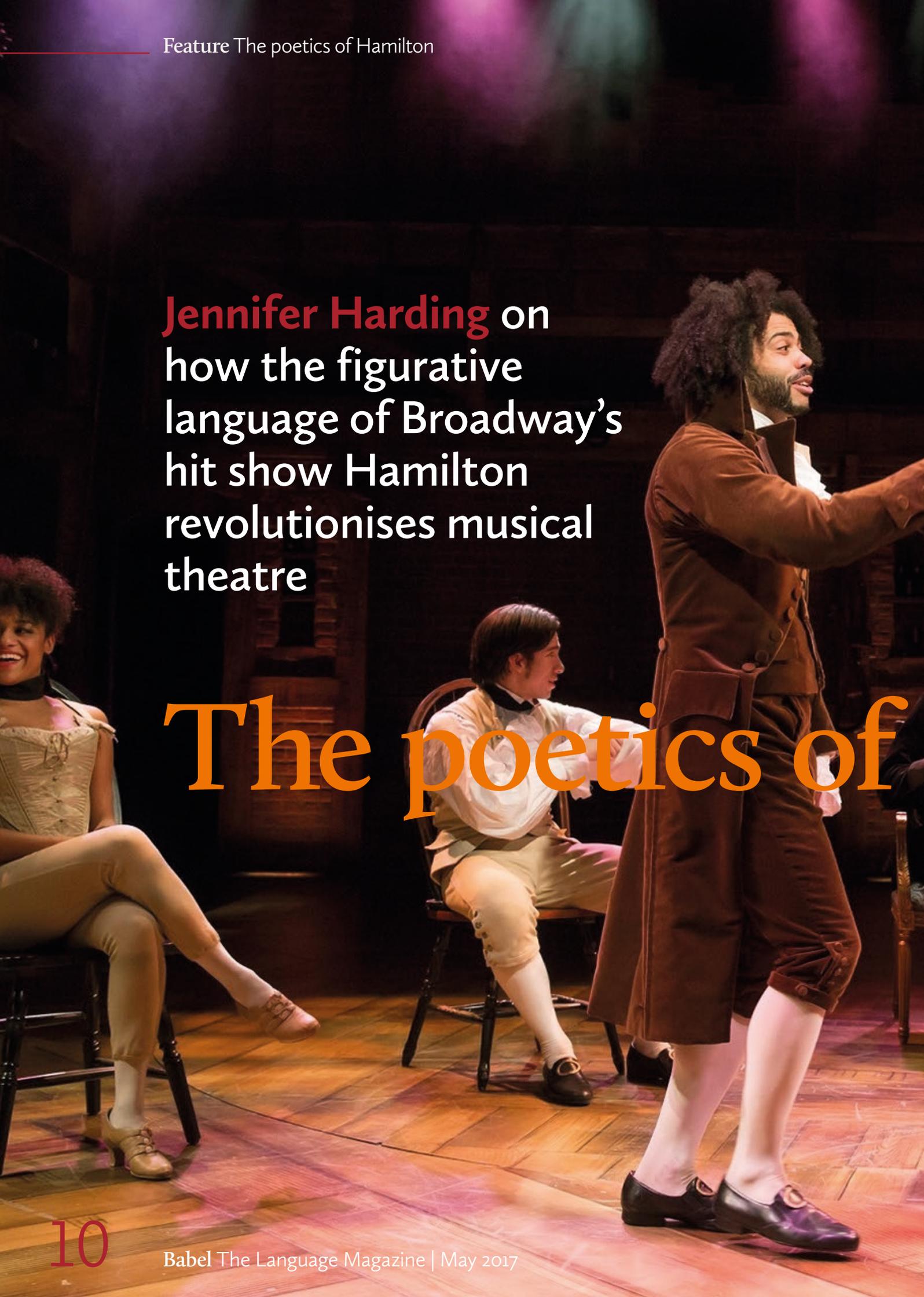


**Jennifer Harding** on how the figurative language of Broadway's hit show *Hamilton* revolutionises musical theatre

# The poetics of





# Hamilton

It's an unlikely premise for a hit musical – the life story of a forgotten figure from American history told through seamless performances of hip hop, jazz, R&B, and show tunes. And yet, despite its unexpected premise and unlikely blend of styles, *Hamilton* has been a game-changer in American musical theater and beyond, winning Tony Awards, a Grammy, and a Pulitzer Prize. The show is distinctive for its unique deployment of language, especially in figurative forms – rhymes, puns, and idioms – that are showcased in its musical styles.

The musical is based on an incredible life story: Alexander Hamilton was a flawed yet influential 'bastard orphan' who was a Revolutionary War officer and politician trusted by George Washington. He virtually invented the American financial system, yet ended his life enmeshed in political backstabbing and a fateful duel. *Hamilton*'s writer, Lin-Manuel Miranda, said in an interview that reading a biography of Hamilton made him feel "like a mosquito that hit an artery". In Miranda's hands, *Hamilton*'s story is like a Shakespearean tragedy: Hamilton 'rises up' along with his country in Act I only to face political disgrace and personal calamity in Act II. In conveying the story, the musical is operatic in its form, moving between hip-hop and other styles without a pause for traditional spoken dialogue.

While writing the show, Miranda says he realised that "We need a revolutionary language to describe a revolution". Capturing the spirit of the American revolution in hip-hop made sense because "This was a war of ideas [...] And

so hip-hop's uniquely suited to that, because we get more language per measure than any other musical form". Linguistic compression and figurativity are hallmarks of hip-hop and its signature verse style, rap, and Miranda weaves figures of speech into the show's other songs as well. As I learned in 2016 when I saw the show performed in New York City, *Hamilton* provides a uniquely energising aural experience that pulses with figurative language.

### Rhymes

Other musicals feature rhymed lyrics, but *Hamilton*'s rhyme and wordplay dominate with a frenetic density that is characteristic of hip-hop. Celebrated composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim wrote of *Hamilton*, "Rhyme does something to the listener's perception that is very important, and Lin-Manuel recognizes that, which gives the *Hamilton* score a great deal more heft than it might otherwise have".

One can sense the heft of this rhyming in the opening number, which begins with a rap performed by *Hamilton*'s nemesis Aaron Burr. The lines are colour-coded below to show rhyming syllables and words:

**Aaron Burr:** How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten Spot in the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?

In this opening, several kinds of rhyme combine to achieve a level of linguistic density. First, the 'or' sound repeats in three words that use apocopated

rhyme, a common rhyme style in rap in which a one-syllable word is rhymed with a stressed syllable in a multi-syllable word. Next, the words and phrases "Scotsman", "dropped in", "gotten", "spot in" and the last syllable of "Caribbean" use internal and end rhyme, taking advantage of the fact that, as Adam Bradley notes, "oral expression is generally more forgiving of sonic difference". The alliterative repetition of a pair of phonetically-similar words, "impoverished" and "providence", is followed by two-syllable rhyming words, "squalor" and "scholar", in a final couplet. This opening introduces the audience to the linguistic swagger that is typical of rap.

The next set of lines uses another kind of rhyme, known as chain rhyme, as it begins to answer the narrative question posed by Burr. Revolutionary War hero John Laurens informs the audience that this rags-to-riches story is a testament to a singular drive and talent:

**John Laurens:** The ten-dollar Founding Father without a father Got a lot farther by working a lot harder By being a lot smarter By being a self-starter By fourteen, they placed him in charge of a trading charter.

"The ten-dollar Founding Father" alludes to the fact that *Hamilton*'s face appears on the current American ten-dollar bill; "dollar" and "father" are the opening rhymes in a chain with seven more rhyming words. One can see (or more appropriately, hear) the forgiveness of sonic difference that Bradley describes: the obvious visual differences in words like "dollar" and "father" don't matter during the show, as



Former US president Barack Obama greets the cast and crew.

phonetic similarity is enhanced through performance.

Rhyming is not limited to single performers – other scenes represent the dialogue of characters speaking to each other in rap, their verses interlaced with complementary rhymes. For example, the following scene depicts the consequential first meeting in New York City of the show’s protagonist and antagonist, Hamilton and Burr.

**Hamilton:** Pardon me, Are you Aaron Burr, sir?

**Burr:** That depends, who’s asking?

**Hamilton:** Oh, well, sure, sir. I’m Alexander Hamilton. I’m at your service, sir.

I have been looking for you.

**Burr:** I’m getting nervous.

**Hamilton:** Sir ...

I heard your name at Princeton. I was seeking an accelerated course of study when I got sort of out of sorts with a buddy of yours. I may have punched him. It’s a blur, sir.

He handles the financials?

**Burr:** You punched the bursar.

The rhymes here are shared by the characters, as when Hamilton’s “service” rhymes with Burr’s “nervous”, and Hamilton’s “Burr, sir” and “sure, sir” with Burr’s “bursar”. Rhymed dialogue like this is used in exchanges

between characters throughout the show, a distinctive conversational rhyming.

In less cooperative scenes, rhymes are used in raps that represent heated debates. Two scenes in Act II are performed in the style of a cipher, in which two rappers try to outdo each other in a competition of wits and language – a battle of rhyme, puns, and insults. Rap battles are part of a longer African-American tradition of signifying, which Adam Bradley defines as “a rhetorical practice that involves repetition and difference, besting and boasting”. In a study of language users in the 1970s, linguist William Labov described examples of an early form of signifying called playing the dozens, a “game of exchanged ritualised insults” that were often expressed as rhymed couplets. Hamilton participates in this long tradition of signifying in rhyme, transforming the rap cipher into an element of musical theater and of storytelling.

In Hamilton, two “Cabinet Battles” moderated by president George Washington pit Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton against his political and linguistic adversary, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Their verbal duels reveal competing visions for the new nation:

**Jefferson:** “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

We fought for these ideals; we shouldn’t settle for less.

These are wise words, enterprising men quote ‘em.

Don’t act surprised, you guys, cuz I wrote ‘em.

**Jefferson, Madison:**

Owwwwwwwwwww.

**Jefferson:**

But Hamilton forgets

His plan would have the government assume states’ debts.

Now place your bets as to who that benefits

The very seat of government where Hamilton sits.

**Hamilton:** Not true!

**Jefferson:** Ooh, if the shoe fits, wear it.

If New York’s in debt

Why should Virginia bear it?

Uh! Our debts are paid, I’m afraid.

Don’t tax the South cuz we got it made in the shade...

**Hamilton:** Thomas. That was a real nice declaration.

Welcome to the present. We’re running a real nation.

Would you like to join us, or stay mellow,

Doin’ whatever the hell it is you do in Monticello?

If we assume the debts, the Union gets a new line of credit, a financial diuretic.

How do you not get it? If we’re aggressive and competitive

The Union gets a boost. You’d rather give it a sedative?

A civics lesson from a slaver. Hey neighbor.

Your debts are paid cuz you don’t pay for labor....

In this excerpt, the linguistic virtuosity is apparent, especially in Hamilton’s quick-witted and adaptive style. Jefferson relies mostly on couplets. Hamilton answers by opening with couplets, then performs a series

of elaborate lines, first rhyming “debts” and “gets”, then adding additional syllables to the core ‘et’ sound to rhyme “line of credit” with “diuretic” and “get it”, then re-deploying the ‘et’ and ‘et it’ sounds followed by ‘ive’ to rhyme “aggressive”, “competitive”, and “sedative”. He then insults Jefferson in three rhyming words (‘slaver’, ‘neighbor’, ‘labour’) that insinuate that Jefferson’s financial views are grounded in his interests as a slave-holder. Owwwwwww! Hamilton wins the battle because of his logic and his rhymes.

### Puns

Hamilton’s figurative talent in the show does not end with rhyme. In the previous excerpt, Hamilton also puns on “declaration”, a word with a double reference in context – not only has Jefferson just made a declaration in rap, but he is also the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, as Jefferson himself reminded Hamilton and the audience in his opening couplets.

In my forthcoming book *Similes, Puns, and Counterfactuals in Literary Narrative*, I define puns as words that are contextually-relevant in at least two ways and that create a humorous, provocative, or poignant effect. Puns of various sorts abound in *Hamilton*, and they play an especially central role in the song ‘My Shot’, which imagines a fictional meeting of revolutionaries in New York City. The scene takes place in a tavern where the characters drink and raise toasts, thus providing one contextual meaning for ‘shot’. The characters sing “I am not throwing away my shot”, providing another contextual meaning of ‘shot’ relevant to these young upstarts – they don’t want to miss the opportunities

the revolution could provide them with. But Aaron Burr reminds them that “You’ve got to be carefully taught: if you talk you’re gonna get shot!” Yes, a revolution includes real gunshots, too, and a gunshot is the last sound heard in Act I.

The punning on ‘shot’ extends into Act II, in which there is another meaning for the phrase “throw away my shot” in the context of dueling. As Ron Chernow describes in his *Hamilton* biography, the dueling code included the option of ‘throwing away shot’, intentionally firing in the air rather than firing at the adversary. When Hamilton’s son Philip faces a duel in Act II, his father tells him to “fire your weapon in the air”. His son heeds his advice, gets shot, and dies, bringing ironic commentary to the show’s previous puns on ‘shot’ as well as to the description of Philip as the child who would “blow us all away”. Some historians believe that Hamilton likewise threw away his shot in his deadly duel with Aaron Burr, as depicted onstage at the end of Act II.

Other characters utilise puns, including the character King George III, who sings “And no, don’t change the subject, cuz you’re my favorite subject”, and Hamilton’s wife Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, who sings that the soldier Hamilton makes her heart go “boom”. A pun on ‘declaration’ is also used by Hamilton’s soul-mate, his beautiful and brilliant sister-in-law Angelica Schuyler, who raps about revolution in Act I:

**Angelica:** I’ve been reading *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine.

So **men** say that I’m **intense** or I’m **insane**.

You want a **revolution**? I want a **revelation**

So listen to my **declaration**:

**Eliza, Angelica, Peggy:** “We hold these truths to be self-evident That all men are created **equal**.”

**Angelica:** And when I meet Thomas Jefferson, I’m ‘a compel him to include women in the **sequel**!

Angelica and Hamilton share an intense emotional affinity in the show, so perhaps it is no surprise that they both pun on ‘declaration’ as a retort to Jefferson. In general, when the characters pun on words that relate to war (‘shots’, ‘boom’), monarchy (‘subjects’), and the founding documents (‘declaration’), the punning relies on the double relevance provided by historical context and the scenes unfolding onstage.

### Idioms

It may not be typical to think of idioms as figurative, exactly. Idioms are sometimes called ‘dead metaphors’, and professional writers often avoid them because they represent overly-familiar collocations. They are thus more characteristic of everyday discourse than literary language. As linguists Geoffrey Nunberg, Ivan A. Sag and Thomas Wasow note, “idioms are typically associated with relatively informal or colloquial registers and with popular speech and oral culture”. While we might admit that idioms are by definition non-literal and therefore figurative in some sense, they are not considered creative.

And yet in *Hamilton*, idioms are creative and effective, particularly because they bring informality into the context of a Broadway musical about a lofty historical topic. Overall, idioms make the language in the show

recognizable and contemporary, collapsing the distance between the 18th century and the 21st century. Such is the case when Hamilton's wife urges him to "take a break," and he later sings "Eliza, I've got so much on my plate": this seems like a typical conversation a couple today might have. Likewise, when George Washington raps about the losses he piles up in the American Revolution in 1776, he declares "the elephant is in the room. The truth is in ya face...": this is his idiomatic way of expressing his angst, and makes him seem more contemporary.

Sometimes the contemporary reference is even more specific. When Hamilton's political enemies – Aaron Burr, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison – unite against him in Act II, they vow to "...follow the money and see where it leads. Get in the weeds, look for the seeds of Hamilton's misdeeds". The idiom 'follow the money' has become part of the American lexicon since the movie *All the President's Men* (1976) depicted the informant Deep Throat using this phrase to help a journalist discover Nixon's cover-up during the Watergate scandal. It has become a common way to describe actions intended to ferret out corruption; the idiom thus creates an analogical connection between corruption and political infighting in the 1790s and our own time.

The informality of idioms like these is consistent with the use of phrasing and pronunciation in a conversational register throughout the show, as demonstrated in "I'm intense or I'm insane", and "I'm 'a compel" in the rap by Angelica Schuyler. Yet throughout the show, contemporary phrasing, pronunciation, and vocabulary is integrated with quotations from

actual historical documents like the Declaration of Independence and the vocabulary of the 18th century – Miranda even finds rhymes for colonial-era words like 'bayonet', 'battalion' and 'corset'. It's a successful balance: contemporary vocabulary and idioms connect the show's language to our era (not to mention the frequent allusions to hip-hop songs and to other musicals), while the sweeping figurativity and 18th century words and quotations elevate and historicise it.

The use of contemporary idioms and historical allusions represent the show's external referentiality, while repetition of phrases within the show creates significant internal referentiality. The show repeats specific phrases like 'bastard orphan' and 'throw away your shot' again and again: they become recognisable idioms within the discourse of the musical. But because they are often used in new contexts that connect analogically to earlier scenes, the repeated use of phrases is meaningful rather than merely repetitive. For example, the phrase 'Talk less, smile more' is a catchphrase for Burr in Act I, and later repeated by Alexander Hamilton in Act II when he explains to Burr how he intends to get his debt plan passed by Congress. Similarly, the phrase 'History has its eyes on you', an admonishment made by George Washington in Act I, is sung to Hamilton by a chorus of characters in Act II as he makes the ill-fated decision to write a confessional pamphlet. There are many examples of repeated internal idioms like these that provide tight analogical connections between scenes – they are a hallmark of Hamilton.

Altogether, the effects of Hamilton's language are extraordinary in performance

and difficult to truly capture. Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of The Public Theatre in New York City, said in an interview that "Lin, in Hamilton, is doing exactly what Shakespeare did in his history plays. He's taking the voice of the common people, elevating it to poetry – in Shakespeare's case iambic pentameter, in Lin's case rap, rhyme, hip-hop, R&B – and by elevating it to poetry, ennobling the people themselves; he is bringing out what is noble about the common tongue, and that is something that nobody has done as effectively as Lin since Shakespeare". And yet, as with Shakespearian plays, the words do not belong on a page. Only in performance does the language sing. ¶

## Find out more

### Books

Adam Bradley (2009) *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop*, Basic Civitas Books.

Jennifer Riddle Harding (forthcoming) *Similes, Puns, and Counterfactuals in Literary Narrative*, Routledge Press.

William Labov (1973) *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter (2016) *Hamilton: The Revolution*, Grand Central Publishing.

### Media

Genius music crowdsourcing site, *Original Broadway Cast of Hamilton* – [genius.com/artists/Original-broadway-cast-of-hamilton](https://genius.com/artists/Original-broadway-cast-of-hamilton)

*Hamilton: An American Musical*, Original Broadway Cast Recording (2015), Atlantic.

*Hamilton's America* (2016), Great Performances series, PBS.

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