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Harry Potter and Hamilton from the Stage to the Page

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"HARRY POTTER" AND "HAMILTON" FROM THE STAGE TO THE PAGE

10.28.2016



BY DANIEL POLLACK-PELZNER

Move over, Shakespeare. The best-selling play on [record](#) is the script of the London theater smash *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, which was published as the latest installment of J. K. Rowling's wizard saga this summer. In its first week, the script whizzed past the cumulative sales for the previously top-ranked *Romeo and Juliet*, making it the fastest-selling title in almost a decade. Not far behind comes the libretto for Lin-Manuel Miranda's hit Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, leading Amazon's [theater list](#). (*Hamlet* lags a distant sixth.) The two shows are sold out well into the next presidential administration.

But millions of readers who haven't picked up a play since *The Crucible* in ninth-grade English are now getting another cursed child script and another colonial American drama delivered by Amazon's overnight owls to their doorstep. So how do Harry and Hamilton—the Anglo-American world's favorite orphans—play at home, adopted from the stage to the page?

Both books try to navigate the difficulty of appealing to their ardent fandoms through unfamiliar media, and they do so by summoning and repurposing the expectations of their audiences. It's tricky, though, to apply novel-reading norms to plays, or cast-album conventions to an annotated script. Skillfully marketed, with a careful manipulation of their literary lineage, these books seem canny about the ways they hope to control their interpretive communities.

For a start, they both trade on genre confusion. Although a gold banner on the cover of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* reads "Special Rehearsal Edition Script," it's designed to look like an eighth Harry Potter novel, hardbound (unlike most scripts) with a dust jacket that advertises "The Eighth Story. Nineteen Years Later." Story time doesn't quite map onto publication time; it's only been nine years since *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* appeared. But that culminating volume's epilogue becomes the play's starting scene, where Harry, now a middle-aged minister, encourages his son to run through the King's Cross Station wall to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. It's a parallel for the readers who grew up with Rowling's novels (myself included) and are now trying to lure their kids onto the Hogwarts Express. The show's creators (Rowling shaped the story with Jack Thorne, who wrote the script, and John Tiffany, who directed the production) [stated](#) their wish that it will turn a new audience on to theater just as the books enticed a generation to read. Scholastic evidently hopes the script will do the same for young readers unaccustomed to stage directions.

Will these young readers be hooked? The plot twists as breathlessly as ever; the characters, new and old, hew agreeably to type; the dialogue is serviceable; emotions run the adolescent gamut. But the selling point of the show is its spectacular magic, and that's where things get complicated. "I'd just write it on a page and make John [Tiffany, the director] do it," the playwright, Jack Thorne, [explained](#). "And he does." (Reviews [concur](#).) But how do we as readers experience the show's special effects? Let's take a look at a stage direction from the script that has come in for some [derision](#): "This is chaos. This is magic. This is St. Oswald's Home for Old Witches and Wizards and it is as wonderful as you might hope." Is it, though? The script's gushy abstractions seem to substitute for the precise descriptions—those found in Rowling's novels—that would conjure chaos or magic or wonder in our minds.



The Harry Potter Shop at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, 2016. Photograph by Madeley / Flickr

This sense of inadequacy, however, stems from a category mistake. Elaine Scarry has distinguished between forms of art that give us “immediate sensory content” (painting, music, the Harry Potter films), forms that provide “instructions for the production of actual sensory content” (a written musical score, say), and—one step more removed—forms that offer “instructions for how to imagine” the sensory world (the realm of fiction and poetry).¹ A description that suggests a place “as wonderful as you might hope” looks like an impoverished version of the third category: a fiction with meager instructions for imagination, full of deictic phrases (“This is ...”) that point to a world we can’t see. But it really falls in the second category: in a rehearsal script, stage directions yield instructions for the director and designers to *produce* a sensory world. The second-person “you” who might “hope” isn’t you, the reader; it’s the director (though it’s hard to shake the sense that it’s also you, the tantalized ticket buyer). “Plays are like sheet music, meant to be sung,” the playwright Thorne has [tweeted](#). *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* isn’t a bad novel. It’s just packaged to look like one.

If *Cursed Child* is a script masquerading as a novel, then *Hamilton: The Revolution* is a novel disguised as a script—a bildungsroman chronicling the growth of the show’s subject (the “Founding Father without a father”), its author, its form, and even its nation. The book frames Miranda’s lyrics with astute essays by the cultural critic Jeremy McCarter and revealing

annotations by Miranda himself that together narrate the genesis of the hip-hop musical alongside the historical revolution it retells. “It’s not a metaphor to call a play like *Hamilton* a living, changing thing,” McCarter insists, “It has the same surprising life as a baby, or a new nation.”

Part of the surprise of the musical—in the theater and on the chart-topping cast album—comes from hearing 18th-century statesmen swagger like young MCs. (Thomas Jefferson, riffing on the Declaration of Independence in “[Cabinet Battle #1](#)”: “These are wise words, enterprising men quote ’em. / Don’t act surprised, you guys, cuz I wrote ’em.”) The book inverts this convention, documenting the origin story of a 21st-century show in the form of an 18th-century volume: leather binding, deckled edges, and chapter titles out of *Tom Jones* or Thomas Paine (Ch. I: “On the Origins of Revolution, Both National & Musical, with Reference to Opening Numbers & White House Raps”). This double exposure, mapping the present onto the past, also shines through luscious production photos that showcase *Hamilton*’s own visual effects: the black, Latino, and Asian-American actors who reclaim American history onstage in Paul Tazewell’s colonial costumes. “Period from the neck down,” as McCarter puts it, “modern from the neck up.”

Critics have [debated](#) just how revolutionary the show’s politics of racial and gender representation really are. If you’re inclined to see *Hamilton* as a brilliant Broadway [bromance](#) that treats the Founding Fathers as a hetero band of hip-hop brothers, you won’t be dissuaded by McCarter’s account of the guys behind the scenes, from the all-male production team that Miranda dubbed his “Cabinet” to his nearly all-male creative influences. But the book makes a good case for the revolution of *Hamilton*’s lyrics, which transform the showbiz legacies that Miranda has inherited and cultivated. A bildungsroman needs a family tree, and McCarter supplies one. “The four grandparents of the show,” he explains, quoting the director Tommy Kail, “are *Sweeney Todd*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Evita*, and *Gypsy*”: a pair of Stephen Sondheim’s antihero librettos embracing two of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s faux-historical scores. If Broadway in the late 1970s and ’80s was divided between Lloyd Webber’s British pop anthems and Sondheim’s dissonant New York sophistication, then it seems that Miranda—born in 1980—fathered the love child to heal the rift.

“HARRY POTTER AND THE CURSED CHILD” ISN’T A BAD NOVEL. IT’S JUST PACKAGED TO LOOK LIKE ONE.

But while Miranda’s cast recording was inspired by sung-through concept albums like *Superstar*, the origins of the book stem from Jay-Z’s memoir-cum-explication, *Decoded*, and Sondheim’s two volumes of essays and annotated lyrics, *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a*

Hat. (When Miranda won his first Tony Award in 2008, for the score of *In the Heights*, he [freestyled](#): “Mr. Sondheim, look, I made a hat—where there never was a hat! It’s a Latin hat at that!”) Miranda’s annotations continue Jay-Z’s project to legitimate hip-hop as a literary art form as complex as a sonnet, while testing Sondheim’s notoriously prescriptive account of what the best lyricists do.² (Sondheim denounced imperfect rhymes, for instance, as “juggling clumsily” with pop music’s “vagueness and fuzziness”; whereas “in the theater,” he claimed, “true rhyme works best on every level.”)³ You can see the debate play out when Miranda glosses Hamilton’s couplet on the eve of [revolution](#), “Then I remember my Eliza’s expecting me ... / Not only that, my Eliza’s expecting.” Miranda explains, “This is the kind of thing that happens in hip-hop but not so much in musical theater: breaking the rhyme scheme to highlight a different meaning of the word. Musical theater purists may scoff, but I love that Hamilton’s soliloquy here leads him to maturity.” He seems to be saying: slow down, Sondheim, this is a shift in genre, not a lapse in craft.

Both books’ implied conversation, however, runs less between stage and page, or between musicals and hip-hop, than between web and print. *Cursed Child* and *Hamilton* present authorized, merchandized, hardcover versions of discourses that float for free online. Rowling’s new story is only one Harry Potter follow-up among a flood of fan fictions available on sites like [FictionAlley](#), [MuggleNet](#), and [Archive Of Our Own](#). (The latter offers 106,411 entries from Potter fandom to date.) Unlike many popular authors, Rowling has [sanctioned](#) readers who spin their own stories with her characters, as long as their writing stays “non-commercial.” Harry Potter and online fandom may have been [linked](#) at birth.

Cursed Child, however, invokes the counterfactual energy of fan fiction and yet also curtails it. The plot hinges on a magical “Time-Turner” that allows Harry’s son to travel back to Hogwarts in his father’s era in the hope of correcting his mistakes. It’s a joy ride for Millennial readers, although tampering with the past leads, as usual, to unpredictable shifts in the present. This setup taps the excitement of the alternate scenarios so common in online fan fiction: What if Harry’s son fell in love with the son of his nemesis, Draco Malfoy? (Same-sex romance is by far the most popular subject for fic.) What if Voldemort fathered a child? What if Hermione never married Ron and became a guerrilla warrior instead? (Casting a black actress, Noma Dumezweni, as Hermione in the London production confirmed a long-standing [fan theory](#) about her race, though the character is given so little to do that fans’ enthusiasm, as well their [outrage](#), seem a tad overblown.) But the script turns the existence of alternate universes into a nightmare that the plot has to remedy. The characters channel their energy into restoring the world as Rowling originally left it, as if to say: Didn’t you prefer the canonical version after all?

Because the cautionary fan parable is wrapped in a reassuring quest for understanding between father and son, mirroring the generational divide of its target audience, the lesson goes down easily. But it seems nevertheless rather punitive in its treatment of the desire to play with Rowling’s authorized world. On the book’s cover, the marquee names—“Harry Potter” and “J. K. Rowling”—appear in parallel large type, whereas “Cursed Child” and “John Tiffany & Jack Thorne” are printed in smaller type below, as though the truly foul offspring were

misbegotten spinoffs. (Tiffany and Thorne had previously collaborated on well-regarded stage version of the Swedish teen vampire film *Let the Right One In*, so presumably they were thought to know how to handle adolescent fantasy.)

Fans who attend the London show are issued buttons that read #KeepTheSecrets, simultaneously an invitation to an online hashtag community as well as a caution against spoiling the official word. Miranda, an avowed Potterhead and Twitter maven, posted his own #KeepTheSecrets [selfie](#) outside the Palace Theatre, but the motto of #Hamilfans seems more like #SpillTheBeans. In the spirit of fandom, Miranda [announced](#) that he had planted allusions throughout his lyrics, “Easter eggs” for fans to track down. “I don’t want to give them away,” he said, “because I feel like [Rap Genius](#) is going to have a field day finding them.” If you visit the [Hamilton page](#) on the Rap Genius site—where lyrics are annotated collaboratively—you can see the result: thousands of notes citing chapter and verse from *Moby-Dick*, *Les Misérables*, and Ron Chernow’s *Hamilton* biography. There are even several notes by Miranda himself, who seems to have overcome his spoiler scruples. The published #Hamiltome (as fans dubbed it) supplies many annotations that hadn’t appeared online, though fans are now posting Miranda’s printed additions, too. Internet genres, in turn, find their way into the form of the Hamiltome, which reprints several of Miranda’s tweets, Google chats, and email exchanges as primary sources for the musical’s creation. An entertaining chapter about Alex Lacamoire’s orchestration techniques—including a few Beatles guitar chords for King George III—is illustrated with a backstage snapshot of Sir Paul McCartney himself, arms draped around Lacamoire and Miranda. It’s as though we’ve become Miranda’s online followers, flipping through his Instagram feed.

You could also see the Hamiltome itself as a kind of Harry Potter fan fiction. In his notes, Miranda reveals that the image in his head for the opening number, when *Hamilton* begins to plan his education, “is of Harry Potter finding out he’s a wizard”; he describes *Hamilton*’s first encounter with Burr as “basically Harry Potter meeting Draco Malfoy before meeting his real friends.” But the volume is really a three-pound, 30 dollar monument to Hamilfandom, just as *Cursed Child* is a commodity wrapped as a gift for fans who don’t need a Time-Turner to recall the role that Neville Longbottom played at the Battle of Hogwarts.

Over the past year, since I saw the musical on Broadway, I’ve ridden the waves of *Hamilton* obsession: the [hype](#), the [hyper-hype](#), the [backlash](#), the [backlash to the backlash](#). And I still can’t resist the punning rhymes in lines like the insults *Hamilton* spits at John Adams: “You nuisance with no sense! / You will die of irrelevance! / Go ahead: You can call me the Devil / You aspire to my level, / You aspire to malevolence!” Miranda can’t resist either, cheering from the margins that “The wordplay in this is just so much fun.” McCarter, Miranda’s Boswell, claims that his essays will show that the musical’s triumph, like the American Revolution itself, was not “inevitable.” Yet his narrative tone is so triumphalist that, for an era of Federalists and Democratic Republicans, it seems downright Whiggish. That diatribe against Adams—based on a lengthy [pamphlet](#) *Hamilton* actually published—was cut from the Broadway show, a choice that McCarter says “demonstrates *Hamilton*’s lack of discipline and Lin and Tommy’s abundance of it.” But the decision to slip the rap back into

the book slightly weakens this claim. Instead it seems as though fandom trumped discipline—or rather, it's the readers who have to become disciples.

**BOTH WORKS RESOLVE THEIR FAMILY
ROMANCES IN A PLURALISTIC POLITY
WHERE ORPHAN IMMIGRANTS ARE
EMBRACED AND PUREBLOOD DIE-HARDS
ARE DEFEATED.**

Like the Harry Potter rehearsal script, which includes material that would likely be cut or revised in production, the backstage drama of the *Hamilton* book shows the gap between text and performance. In a way, though, the sensory deprivation of the books allows us to make more sense of the shows' popularity, to step back from their theatrical thrills so we can consider their position within our culture. McCarter encourages this broader perspective, bracketing his essays on *Hamilton's* rise with two appearances by President Obama himself: first, when the president cheered from the audience as Miranda performed the nascent version of his opening *Hamilton* rap at a White House evening in 2009; and later, when Obama addressed the cast on Broadway to celebrate its representation of popular change and national unity for a Democratic Party fundraiser in 2015. "The Obama presidency will end in January 2017, but the show that shares so much of its spirit will keep running," McCarter prophesies. He envisions a political future conditioned by *Hamilton's* success, much as *Cursed Child* maps out future narratives to continue Rowling's reign. Both works resolve their family romances in a pluralistic polity where the legacies of orphan immigrants—like Hamilton—are embraced, racist threats from pureblood die-hards—like Voldemort's minions—are defeated, and Miranda and Rowling are canonized.

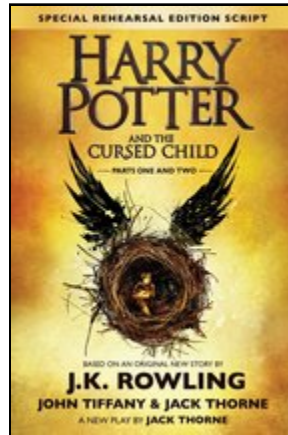
Currently, the reach of the books exceeds that of the shows. While the scripts have become transatlantic reading phenomena, the performances are still confined within national boundaries. What will happen next year when the shows transfer, when Harry Potter's alternate realities confront America after Obama and *Hamilton's* pro-immigrant spectacle hits post-Brexit Britain? Just you wait. 📖

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1. Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 6. [↗](#)
 2. Jay-Z, *Decoded* (Spiegel & Grau, 2010), p. 26. [↗](#)
 3. Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat* (Knopf, 2010), p. xxvi-xxvii. [↗](#)

Featured image: *The President greets the cast and crew of "Hamilton" after seeing the play with his daughters at the Richard Rodgers Theatre in New York City, 2015.* Photograph by Pete Souza / White House

#DRAMA #FICTION #HISTORY #MULTICULTURALISM #NONFICTION #POLITICS #THEATER

ON THE TABLE



Harry Potter and the Cursed Child
Story by J. K. Rowling, John Tiffany, and
Jack Thorne Play by Jack Thorne
Arthur A. Levine / Scholastic, 2016



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