

Eliza's Narrative Agency and Historical Memory in Hamilton

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Abstract. *Hamilton* concludes the American founding narrative with the question "Who tells your story?". This paper takes the 2015 Broadway version as the research object, selects six core songs and supplements with three related songs, and examines the changes of Eliza in four dimensions: vocal position, consequential actions, archive control, and relational dependence. To make the cross-song comparison have a testable explanatory boundary, this paper constructs a narrative agency index based on the 0-2 level heuristic coding. Close reading shows that she first enters the narrative with choral, marital, and caregiving voices, obtains negative archive sovereignty by burning letters in "Burn", and changes the relationship with almost wordless physical actions in "It's Quiet Uptown", and finally returns to history. The finale grants her narrative power, but still takes maintaining Alexander Hamilton's legacy as the main condition. This paper summarizes this position, which combines action ability and structural limits, as "constrained historical subjectivity", thereby revealing how caring labor transforms into historical production and also revealing the naming boundaries that still exist when women are incorporated into the grand narrative.

Keywords: *Hamilton*, Eliza Hamilton, Feminist Narratology, Care Ethics, Historical Memory

1. Introduction

The finale of *Hamilton* leaves the most fundamental question of the play to a woman who has long been on the periphery of the heroic narrative: "Who tells your story?" When the male characters exit the stage one after another, the chorus answers with "Eliza"; previously, Eliza had actively "withdrawn from the narrative", and she reappears to begin to narrate the rescue work she completed fifty years after her husband's death. The script published in 2016 places this finale at the end of the entire work [1], while the original Broadway recording in 2015 uses the changes in the sound field of solo singing, chorus, and the final inhalation sound to transform the historical naming into audible stage events [2]. Eliza finally gains the last voice, but what she tells is still primarily "your story".

This makes it difficult to summarize Eliza as a traditional virtuous wife and also unable to be treated as a linear example from repression to awakening. Muro, starting from the narrative mode, divides the songs in *Hamilton* into audience-oriented narration, confessional monologue, letter narrative, and dialogue scenes, and points out that the issues of legacy and memory depend on "who is telling" [3]. However, for Eliza, speaking does not always occur simultaneously with action. In

"Helpless", she has a complete first-person narration, but is still defined by marital grammar; in "It's Quiet Uptown", she almost loses the solo singing and the physical action of reaching out actually changes the relationship; in the finale, she gains the organizational power of public memory, but still takes her husband's name as the entry point to history. Simply counting the number of lines cannot explain these dislocations.

Based on this, this paper raises three questions. First, how are the voices, actions, and memory control rights of Eliza distributed in the six core songs? Second, how does family caregiving transform from private ethics to historical production? Third, in what sense does the narrative return in the finale constitute empowerment, and what kind of relationship structure is it restricted by?

2. Theoretical framework

Current research has pushed Eliza from a supporting role to a position in historical writing. She retreated to the chorus section in "The Schuyler Sisters", burned letters in "Burn", and returned to history through commemorative practice in the final piece [4]. These actions indicate that she can intervene in the narrative, but do not change the fact that her public identity is attached to her husband's legacy. Vollmann examines this attachment within the racialized mechanism of the founding narrative [5]. Schoch points out that the work re-tells the revolution while still being constrained by institutionalized dissemination [6]. Wolf thus characterizes Eliza as Hamilton's wife, a narrator gradually gaining writing rights [7], but the main political conflicts still focus on male characters [8].

This imbalance stems from archival production. Herrmann notes that the founders use written records to shape their own legacy, and those without equivalent materials tend to fade from the historical view [9]. Madison further explains that whether the materials can be preserved and made public directly affects the historical visibility of the characters [10]. Although Eliza can intervene in the archives, she cannot completely escape the narrative boundaries set by her husband's legacy. The critical potential of the work also arises from this limited intervention [11].

Therefore, this article does not measure subjectivity by the duration of solo performances. Lanser advocates examining the narrative voice within the context of the character's situation and the consequences of the ending [11], and his earlier research also indicates that whether an individual voice can enter public discourse depends on the gendered social position [12]. Care ethics requires asking how responsibility is formed, who it is assumed by, and how the recipients respond [13]. The meaning of care depends on the responsibility structure and cannot be calculated by the number of actions [14]. Taylor believes that archives rely on material records to preserve memory, while performance libraries convey knowledge through physical practice [15]. Finden further points out that the retention or absence of materials themselves will determine what can become history [16]. Based on this, the letter destruction in "Burn", the physical actions in "It's Quiet Uptown", and the commemorative practice in the final piece should be understood as different ways in which Eliza contends for narrative outcomes.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research materials

This study examines the 2015 Broadway version of *Hamilton*, using the version published by Miranda and McCarter in 2016 as the main text and comparing it with the original Broadway recording from 2015. The research object is the image of Eliza constructed by the musical. The core

corpus includes "The Schuyler Sisters", "Helpless", "That Would Be Enough", "Burn", "It's Quiet Uptown", and "Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story"; "Satisfied", "Take a Break", and "Best of Wives and Best of Women". The analysis unit is set as "narrative nodes in the song". This unit retains the connection between lyrics, musical division, and stage actions, and avoids using isolated word frequencies to replace textual explanations. Direct quotations are limited to short sentences that can be mutually verified by the published research and public recordings. The operational boundaries of each level are listed in Table 1. The coding is reversed and rechecked in reverse order after completing the initial round of detailed analysis.

Table 1. Operational coding scheme

Dimension	0	1	2	Interpretive Question
Voice Autonomy (V)	No self-voiced position	Relational, brief, or secondary voice	Sustained self-authorized address	Who speaks, and under whose authority?
Consequential Action (A)	No observable consequence	Limited relational or plot effect	Alters plot, relationship, or public memory	What changes because Eliza acts?
Memory Control (M)	No memory or archive function	Refers to legacy, narrative, or remembrance	Controls preservation, destruction, or transmission	Who governs historical availability?
Relational Dependence (R)	Identity not anchored to a male relation	Mixed autonomous and relational definition	Predominantly defined through a male relation	On whose name does public legibility depend?

For the purpose of comparison, this article constructs the Narrative Agency Index (NAI):

$$NAI_s = \frac{V_s + A_s + M_s + (2 - R_s)}{8}, \quad 0 \leq NAI_s \leq 1 \quad (1)$$

Among them, "s" represents a song. R uses reverse scoring because the higher the degree of relationship attachment, the more restricted the autonomous public attribution becomes. The change in adjacent nodes is expressed as:

$$\Delta NAI_{i \rightarrow j} = NAI_j - NAI_i \quad (2)$$

The same score can come from different forms of subjectivity.

4. Eliza's non-linear narrative transformation

4.1. From relational expression to archival withdrawal

In "The Schuyler Sisters", Eliza responds to the revolutionary scene with "Look around", but remains under Angelica's lead. "Helpless" in "Helpless" expands her first-person space. "This one's mine" indicates that she actively confirms her marital choice. The title "helpless" does not prove that she is completely inactive. "Satisfied" then re-tells the wedding from Angelica's perspective, making Eliza both the narrator of the love story and the one being narrated in others' memories.

"That Would Be Enough" further turns the expression into action. Eliza writes to Washington, requesting Hamilton to come home, and demands to enter his life narrative with "let me be a part of the narrative". She questions the logic of fame with the required presence time in the family, but the responsibility still mainly lies with her. "Take a Break" sees a similar request being rejected again, indicating that clear expression does not necessarily lead to a response.

"The Reynolds Pamphlet" publicizes the marital harm, while "Burn" returns the stage to Eliza. She burns the letters and directs her words to "future historians", using "Erasing myself from the narrative" to block private materials from entering future archives. Berraf noticed that this action contains a clear historical consciousness [4], and Madison also pointed out that the preservation or destruction of the materials directly shapes the historical narrative [9]. Eliza thus gains the power to refuse preservation, but at the cost of her own withdrawal. She has the strongest personal voice in the entire play, but still does not obtain a stable public signature.

4.2. Memorial return

"It's Quiet Uptown" pushed the dislocation of voice and action to the extreme. After Philip's death, Eliza had almost no independent lyrics; "Forgiveness, can you imagine?" The interpretation from Angelica and the choir cannot be rewritten as Eliza's self-account. The key moment that truly belongs to her is "she takes his hand". A physical action without explanatory monologue changed the marital relationship and also ended Hamilton's unilateral request for forgiveness. This silence should not be romanticized. In "Best of Wives and Best of Women", Hamilton did not inform her of the true plan before the duel, indicating that the relationship structure did not complete symmetry due to reconciliation. Eliza's reaching out can be understood as choosing to continue living together, but it is not sufficient to prove that the harm has been eliminated, nor can it be used to set forgiveness as a moral obligation for female care.

The finale reconfigures this asymmetry. When the choir asks who will keep the names and who will hold the flame, the female choir first answers "Eliza", and then she reverses "Burn" with "I put myself back in the narrative". Private care here crosses the boundaries of the family, she not only saves her husband but also extends the care object to the deceased, the enslaved, and the children who have lost their parents. The power of the finale still has clear boundaries. Eliza gains the final personal voice and the right to review the ending, the recipient of the message still appears as "you"; her fifty years were first organized as a legacy project after Hamilton's death. The final inhalation sound has no fixed meaning and can be understood as reuniting with the deceased, seeing the audience, or suddenly realizing that she is being told. No matter which interpretation is taken, Eliza's public presence must be established through a continuous narrative relationship. She steps out of her husband's shadow but does not completely leave his name.

4.3. Coding results

Table 2 summarizes the coding of the six core songs. The results show that Eliza's agency did not continuously increase with the plot. The first two songs were both 0.375, "That Would Be Enough" rose to 0.625 due to writing letters and the requirement to "enter the narrative", "Burn" reached 0.875; "It's Quiet Uptown" dropped to 0.125 due to losing the ability to speak independently and control the archive, and then rebounded to 0.875. The most significant changes were -0.750 from "Burn" to "It's Quiet Uptown" and +0.750 from "It's Quiet Uptown" to the finale. These two breaks prove that the embodied actions after trauma and the public voice at the end of the story belong to different power forms and cannot be smoothed out by the term "awakening".

Table 2. Song-level coding results for Eliza

Narrative Node	V	A	M	R	NAI	Dominant Mode
The Schuyler Sisters	1	1	0	1	0.375	Relational public voice

Table 2. (continued)

Helpless	2	1	0	2	0.375	Romantic focalization
That Would Be Enough	2	2	1	2	0.625	Care-based counter-time
Burn	2	2	2	1	0.875	Archival refusal
It's Quiet Uptown	0	1	0	2	0.125	Embodied relational action
Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story	2	2	2	1	0.875	Public memory stewardship

"Burn" has the same score as the finale, but it respectively represents the inability to access the archive and the ability to make it accessible. This phenomenon of the same score but different meanings constitutes the necessary limit of the index and also confirms that close reading cannot be replaced by numerical values. Figure 1 intends to present this non-linear trajectory with six nodes, and uses two visual markers, archive destruction and public memory, to distinguish the two peaks. From the perspective of the relationship between archives and performance, this subjectivity also involves a repetitive process. In "Burn", the body movements destroy the archives; in "It's Quiet Uptown", the body movements act as a substitute for speech; and in the final piece, the body testimony is transformed back into archive organization.

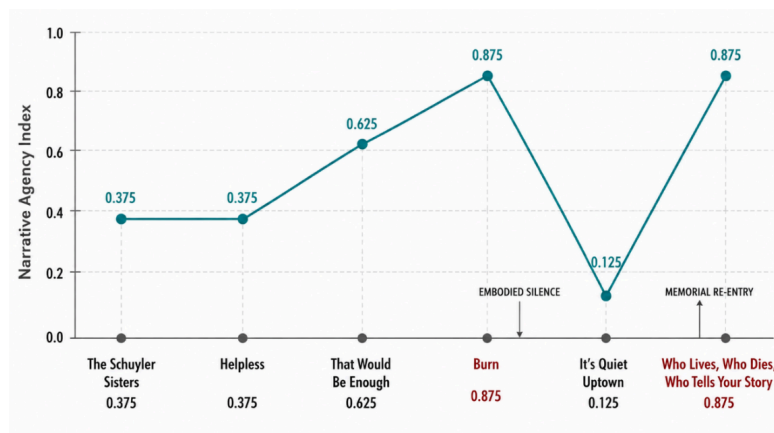


Figure 1. Eliza's non-linear narrative agency across six songs

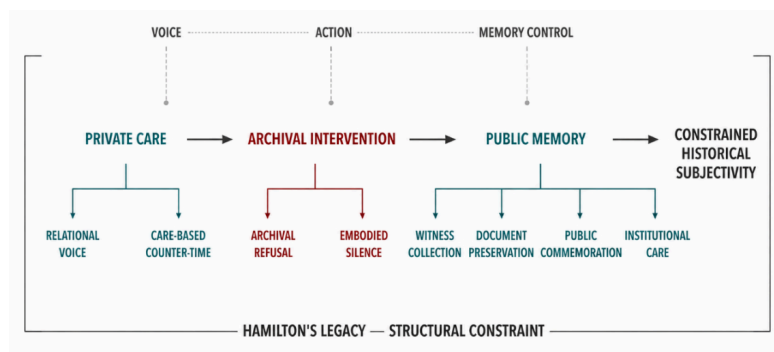


Figure 2. The formation of constrained historical subjectivity

As shown in Figure 2, the performance repository temporarily holds the contents that cannot be saved in the archives during the trauma nodes, and then participates in the reproduction of public history.

5. Conclusion

In *Hamilton*, Eliza is not given a continuous expansion of her vocal trajectory. The comparison of the six songs reveals that voice, action, and historical power can either overlap or be separated from each other. Eliza's quietest moments can lead to relational consequences, and her most vocal moments may come at the cost of self-erasure. From a feminist perspective, Eliza thus has a dual meaning. She makes caregiving labor visible as an infrastructure that sustains historical continuity; at the same time, her narrative returns through the legacy of her husband as the entry point. She is no longer merely the narrated subject of history, but has not yet fully become the subject that organizes historical meaning under its own name. The real question left by the final piece shifts from whether Eliza gains her voice to whose history her voice preserves, and who will continue to tell her story.

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