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The French Connection *or* How "Figaro" Saved the American Revolution

Mention Figaro and most people will tell you it's an opera by Mozart. The well-informed will go on to say that, thanks to his uncanny ability to portray through music sympathetic characters, complete with faults and virtues, Mozart transformed the genre *opera buffa*.[1] In his hands, operas like *Le Nozze di Figaro* (1786) went from mere farce to "monument[s] of eternal validity," capable even of conveying a sense of life's tragedy (Lang 662). What most people won't be able to tell you is that the source for Mozart's *Figaro*, the inspiration for the opera's revolutionary theme, was a play by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. In fact, the influence of Beaumarchais and his two Figaro plays extended beyond Mozart. The first, the light-hearted *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775) formed the basis for Rossini's enormously popular opera, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (1816), as well as less renowned settings by Georg Benda, Giovanni Paisiello, and Nicolas Isouard. More significant historically, however, was Beaumarchais' *La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (1784), the basis for Mozart's opera. This play was among the most controversial and influential works of the late eighteenth century. Both in its original form and in Mozart's incomparable operatic treatment (*Le Nozze di Figaro*), it helped further the cause of democratic reform in both America and in Europe. The precursor to the play was Beaumarchais himself, who, as if acting the part

of Figaro in real life, had a direct hand in the success of the American Revolution.

Of his plays, Beaumarchais' *La folle journée, ou le Mariage de Figaro* (in English, *The Marriage of Figaro*), is the best known. For later generations its popularity certainly is due to Mozart's incomparable operatic setting; in its own day its reputation was a function of its hidden depths and political innuendo. It was banned throughout Europe as a volatile and dangerous piece, extolling the virtues of the common man and criticizing the decadence of the ruling class.[2]

At first glance, the premise of *The Marriage of Figaro* seems rather tame: the hero, Figaro, is servant to an aristocrat, Count Almaviva; Figaro's fiancée, Susanna, works for the Countess. The Count, a philanderer bored with his wife, has decided to exercise his traditional "God-given right" as an aristocrat—the legendary *droit du seigneur* (the right of the lord)—which permits him to have sexual relations with Susanna before her marriage. Quite understandably Figaro objects, and the entire plot revolves around attempts to outsmart, obstruct, and embarrass the Count.[3] Determination pays off, and in the end, with the help of Susanna and the Countess, Count Almaviva is thwarted and humiliated.

In a sense, this is an eighteenth-century piece about sexual harassment. In its time, however, *Figaro* embodied Thomas Jefferson's immortal words about man's right to the pursuit of happiness—words, which were known and admired in Paris. When the Rights of Man were declared in France, the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution were used as models.

> We hold these truths to be self evident.
> *Nous tenons ces vérités pour évidentes.*
> That all men are created equal,
> *que tous les hommes naissent égaux,*

> that they are endowed . . . with certain unalienable rights,
> *qu'ils possèdent certains droits inaliénables,*
> that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
> *parmi lesquels nous comptons la vie, la liberté, et la quête du bonheur.*

So, it is not the complicated plot, but the basic premise of Beaumarchais' second *Figaro*, that was of utmost importance and functioned as a rallying cry for the Age. Put simply, that premise is "Worth, Not Birth."

Prominent people on both sides of the issue clearly saw the implications: Napoleon once described Beaumarchais' *Figaro* as "the Revolution in action" (Grendel 220), while Danton declared that "Figaro killed the nobility" (Cox 144). Scenes from the play also attack the State administration and mercilessly criticize the state prisons. Figaro's speech in the final act rages against the status quo, including all magistrates, rulers, censors and prisons. A self-made man who relies upon his wits, Figaro declares:

> Because you are a great nobleman, you think you are a great genius. . . . Nobility, fortune, rank position! How proud they make a man feel! What have you done to deserve such advantages? Put yourself to the trouble of being born—nothing more! For the rest—a very ordinary man! Whereas I, lost among the crowd, have had to deploy more knowledge, more calculation and skill merely to survive than has sufficed to rule all the provinces of Spain for a century! Yet you would measure yourself against me. (Beaumarchais 199)

Such sentiments were attacked by republican and monarchist alike. Consider the words of the critic Brissot, an anti-royalist:

> [*Figaro* is] a scandalous farce, where, behind an appearance of defending morality, morality itself is held up to ridicule; where, behind an appearance of defending moral truths, they are debased by the despicable interlocutor who voices them; where the aim seems to have been parodying the great writers of the century, but putting their language in the mouth of a rake's valet, and of encouraging people to laugh at their own degradation . . . by heinous imposture. . . . (qtd. in Heartz 131)

Even the slow-witted (if well-intentioned) Louis XVI felt threatened. His reaction was emphatic: "This is bad taste! It is detestable! It must never be played. . . . [I]t would be necessary to destroy the Bastille before the presentation of this play would not be a dangerous piece of consequence This man mocks at everything that ought to be respected in a government" (qtd. in Cox 136). Prophetic words indeed, for the Bastille fell only five years after Louis relented in 1784 and allowed *Figaro* to be staged.

We know Mozart was influenced by Beaumarchais because Mozart's widow listed a well-worn copy of *Figaros Hochzeit* in an inventory made the year after his death, and it is very likely that he saw a performance while in Paris (Till 100). Current musicology, however, continues the debate over Mozart's actual political inclinations. Was he making a personal statement when he chose to set this infamous play?[4] His letters suggest that well be-

fore he began work on the opera, Mozart was in touch with the play's controversial politics. He was thoroughly exasperated with the treatment he had received from his employer, the Prince-Archbishop Hieronymous Colloredo, and was dismissed ignominiously from the Archbishop's service, basically for insubordination. In a letter to his father (20 June 1781), Mozart expressed his frustration, in sentiments which clearly foreshadow the words of Figaro:

> I have but to consult my own feelings and judgment and therefore do not need the advice of . . . a person of rank to help me to do what is right and fitting. . . . It is the heart that ennobles a man; and though I am no count, yet I have probably more honour in me than many a count. Whether a man be a count or a valet, the moment he insults me, he is a scoundrel. (Mozart 156)

It was Mozart's idea to set the play to music. Emperor Josef II of Austria reacted with characteristic caution. His censors already had banned German translations of Voltaire's works and had forbidden performances of Beaumarchais' *Figaro*, deemed provocative and immoral. Particularly problematic were performances of the opera in German, because mostly middle-class people attended German-language performances. However, the censors did permit and even encouraged the opera's performance in Italian. Typically, the patrons of Italian-language performances were from the upper classes, and Josef (a benevolent despot, who had long been trying to reform the aristocracy) actually hoped the play's message would send them a wake-up call (Till 149).

Whatever the truth about his political convictions, Mozart, along with his librettist Lorenzo da Ponte,[5] pro-

duced an opera that, according to music historian Paul Henry Lang, destroyed social conventions. Writes Lang, "aristocrats and servants deport themselves on this stage as humanly equal persons"; we're given "a profound picture of life, free of all caricature" (660-661). Joseph Kerman, in his classic study *Opera as Drama* goes even further, and refers to Count Almaviva as "Mozart's most savage creation" (107). Almaviva, says Kerman, has polish, charm, and education, but beneath the well-groomed façade is a character capable of cruelty, brutality, and extreme selfishness, especially toward his long-suffering wife. Ultimately, "Mozart's opera, in its exaltation of the servant classes, sets forth a cunning criticism of the *ancien régime*. Cruelty and shame have their place in Mozart's picture of human fallibility; particularly in this context, his drama reveals a view of life that is realistic, unsentimental, optimistic, and humane" (Kerman 107).

By the time Mozart's opera appeared, however, America had already sent a more powerful message than any of Mozart's operas ever would, and once again we find Beaumarchais actively involved. Who was this playwright, and what did this real-life Figaro have to do with the American Revolution? The details are not unlike an *opera buffa*, with its twists and turns and characters that are somehow larger than life.

Paris in the eighteenth century was a city of contrasts, where, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau, "flaunting wealth and the most appalling poverty dwell together" (Cox 1). Voltaire, too, described the rather remarkable standard of living of a growing middle class:

> I do not hesitate to declare that there is five times as much silver plate in the houses of the bourgeoisie of Paris as in those of Lon-

> don. Your notary, your lawyer, your tailor, is far better lodged, has far better furniture, and is far better waited on, than any magistrate in the capital of England. More poultry and game is eaten in Paris in one day than in a week in London. (qtd. in Cox 1)

Pierre-Augustin Caron (de Beaumarchais) was born into such a family. His father, André-Charles Caron, was a self-educated clock-maker whose eclectic interests ranged from literature and the arts to science. He also possessed a certain amount of musical talent, which he bequeathed to his children; their household was filled with music-making, with the girls playing harp or cello, and Pierre-Augustin the viola or flute. By the age of thirteen, Pierre-Augustin was apprenticed to his father, but already his free spirit was cause for consternation, and the father was concerned about the "undesirable" company he was keeping. Pierre-Augustin was just like his character Chérubin,[6] and he recalled that his heart pounded at the very sight of a woman—any woman (Cox 3-4). By the time he was eighteen, André-Charles felt compelled to spell out regulations governing every aspect of his son's behavior, including the following:

> You shall rise in summer at 6 o'clock and in winter at seven, and you shall work until suppertime at anything I give you to do, without showing any distaste for your task. . . . You must never go out for supper parties nor go out at all in the evening. Such parties and entertainments are too dangerous for you. . . . You must give up your wretched music altogether and, above all, the company of young men, for I shall not tolerate either

> of them. Both have been your ruin. However, in consideration of your weakness I shall allow you the violin and the flute. (qtd. in Lemaitre 17)

In danger of losing his father's support, young Pierre acquiesced and worked hard.

In 1753 Pierre-Augustin invented a new escapement for watches, and confided in a colleague named Lapaute, who happened to be clock-maker to the King of France. Lapaute passed the work off as his own, which Pierre-Augustin protested to the Academy of Sciences, forwarding extensive documentation of his research to the Secretary of the Academy. Lapaute, fearing repercussions, vanished from Paris, and Pierre-Augustin then sent word to the papers, announcing to all that the thief would not even appear to defend himself. The Academy, facing all the evidence, upheld the claim: "We therefore believe that the Academy should regard M. Caron as the true inventor of the new escapement and that M. Lapaute has only imitated the invention" (Cox 7-8). Thus vindicated, Pierre-Augustin Caron was noticed by King Louis XV and came to be the *horloger du roi*.

At Versailles, Pierre-Augustin Caron made the acquaintance of Pierre-Augustin Franquet, who worked at the War Ministry as Controller of the Military Chest and as Controller of the Pantry of the Royal Household. Franquet's wife was twenty years his junior and six years older than Caron. The couple enjoyed his company, and young Caron often visited and enjoyed playing duets on the harpsichord with Mme Franquet. This friendship grew and helped Pierre Augustin Caron advance to *Contrôleuer Clerc d'Office de la Maison du Roi*, in place of the lady's husband. Ten months after Franquet's death, in

1756, she married Pierre-Augustin Caron; she was thirty, he twenty-six.

André Caron did not approve of the marriage, which for his son represented another step toward emancipation. As a final gesture, the younger Caron did what was quite common in France at the time: he took the name of an estate which belonged to his new wife. This was the *Bois-marché*, or *Beaumarchais*. Pierre-Auguste Caron thus became Pierre-Auguste Caron de Beaumarchais (Lemaitre 30-33). And so the real adventure began.

Beaumarchais, like his creation Figaro, was a factotum, an opportunist, and a jack-of-all-trades. Having got his foot in the door at Versailles, he now showed himself to be a competent flutist, harpist, and sometime composer, and soon became the favorite music teacher to the King's daughters; during this period (1760's) he even perfected a pedal mechanism for the harp. He was so successful that he was encouraged to buy a patent of nobility on the premise that it was not acceptable for a mere watchmaker to hold important positions at the royal court (Grendel 22-26).

Trouble followed in the early 1770s, however. Due to the hostility of certain nobles, he became embroiled in well-publicized lawsuits, which broke him financially and even landed him briefly in jail (Grendel 55). Finally, remembering Louis XV's earlier favors, he went to the King, hat in hand, and asked what he could do to regain his favor. That event was a turning point in Beaumarchais' life. Louis had a little undercover work that needed to be done, and he needed someone expendable to do it; if Beaumarchais would take the job, the King would be grateful. It seems a disreputable Frenchman living in England had published a scandalous pamphlet about the King's latest mistress, Madame du Barry, and was threatening to distribute it unless he was paid

off. Beaumarchais went to England in 1774, and, in short order, got the pamphlets destroyed (which delighted the King)—and turned the author into a loyal friend who proved useful in later dubious projects. In the process, he found that he liked undercover work, intrigue, and politics on the grand scale (Cox 68-71).

After Louis XV's sudden death in 1774, Beaumarchais quickly made himself useful to the new King, Louis XVI. Louis XV had secretly planned an elaborate invasion of England, and a French army officer living in England had all the incriminating documents and vowed to hand them over to the British unless he, too, was paid off. It was another threat to embarrass the French crown, so in 1775 Beaumarchais found himself in England again.

This time, however, the negotiations took months. While in London, the French government asked him to find out all he could about the growing rebellion in America. To fulfill this mission, Beaumarchais became a regular visitor at the home of John Wilkes, the radically pro-American Lord Mayor of London, whose house served as the local headquarters of the Sons of Liberty (Lemaitre 174). Contact with these plain but passionate men turned Beaumarchais from a mere opportunist into a confirmed and resourceful idealist. The nature of the change shows clearly in the two famous Figaro plays. *Le Barbier de Séville* (1775) is a delightful romp, but remains well within the accepted conventions of the *Commedia dell'arte.*[7] *Le Mariage de Figaro*, a much more subtle work, came after his experiences in London.

Later in 1775, the Comte de Vergennes, the new French Foreign Minister, sent Beaumarchais to America, to report on the progress of the rebellion. Soon, Beaumarchais was sending letters urgently recommending the financial support of the American Revolution. But there was a major obstacle—Louis XVI. Louis had two prob-

lems with supporting the American Revolution: first, he was not especially eager to support revolutions of any kind and second, as a religious man, he considered it un-Christian to take advantage of England's misfortunes (Lemaitre 178-181).

Beaumarchais was equal to the situation. In December 1775, just after his return to France, he wrote to the King and attempted to overcome Louis' scruples by putting forward a bold new argument, based "upon the revolutionary idea that a sovereign is responsible not only to God, but also and mainly to the *people*" (180). He said,

> If you are so scrupulous that you do not wish to favour even something that can harm our enemies, how can you, Sire, permit your subjects to vie with other Europeans for the conquest of countries belonging by right to poor Indians, savage Africans, or Caribs who have never offended you? How can you allow your vessels to seize by force and shackle black men whom nature had made free and who are wretched merely because you are powerful? (qtd. in Grendel 163)

The letters continued. Enter Arthur Lee (one of the Virginia Lees) and Silas Deane, son of a Connecticut blacksmith, who became a successful lawyer and rose to prominence through his involvement in protesting the Stamp Act of 1765, when the cry "No Taxation Without Representation" fueled the impending Revolution. When Deane, representing the American Continental Congress, arrived in France in March of 1776, it was to seek financial aid for the Revolution. Beaumarchais functioned as the go-between, faithfully and passionately conveying the needs and wishes of the Americans to the

Comte de Vergennes. Lee's and Deane's frantic appeals for help (especially in the form of engineers and ammunition) were duly seconded by Beaumarchais. In letters written between April and May 1776, he reiterated the urgent need:

> The Americans are in as good a situation as they can be. Army fleet, food supplies, courage—everything is excellent. But without gunpowder and without engineers, how can they be victorious or even defend themselves? Are we going to let them perish rather than lend them one or two millions? . . . Monsieur le Comte, will you do nothing for the Americans? Ah, Monsieur le Comte, as a favor to me . . . some powder and a few engineers! It seems I have never wanted anything so much. I can pledge my sacred faith to make any sum reach them through intermediaries, by way of Holland, without any risk and without any other authorization than that which exists between us. . . . But engineers! Engineers and gunpowder! (qtd. in Lemaitre 184)

Finally, in Spring 1776, the breakthrough came, once again through some adroit manipulation from "Figaro." During his days in London, Beaumarchais had made the acquaintance of Lord Rochford, then a member of the British cabinet. He went to Rochford and irritated him by objecting strongly to England's presumption in claiming to rule the seas (the English had just seized an American merchant ship bound for France). Rochford's response was pure "Rule Britannia," and Beaumarchais was able to write to Versailles about the arrogance of the

British government. At last the King was persuaded to take action (Lemaitre 187).

Vergennes was able to help by convincing Louis that some secret aid would harm the British, thereby strengthening the interests of France. In April 1776, Vergennes wrote to Beaumarchais:

> We will secretly give you one million livres. We will try to obtain an equal sum from Spain. [This was obtained.] With these two millions you will establish a commercial firm, and at your risk and peril you will supply the Americans with arms, munitions, equipment, and all other things that they will need to maintain the war. Our arsenal will deliver to you arms and munitions, but you will either replace them or pay for them. You will not demand money from the Americans, since they have none, but you will ask in return the produce of their soil, which we will help you sell in this country. (qtd. in Durant *Revolution* 868)

Beaumarchais, in turn, organized a firm called "Rodrigue Hortales and Company," which functioned as a front organization, sending cargoes from French ports to Holland and the West Indies for transshipment to America. The good news was that the company provided a viable conduit for supplying the American rebels with arms; the bad news from Beaumarchais' point-of-view was that the entire operation was at his "risk and peril." If anything went wrong, Beaumarchais clearly would "take the fall" (Grendel 175).

Through the activities of Rodrigue Hortales and Company, however, critical weapons and provisions were secured for the Continental Army. According to

one source, Beaumarchais collected 200 cannon, 25,000 muskets, 30 brass mortars, 200,000 pounds of gunpowder and enough clothing and tents for 25,000 men (Cox 113). Much of this equipment turned up at Saratoga, where it was put to good use in the encirclement of General Burgoyne's army (Grendel 197). Beaumarchais also recruited French and other European officers for the cause. Silas Deane wrote in 1776: "I am well-nigh harassed to death with applications of officers to go out to America. . . . Had I ten ships here I could fill them all with passengers for America" (Durant *Revolution* 869).

One of Beaumarchais' recruits was Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, better known as The Marquis de Lafayette, who at the age of nineteen left his pregnant wife in France and was rewarded with a commission as a major general in the Continental Army in 1777. An intimate friend of George Washington, he shared the miseries at Valley Forge, and later gave Washington the key to the Bastille. It now hangs on a wall at Mount Vernon, a permanent symbol of the friendship between France and the United States. Casimir Pulaski (a Polish general who commanded the French and American cavalry and was mortally wounded in the siege of Savannah in 1779) was another find, as was Baron von Steuben (Durant *Revolution* 922).

When Beaumarchais met (and liked) von Steuben, he was an out-of-work Army captain who had been rejected by most of the armies of Europe. Even America did not seem to want him, so Beaumarchais set about improving his image.

> Captain von Steuben went about dressed in the uniform of a Prussian Lieutenant General. He was impressively followed by an aide-de-camp . . . and a military secretary . . ., both hired by Beaumarchais. Who first had the

> idea of the masquerade is not known, but it may be remembered that Steuben then lived at Beaumarchais' house, and that Beaumarchais always had a predilection for theatrical solutions to all problems. (qtd. in Lemaitre 224)

Deane and Benjamin Franklin contributed to the hoax, writing to General Washington that they were sending him one of Frederick the Great's generals. In the end "General" von Steuben sailed for America, using Beaumarchais' money for traveling expenses (Lemaitre 225).

So, when Deane returned to America later in 1776, and addressed Congress on November 29, he was able to proclaim triumphantly, "I should never have completed my mission but for the generous, indefatigable, and intelligent exertion of M. de Beaumarchais, to whom the United States are, on every account, more indebted than to any other person on this side of the ocean" (qtd. in Durant 922).

Mention has already been made of Benjamin Franklin. He, too, was deeply involved in this French Connection and in the cloak-and-dagger machinations which helped secure American independence. He also knew Beaumarchais, viewed him with some suspicion, and referred to him as "the real Figaro" (Wright 263). Ironically, Franklin's wariness about Beaumarchais may have been due to their being rather similar. Both were what we've come to characterize as "eighteenth-century men," men of art and science, interested in all realms of knowledge. Both rose from humble beginnings to mix with the highest ranks of western society. And champions, both, of individual freedom and the worth of the common man, they enjoyed literally playing their roles in aristocratic circles. In fact, they enjoyed the opportunities they themselves were

helping to create through a revolution that was eventually to blur class boundaries and make status more a matter of individual ability rather than genealogy.

Franklin had visited France previously, in 1767 and 1769, and had demonstrated his famous experiments with lightning and electricity. He won praise from Louis XV and Diderot, and his scientific work was received with great enthusiasm. In 1778, Robert Turgot, Controller General to Louis XVI, and financial reformer, would say of him: *Eripuit caelo fulmen sceptrumque tyrannis* ("He snatched the lightning from the sky, and the scepter from the tyrants.") (Wright 269).

In 1775, while living in Philadelphia, Franklin began his career as a spy. On three evenings, under cover of darkness, he left his home in the 300 block of High Street and, using a different route each time, made his way to Carpenters' Hall. Two other men, John Jay and Francis Damon, did the same. There they met with Julien-Alexandre Achard de Bonvouloir, who was an agent of the French government. The Americans had not yet declared independence, so the French warned Bonvouloir that they would deny his existence should he get caught. Franklin and Jay, as members of the new Committee for Secret Correspondence, were anxious to confirm any friend and potential benefactor (Williams A7). The meetings of these men, on three December evenings in 1775, laid further groundwork for French support to the Americans. Bonvouloir rather exaggerated the Americans' strength and power, and this report, along with Beaumarchais' involvement, proved critical.

Franklin's real success, however, may not have been as a spy as much as it was as a media figure. In October 1776, Franklin and two of his grandsons sailed for France. He was received by the French intellectual circles with enormous enthusiasm—as the living embodiment of Enlightenment virtues. Crowds followed

him through the streets, and Parisian women were delighted to be seen in his presence. His refusal to wear a wig and fancy clothes furthered his reputation and his allure. When he wrote to his sister in America, he declared with satisfaction: "You have no conception of the respect with which I am received and treated here by the first people" (Lemaitre 208). Beaumarchais noted that "The commotion caused by M. Franklin's arrival is inconceivable." (Lemaitre 210) The Comte de Segur recalled:

> The most surprising thing was the contrast between the luxury of our capital, the elegance of our fashions, the magnificence of Versailles, the surviving evidence of Louis XVI's mode of life, the polite haughtiness of our nobility—and Benjamin Franklin. His clothing was rustic, his bearing simple but dignified, his language direct, his hair unpowdered. It was as though classic simplicity, the figure of a thinker of the time of Plato, or a Republican of the age of Cato or Fabius had suddenly been brought by magic into our effeminate and slavish age, the eighteenth century. This unexpected visitor charmed us all the more as he was not only a novelty, but appeared when literature and philosophy were astir with demands for reform, for change, and for a universal love of liberty. (qtd. in Wright 263)

Whereas Beaumarchais had produced, costume and all, General von Steuben, martial servant to Frederick the Great, Franklin (as he was to do so often in literary form) created none other than Franklin. Both sold the revolution through a kind of theater. Both also be-

came rather fashionable. Beaumarchais' flair for publicity made *Le Mariage* a *succès de scandale*, and fashionable Parisian women even had their favorite lines from *Figaro* embroidered on handkerchiefs and engraved on their fans (FitzLyon 122). Franklin was honored with a *coiffure à la Franklin*, and his portrait appeared on medallions and keepsakes. Louis XVI, not entirely happy about the overwhelming popularity and success of this paragon of enlightenment and democracy, actually had a gift made for the Countess Diane de Polignac: a handsome Sèvres chamber pot with Franklin's image on its inner side! (Wright 269).

When he wrote to his sister in America, Franklin therefore declared with satisfaction, "You have no conception of the respect with which I am received and treated here by the first people." His evident pleasure is reminiscent of the youthful pride Beaumarchais had displayed when, as watchmaker to Louis XV, he had boasted:

> I make watches as thin as may be desired, thinner even than have been made before, without in the least diminishing their quality. . . . The first of these simplified watches is in the hands of the King. His Majesty has carried it for a year and is well-satisfied. . . . I had the honor to present to Mme de Pompadour [the king's favorite mistress, and a patroness of the arts] a short time ago a watch in a ring, which is only four times an a half in diameter, and a line less a third in thickness between the plates. (qtd. in Cox 8)

Beaumarchais took note of Franklin's reception in France, but with a touch of envy: "The commotion

caused by M. Franklin's arrival is inconceivable" (Lemaitre 208/210). The two turned out to be very much an odd couple. Beaumarchais plainly admired the American sage but found him rather aloof and preferred to deal with Silas Deane. Franklin, having learned something of Beaumarchais' shady reputation from one of his scientific friends, thought Beaumarchais a little *too* clever (Wright 274).

Perhaps because of their shared flair for the dramatic, both Beaumarchais and Franklin ran into difficulties as activists. Silas Deane's methods were controversial, and both he and Franklin eventually were implicated in profiteering scandals and accused of unethical financial dealings with Beaumarchais.

The accusor was Arthur Lee, the third member of the American diplomatic triumvirate. A petty and vindictive man, Lee had come to loathe Deane and Franklin—he hated Deane for having replaced him in dealings with Beaumarchais, and deeply resented having to stand in the ample shadow of Franklin's greatness. In addition, he was all too aware that he had not been Congress's first choice but had been sent to Paris only after Thomas Jefferson declined to take the position. In retrospect, he was perhaps not the most sensible choice because of his anti-Catholic sentiments and his deep suspicion of French motives for supporting the Americans.

Lee was not alone in his anti-Catholic suspicions. Tory loyalists in America circulated many songs with texts like the following:

> The French Alliance now come forth,
> The Papists flocked in shoals, sir,
> Friseurs, Marquis, Valets of Birth,
> And priests to save our souls, sir. (Brand 110)

There were other fears as well:

> It was rumored that the French fleet was on the high seas loaded down with crucifixes, rosaries, and indulgences, and that more cargoes of wafers, relics, and beads were being prepared. Even worse, it was reported that vats of scented soaps, dried garlic and precooked frog's legs had been packed ready for immediate shipment to the colonies. (Brand 110)

In some songs, the lyrics were even more specific, expressing vehement anti-Catholicism. *The Old English Cause* refers to "the farces of Rome, laughed at and jeered at by the learned and wise, her stories and relics and sanctified lies." And lest you forget: "It's their politics to burn heretics" (Rabson 100).

In such a climate of intrigue, danger, and mistrust, it is not entirely surprising that Lee was able to tarnish both Deane's and Beaumarchais' reputations. Franklin managed to escape any real damage to his reputation and became the first American Minister to France in 1778, after the American victory at the Battle of Saratoga. It was only then that the terms of the French alliance were signed. It is said that Benjamin Franklin even put on silk stockings for his momentous meeting with Louis XVI.

And what of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, whose dealings with Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, Louis XVI, and so many others had had such an impact on American history? On 15 January 1779, John Jay wrote him the following letter:

> The Congress of the United States of America, recognizing the great efforts which you have made in their favor, presents to you its thanks. . . . The generous sentiment and the

> breadth of view, which alone could dictate a conduct such as yours, are the eulogy of your actions, and the ornament of your character. While, by your rare talents, you have rendered yourself useful to your prince, you have gained the esteem of this young republic and merited the applause of the New World. (qtd. in Grendel 169)

This lofty praise was all very well, but Beaumarchais had more pressing concerns: he stood on the very brink of total financial ruin. Repeated attempts to get Congress to pay up led to endless investigations and bickering. Arthur Lee was a big part of the problem; he maintained that all the weapons, powder, and money were purely a gift of the French government. "The Ministry has often given us to understand that we have nothing to pay for the cargoes furnished by Beaumarchais; however, the latter, with the perseverance usual to adventurers of his type, persists in his demands" (Cox 117).

What Congress actually owed Beaumarchais will probably never be known. At the end of the Revolution, Silas Deane calculated the debt at approximately 3,600,000 francs (about $4,500,000) (Durant 922). When Alexander Hamilton looked into the matter in 1793, he estimated Congress owed Beaumarchais about 2,280,000 francs (Cox 122). Nevertheless, the vast *personal* loans which Beaumarchais made to the young republic were not paid back until the nineteenth century, and in 1835, fully 36 years after his death, Beaumarchais' heirs were to receive only *partial* compensation of 800,000 livres (about $1,000,000) for his investment in the United States of America (Durant 922). It seems that the Congress preferred to believe that all was a gift and not a personal loan. Some things never change. . . .

Inventor, watchmaker, playwright, courtier, scoundrel, politician, publisher, adventurer, philanthropist, spy, American patriot—all these labels were applied to Beaumarchais at one time or another, and all with full justification. It would be hard to summarize such a full life—he truly was the "real Figaro." Still, as regards his role in the Revolution, John Bigelow (American Ambassador to France in 1870) probably said it best:

> To him more than any other person belongs the credit of making Louis XVI comprehend the political importance of aiding the colonies in their struggle with Great Britain; he planned and executed the ingenious scheme by which the aid was to be extended; he sent the first munitions of war and supplies which colonists received from abroad and he sent them too, at a time when, humanly speaking, it was reasonably certain that without such aid from some quarter, the colonists must have succumbed. (qtd. in Cox 123)

By the way, in case you were wondering, the name "Figaro" stands for "Fils Caron" (son of Caron) which in eighteenth century French would have been pronounced "Fi - Caro" (Lemaitre 94). ❑

Notes

1. *Opera buffa*, or comic opera, grew in popularity during the Age of Enlightenment; one of its champions was Rousseau, who wrote an opera: *Le Devin du Village*. Comic opera generally differs from baroque opera in its use of everyday characters, such as "Figaro" and "Susanna," rather than figures from history or mythology.

2. Robert Darnton's *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* reveals a wealth of information on other works considered dangerous. They range from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* to anti-clerical materials and pornography.
3. Early in Act I, Susanna convinces Figaro of the Count's treachery. Figaro emphatically declares *Non sarà, non sarà, Figaro il dice!* ("It will not be! It will not be! Figaro has spoken.") One of the most famous arias in the repertoire follows, *Se vuol ballare* ("If you want to dance, my little count, you shall dance to *my* tune.")
4. Robert Marshall's *Mozart Speaks* is an excellent source for letters and other primary documents which illuminate the composer's personal feelings about political and social issues.
5. Lorenzo da Ponte was born a Jew in Venice, converted to Catholicism, ane became an abbé and philanderer. Having been expelled from Venice, he went to Vienna, where he met Mozart. They collaborated on *Don Giovanni, Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. Soon after Mozart's death, he moved to New York, and became the first professor of Italian at Columbia University. His extensive memoirs are available in translation, and are recommended.
6. In Mozart's opera, this is a famous "pants' role," sung by a soprano. Cherubino ("little cherub") is at that age when a young man is inclined to fall in love very readily (in his case with Countess Almaviva).
7. The *commedia dell'arte* flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It included many stock plots and characters which appeared in the *opera buffa*, including pompous braggarts, the military, lecherous old men (often music teachers or clerics), lawyers, young lovers, and the like.

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