

BEAUMARCHAIS, PIERRE AUGUSTIN DE

Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais (1732-1799) was a watchmaker, playwright, inventor, musician, diplomat, fugitive, spy, arms dealer, satirist, revolutionary, who lived the intense years of the American and French revolutions, at century's end, as well as the inscape of high court politics under Louis XIV. Born in Paris, the son of a watchmaker, Beaumarchais enjoyed the blessings of a comfortable middle class childhood. At ten he was sent to 'country school' where he learned some Latin, and incidentally, in the same years, pursued his interest in the craft of watchmaking. (By researching closely into the mountings of pocket watches, he invented an escapement that made those watches both more compact and more accurate. For Mme. de Pompidou, the mistress of King, Louis, Beaumarchais created a brilliant watch mounted on a ring.) As a skilled musician, Beaumarchais used this ability to get himself employed as harp instructor for the daughters of King Louis XIV. Having proven himself witty, vitriolic, and articulate, Beaumarchais, who wrote a number of better forgotten plays, found his way into the creation of the three plays which made his fame, to this day: *Le Barbier de Seville* (1775) *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784), and *La Mère Coupable* (1792). Nor, though, was this major literary achievement all Beaumarchais undertook at court. For one thing he was deeply involved in financial investments, in partner with a highly placed business person—Beaumarchais saw moments of high poverty and high wealth in these years—for another he served the French government as a spy on England, and as the period of the American Revolution approached he found himself engaged increasingly in somewhat covert, and high level effectual, dealings to support both the American and French Revolutions. His sympathy for the 'common man' was not only a driver for his political stance, but the mainspring of his viewpoint in his greatest dramatic achievements.

The major plays. All three of his major plays revolve around the mischief of Figaro, a man of all trades, educated and quick, who ends up as a Barber. In the first of these plays Figaro acts out the role of a witty partner in a love triangle, but in the second play, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Figaro takes on the role of a critic of the aristocracy, an embittered victim of a privileged society with no respect for the common man; and he expresses these feelings with an incendiary vigor which, in looking back, we may feel part of the spirit that impelled Beaumarchais toward a revolutionary position at century's end. The final address of Figaro to the monarchy, in the last act of *Le Mariage de Figaro*, brought down the ire of establishment France, and is seen, by many, as among the many clarion calls being sounded throughout late eighteenth century Europe, to remind the powers on high that their time was limited. Figaro speaks:

A tirade of Figaro. 'I throw myself full-force into the theatre. Alas, I might as well have put a stone round my neck! I fudge up a play about the manners of the Seraglio; a Spanish author, I imagined, could attack Mahomet without scruple; but immediately some envoy from goodness-knows-where complains that some of my lines offend the Sublime Porte, Persia, some part or other of the East Indies, the whole of Egypt, the kingdoms of Cyrenaica, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers and Morocco. Behold my comedy scuppered to please a set of Mohammedan princes—not one of whom I believe can read—who habitually beat a tattoo on our shoulders to the tune of "Down with the Christian dogs!" Unable to break my spirit, they decided to take it out on my body. My cheeks grew hollowed: my time was out. I saw in the distance the approach of the fell sergeant, his quill stuck into his wig.'

Reading

Primary source reading,

The Figaro Trilogy, tr. David Coward, 2008.

Secondary source reading

Lever, M. *Beaumarchais: A Biography*, 2009.

Further reading

Paul, J.R., *Unlikely Allies: How a Merchant, a Playwright, and a Spy saved the American Revolution*, 2011.

Original language reading

Dussert, Gilles, *La machinerie Beaumarchais*, 2012.

Suggested paper topics

What connection do you see between Beaumarchais' political underground activities and the view of life and society he develops in *The Marriage of Figaro*? Is he in some sense a 'political writer'?

What significance do you see in Beaumarchais' technical skill as a watchmaker? How does that skill, in your opinion, play out into his genius as musician, director, playwright? Give some thought to the escapement he invented for improving watch performance. What kind of intelligence was required for a discovery of that sort?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Pierre_Beaumarchais

Ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante.

That which is not worth speaking they [sing](#).

Que les gens d'esprit sont bêtes.

What silly people [wits](#) are!

Aujourd'hui, ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante.

Nowadays what isn't worth saying is sung.

Je me presse de rire de tout, de peur d'être obligé d'en pleurer.

I hasten to laugh at [everything](#), for [fear](#) of being obliged to weep.

Médiocre et rampant, et l'on arrive à tout.

Be commonplace and creeping, and you attain all things.

Calomniez, calomniez; il en reste toujours quelque chose.

Calumniate, calumniate; there will always be something which sticks.

Il n'est pas nécessaire de tenir les choses pour en raisonner.

It is not necessary to retain facts that we may [reason](#) concerning them.

De toutes les choses sérieuses, le mariage étant la plus bouffonne.

Of all serious things, marriage is the most ludicrous.

Boire sans soif et faire l'amour en tout temps, madame, il n'y a que ça qui nous distingue des autres bêtes.

Drinking when not thirsty and making love all the time, madam, is all that distinguishes us from other animals.

Parce que vous êtes un grand seigneur, vous vous croyez un grand génie! ... vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, et rien de plus. Du reste homme assez ordinaire!

Because you are a great lord, you believe that you are a great genius! You took the trouble to be born, no more. You remain an ordinary enough man!

Sans la liberté de blâmer, il n'est point d'éloge flatteur; et qu'il n'y a que les petits hommes qui redoutent les petits écrits.

If censorship reigns, there cannot be sincere flattery, and only small men are afraid of small writings.