

Beaumarchais did not intend the play *The Marriage of Figaro* to inspire a political and social revolution, rather he intended it as simple comedic commentary on French society. Yet we now look back on the play as one of the seeds of the French Revolution. Beaumarchais was really more of an opportunist than a revolutionary. He only began writing *The Marriage of Figaro* because his dying friend requested it, partly because he was nervous that the themes he touched on might be 'read' as revolutionary, even if he didn't intend them to be that way explicitly. The primary way these themes emerge in the play is through the relationships everyone has with each other, and the complications that emerge in the basic story leading up to the supposed marriage. Knowing something of the context at that time, it is possible to see as the story unfolds how people might equate it directly with the revolution that took place shortly after the play was first performed.

It is useful to discuss briefly Beaumarchais' life surrounding this play, as that is the context in which he wrote it and his life story likely played a role in how the play unfolds. Beaumarchais' father was a watchmaker, and Beaumarchais followed in those footsteps, becoming the watchmaker to the king (Figaro 13). In 1767 his first play was performed (Figaro 15), and it was clear from that play that he was using his plays as a way to communicate commentary on politics and society. *The Marriage of Figaro* is a direct sequel to *The Barber of Seville* (the play he wrote before *The Marriage of Figaro*, but not his first play), and both plays are full of bold comments on society and the aristocracy. These plays are the most memorable

works of Beaumarchais, and contain his most significant commentaries on controversial topics that helped to spark the French Revolution.

The first time we encounter Chérubin in *The Marriage of Figaro* is when he comes to Suzanne talking about how he must leave the house after being caught with her cousin (Figaro 116). In essence all the complexities that can be read as leading to revolution stem from this scene. Giving evidence of how we can see this and explaining that evidence will be the remainder of this paper.

It is Chérubin's dilemma regarding being asked to leave after having an affair in this first act that exposes The Count as the character that can be equated with the aristocratic structures that Beaumarchais is critiquing. Suzanne shows us that this dilemma really is something that can't be controlled by them, exactly the same kind of thing that the French Revolution was instigated around (largely economic troubles that brought deeper grievances forward). Those that stick with Suzanne and Chérubin (including Figaro) end up a little like those at the forefront of the revolution, as the rest of the characters are more like the aristocracy the revolution was against.

One of the root causes of the French Revolution, and certainly one that Beaumarchais used in his court case (a small monetary suit he was in the middle of appeals for, though he was known to get thrown in jail for his plays too) as well as his plays, was the corruption of the government. This strand of revolution, one that makes revolution legitimate because it is confronting corruption, first appears in the play when Suzanne labels Bazile as corrupt. This theme, of confronting corruption then becomes associated with The Count and to other figures in the play (Figaro

120). At this point the “sides” for the revolutionary themes in the remainder of the play are clear: Suzanne, Chérubin, and Figaro (among others) are the instigators of revolution, and The Count, Bazile, etc. are those they are opposing.

Later on in the play we have a scene that feels a lot like it mimics planning a revolution, because it portrays the challenges of keeping your plans hidden from those whom you are resisting (in this case The Count). This is the scene in which The Countess, Chérubin, and Suzanne are in a bedroom talking. When The Count comes knocking (Figaro 137) it becomes clear that their discussion must be kept secret from him. When Chérubin, hiding in a different room with Suzanne, ends up jumping out a window (Figaro 141) this sense of being in the midst of a revolution is reinforced given that they are in effect deceiving The Count and due to the danger of the situation. When Figaro says he was the one who jumped (Figaro 151) he aligns himself with this revolution, and draws the audience further into such an idea.

Figaro’s monologue starting on page 199 is one part of this play that directly discusses Beaumarchais’ controversial commentary on the very hierarchy of French society. Figaro, who here can be read as the very voice of Beaumarchais, comments that talents, and not birth, are what gives someone status. This conviction would very much upset any noble, let alone all of the entire aristocracy. This commentary suggests that peasants are of an equal stature with nobles (an outcome that ultimately came to pass in the years afterwards). As a noble himself Beaumarchais had some breathing space to make these comments, but overstepped his welcome. This monologue is ultimately what caused the king to send Beaumarchais to jail for writing and especially performing this play.

A further example of this play being a commentary on controversial topics emerges when you consider that Suzanne and The Countess made plans to trick The Count by switching roles, independent of Figaro's involvement. Here Beaumarchais is making a commentary that gives women more authority and intelligence than was generally awarded them in society at the time.

One way of understanding the play is by examining the Enlightenment context in which Beaumarchais lived. During the Enlightenment philosophers (those in cities, not nobles) started studying society based on scientific laws solidified during the Scientific Revolution. These philosophers posited that these scientific ideas created better societal status systems. The middle class largely drove this desire for more equitable social standing. I'm not entirely placing Beaumarchais in this class, but a sizable number of his patrons were. This play helped to solidify the Enlightenment ideas, and ultimately became one of many seeds of the revolution. Had the French middle class not admired these ideas I don't think that history would consider this play as completely a seed of revolution as it was. After all, no one thought it fed the revolution at the time.

Finally, let us focus on the song and dance that comes right at the end (Figaro 217). Just as comedies should always have a final lasting and memorable moment (like this song), so revolutions need something catchy to bring members in and unify them. At first glance this song merely does that, leaving audience members with something to remember about the play. But if you pay attention to the lyrics you see that the audience is applauding a song that is full of revolutionary language. "A noble lord – a beardless boy" lets you consider the aristocrats as your equals. "Let

a husband break his vows; It's just a joke the world allows –“ definitely seems to be asking the audience to collectively break away from the established laws of France. Thus *The Marriage of Figaro* ends on what France saw as an active call for revolutionary action against the aristocracy.

Beaumarchais didn't intend for *The Marriage of Figaro* to inspire a revolution, but nonetheless the play did just that. We see that the characters, their relationships, and how the story unfolds all show the elements of a revolution. This meant that, when considered with the Enlightenment context *The Marriage of Figaro* was written and performed in, you see one of many seeds of the French Revolution.