
H-France Review Vol. 11 (February 2011), No. 44

Simon Burrows, *A King's Ransom: The Life of Charles Théveneau de Morande, Blackmailer, Scandalmonger & Master-Spy*. London and New York: Continuum, 2010. xvi + 288 pp. Illustrations, glossary, notes, sources, acknowledgements, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0826-41989-7.

Review by Donald C. Spinelli, Wayne State University.

In eighteenth-century Europe, there is certainly no shortage of interesting characters or scoundrels, think Beaumarchais, Cagliostro, Casanova, d'Eon, Mesmer, Pugachev among many others. Théveneau de Morande fits into this list nicely and is an equal to any of those mentioned.

According to Burrows' bibliography and, to the best of my knowledge, there has been only one other book devoted wholly to Morande and that is in French, by Paul Robiquet and published in 1882. It is, then, time for a new consideration of this fascinating but infamous individual. It must have been difficult for Simon Burrows to limit his description of the man to just blackmailer, scandalmonger, and master-spy. One could easily have added cheater, adulterer, panderer, extortionist, or any number of other derogatory terms to the subtitle; yet, he was more. "He was by turns a secret police agent, spy, journalist, political theorist, practical reformer, and apologist for constitutional monarchy" (p. xvi). At the peak of his writing career, his books outsold all but a few of the *philosophes'* works and so attacked the monarchy and ridiculed it as a political entity, that they added to the causes that led to the French Revolution. Notoriety and politics make for a riveting biography.

Of course, nobody knew that the young Charles-Claude, born into a very bourgeois Burgundian family, would turn into the dissolute adult he was to become. Mischievous and mean at a young age, his pranks on local monks and townspeople gave, perhaps, an indication of his adult character. His father sent him to Dijon to study and there the son incurred debts due to gambling, women, and general debauchery. The father then had the son enlist in the army where he was wounded in Germany and decommissioned at the end of the Seven Years' War.

Upon returning home, he continued his old ways and began to infatuate young girls with his poetry. Morande was forced into a duel with the brother of one of his conquests whom Morande stabbed in the back away from the dueling field. Forced to flee, Morande headed for Paris. These incidents may or may not have taken place, but are part of the folklore surrounding Morande, and do jibe somewhat with Morande's own writings.

In the French capital, Morande took up the life of a libertine including sodomy, cheating at gambling, stealing, and contracting syphilis. While in a brothel, Morande was arrested for some of his illegal shenanigans, but was soon released with the help of a wealthy patron who may have been his sexual partner. Not having learned any lesson whatsoever, Morande changed his ways only slightly to live from the earnings of courtesans and prostitutes; he also spent more time in prison. To escape creditors and others pursuing him, Morande fled to England where he would remain for more than two decades.

In London, Morande soon married; his wife bore him seven children, three of whom survived. It was a marriage of love, but he soon began to mistreat his wife and stray outside of the marriage; his notoriety later becoming the subject of salacious novels. When Morande made the acquaintance of a fellow Burgundian, the chevalier d'Eon, the latter had already been involved in political scandal. Before Morande's arrival in London, rumors had been circulating concerning the chevalier's sex; bets were being placed in favor of one side of the argument or the other.

With a family to support, Morande began selling newsletter-type sheets in which he wrote of scandals and recounted scurrilous gossip about the French aristocracy and the court at Versailles. This led him to write and publish the *Gazetier cuirassé*, a book which continued his attacks on the French nobility. Publishing in England, Morande had his work smuggled into France, thus avoiding French censorship. Its satire, invective, scabrous content, and blasts aimed at the clergy, the church, courtiers and any other worthy targets of the ancien régime produced one of the most successful works on a list of illegal bestsellers.

Morande often blackmailed subjects of his attacks in the *Gazetier* especially those he attacked as homosexuals. Desperately in need of money because of his high living, Morande then decided to go after Mme du Barry, King Louis XV's mistress by publishing the *Secret Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. The French hatched a plan to kidnap Morande. Unsuccessful, intermediaries were sent to negotiate with the blackmailer. They all failed until a new agent agreed to undertake the task; he was none other than Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. As a result of the negotiations, Morande gained a small fortune, had his debts cleared, and received an annuity. In return, 6,000 copies of the *Memoirs* were burned and Beaumarchais returned to France, having accomplished his mission.

After this affair, Morande and Beaumarchais became entwined in a number of others; two are discussed in some depth in chapter four. The first, generally referred to as the Angelucci affair, involved the quashing of a pamphlet claiming that Louis XVI was impotent and that the queen, Marie-Antoinette, had lovers; the pamphlet was supposedly written by Guillaume Angelucci. In a story worthy of an adventure novel, Beaumarchais claimed to have burned all but one copy of the pamphlet which was in the possession of the author. Beaumarchais pursued Angelucci until he caught him in a forest outside of Nuremberg. Unfortunately, Beaumarchais was set upon by bandits who wounded him. The brigands, Angelucci, and the pamphlet disappeared and were never to be heard of again.

Scholars are almost all in agreement that the whole chase episode was invented by Beaumarchais to get himself into the good graces of the royal couple. Some have even suggested that Beaumarchais wrote the pamphlet; others that an examination of the text in no way suggests Beaumarchais' style. Simon Burrows proposes that Morande and Beaumarchais conspired in the whole affair and that Morande himself in all likelihood printed it on a printing press he had in his house. Until further evidence becomes available, we will never know whether there was an Angelucci or if he actually composed the pamphlet.

The second affair concerns the wagers on the chevalier d'Eon's sex. Morande and Beaumarchais would gain huge sums if the chevalier were proved to be a woman. Here, again, documents are lacking and there is much hearsay and numerous attacks made by various interested parties, especially d'Eon, against Beaumarchais and Morande. There are no indications that either of the supposed bettors won anything if they did wager. Morande and d'Eon would eventually make amends and become friends. Animosity, however, grew between Beaumarchais and Morande and, as Burrows writes, "Morande was to sap Beaumarchais' finances and peace of mind for the rest of his life" (p. 75).

In the mid-1770s, Beaumarchais served as an arms supplier to the Americans during the Revolution. He had hired Morande as a spy to help keep him informed of British war efforts and, in the 1780s, Morande parlayed this experience into a job as a spy for the French naval and foreign ministries. He could use the money for he was always in debt and had even spent time in jail for them. Morande was quite successful at espionage and for some ten years “was, without a doubt, one of the master-spies of his age” (p. 129). It should be noted that Morande also served as an informant and police spy for the French authorities.

In 1785 Morande got involved in the famous affair in which the court jewelers were conned out of an extremely expensive diamond necklace based upon the forged signature of Marie-Antoinette. When a French agent was sent to London, Morande helped him to pursue the conspirators. As a result of the tumult surrounding the “diamond necklace affair,” the queen became implicated in the fraud although she was quite blameless. As a result, she lost popularity among the people and the monarchy was discredited. The affair was even used against Marie-Antoinette at her trial in 1793 when she was convicted and executed. Morande’s earlier slanders of Louis XV’s mistress “ended in the grotesque, murderous carnival of revolution” (p. 177).

Of course, Morande cannot be blamed for the events of 1789, but from his early writings he was interested in establishing a constitutional monarchy. Thus, Simon Burrows rightly places him on a list of early founders of revolutionary journalism. Under his editorship, the *Courier de l’Europe* prospered and supplied high quality political news to elite readers. His editorials attacked government abuses, and laws and customs that prevented nobles from participating in commerce and that encouraged wealthy merchants and manufacturers to purchase noble offices. In this respect, Morande may share the lineage of those *philosophes* who encouraged trade and a more open business climate. Nonetheless, if some of his writings suggested change, he retained a belief in the monarchy. He had lived in England too long not to be influenced by the British form of government. For his more moderate stance, Morande suffered at the hands of many radical thinkers during the French Revolution. He was imprisoned in 1792, but was soon freed and managed to survive other attacks by his enemies. He outlived his creditor Beaumarchais, who also had avoided the guillotine, but whereas Beaumarchais did not see the new millennium, Morande lived to 1805 when he died in his hometown of Arnay-le-Duc.

In 1996, Edouard Molinaro directed *Beaumarchais l’insolent*, a film in which Morande appears, albeit briefly. It is, perhaps, time for someone to put Morande’s life on the screen. A director can do no better than to use Simon Burrows’ biography as the basis for what would be an exciting script. It is interesting, extremely well-written, full of enticing anecdotes, with duels, sex, and a protagonist, who, if not lovable, holds our attention from beginning to end.

A King’s Ransom is meticulously researched: the collections of all of the pertinent major and even minor libraries and archives have been examined along with primary and secondary sources. It has been over a century and a quarter since the last biography of Théveneau de Morande was written. After Simon Burrows’ definitive work, future scholars will not need another.

One final comment about presentation is in order: this book is refreshingly free of typographical errors (I counted only four). At a time when publishers have become more and more dependent on computers and their spelling checkers, it is evident that the editors and the author reviewed the manuscript thoroughly before publication.

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ISSN 1553-9172