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Hugh Thomas, *Beaumarchais in Seville: An Intermezzo*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. xiv + 177 pp. Preface, dramatis personae, postscript, bibliography, index, and illustrations. \$25.00 U.S., £16.00 U.K. (cl); ISBN 0-300-12103-2.

Review by Donald C. Spinelli, Wayne State University.

Readers of the author's previous works might think this one of under 200 pages and on such a limited subject an anomaly. Consider his *Spanish Civil War* (some 1100 pp.), *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom* (over 1500 pp.), *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (over 900 pp.); or even *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire from Columbus to Magellan*, *World History: The Story of Mankind to the Present*, and *An Unfinished History of the World*, all three of which range from 700-800 pages.

As the subtitle suggests, we really do have here, then, with *Beaumarchais in Seville*, a "diversion" or "interlude." The theatricality aspect is hinted at with a Dramatis Personae introduced before chapter one. There are some fifty names mentioned, more than Beaumarchais listed in any of his own plays, including *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

It should be pointed out that Beaumarchais never set foot in Seville. In 1764-65, he did travel to Madrid, ostensibly to right the wrong done to one of his sisters Lisette by Clavijo, who had reneged twice on an oath to marry her. In actuality, Beaumarchais was in Madrid for a number of reasons. One was simply to recoup debts owed to his watchmaker father from various *grandees* for whom he had made timepieces and who had left France without reimbursement.

Beaumarchais's trip to Spain was sponsored by Pâris-Duverney, a wealthy financier, who had already helped Voltaire make a fortune. Pâris-Duverney saw money to be made in Spain and sent his protégé off with 200,000 livres of credit to see what he could do to increase both their wealth. They had several schemes in mind, among them gaining a monopoly on providing Louisiana with needed goods and furnishing the Spanish colonies with slaves. Other projects included the colonization and exploitation of the Sierra Morena, the development of Spanish manufacturing, and furnishing supplies to Spanish troops.

All was not work for Beaumarchais in Madrid. In fact, if we read his letters home to friends and family, it is obvious that this thirty-two year old widower was quite active socially. His naturally open and pleasant personality, story-telling skills, musical abilities that included a pleasant singing voice, and all around *joie de vivre* made him a desired guest, especially in the homes of those in the diplomatic corps. He was a regular guest of the Russian, French, and English ambassadors. At the Countess of Fuenclara's, Beaumarchais met the niece of the Bishop of Orléans, the Marquise de La Croix, who, in short time, became his mistress.

Beaumarchais had always been interested in politics, as his actions in a number of diplomatic activities attest. The obvious example would be his involvement supplying arms, ammunition, and other materials to the American rebels during their Revolution. In 1765, he felt it important to work on French-Spanish relations. Charles III, King of Spain, had recently lost his wife. Beaumarchais thought that a good way to cheer the monarch up would be to find him a French mistress. She would not only make the king happy, but could also influence Spanish policy toward the French and France. Beaumarchais, of course, would be her advisor, and who better for the post than the Marquise de La Croix? Despite

Beaumarchais's best efforts, he was not successful in transferring the marquise from his bed to the king's; he returned to his other responsibilities.

Beaumarchais left Madrid in March 1765, after just under a year there, having departed Paris in April 1764. Beaumarchais's voyage was almost a total disaster, at least for the trip's official or even unofficial reasons: Lisette never married Clavijo, the marquise remained with her husband, and not one of the business plans was implemented. Yet, there were important successes. First, Beaumarchais met Lord Rochford, the English ambassador. It was a friendship that would prove helpful ten years later when Beaumarchais began helping the American rebels. Second, he did manage to recoup some of his father's watch-making money. Third, and perhaps most important, he returned to France with some possible ideas about writing plays with a Spanish atmosphere. It is legitimate to ask if *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro* could have been written without that year south of the Pyrenees. Perhaps they would have been, but few would want to consider the theater or opera if the trip had never been made.

It should be noted that several other works were written as a result of Beaumarchais's trip. One of specific interest might be Goethe's *Clavijo*, of which Beaumarchais wrote after seeing the play: "the German ruined [the story] by overloading it with a duel [between Beaumarchais and Clavijo, who is killed] and a funeral [Lisette's, who dies broken-hearted], additions which showed more empty-headedness than talent." [1] Another is Marsollier des Vivetières's *Norac and Javolci* \$mdash; the title is an anagram for Caron (Beaumarchais's family name) and Clavijo \$mdash; which Beaumarchais also saw. Beaumarchais wrote to the author, "[The play] was so applauded, and the whole audience, turning towards me, gave me such a reception that along with the emotions that scenes on the stage had awakened in me, I felt my tears flowing in abundance." [2]

Beaumarchais's biographers, of whom there are many, have often recounted the latter episode in the dramatist's life, but Hugh Thomas has added his own flavor and style to the story. The narrative is lively, the style unostentatious, and his description of the characters and places of Madrid and of Spain take the reader back to the period under consideration.

In Thomas's work we learn of dances like the *meona*, "in which the dancers, in a ring, having previously taken a mouthful of water, would spit into the middle of the circle" (p. 120); of gambling and card games like *brelan*, "in which each player is dealt three cards, on which he bets. Three aces, the best hand, was known as a *brelan*" (p. 127). We learn that dogs were used in the bull ring (p. 125); that in terms of religion, "every Spaniard looked on the Virgin as a friend who was constantly concerned only about him and who dreamed of happiness" (p. 33); that if a courtier could not pronounce the Spanish word for garlic (*ajo*) or onion (*cebolla*), "he ran the risk of being beaten up for the crime of 'being French'" (p. 83). This would seem to indicate that this dislike for the French was not going to be very promising for Beaumarchais's business plans. We are told that the Plaza Mayor was used for hangings at the time and also functioned as a market as it sometimes does today. In short, Thomas serves as tour guide, placing us into the Spanish milieu that Beaumarchais must have experienced during his stay in Spain.

If a reader were to nitpick, one might mention the following: Beaumarchais's brothers-in-law is Janot de Miron, not Moron; accents are not always correct (it's Marie-Josèphe Caron, not Marie-Josèphe, the Duc de la Vallière rather than Vallière, etc.); the poet who wrote "Where are the snows of yesteryear?" was *François* Villon and not *Jacques*; finally, in the bibliography there are numerous typographical errors and perhaps at least one more work that Hugh Thomas should have been aware of and included. That is García de la Huerta's *Theatro Hespagnol*, in which the author comments that there is a lack of propriety and verisimilitude in *The Barber of Seville* and that the play has no Spanish atmosphere. Even the names and customs, which are supposed to be Spanish, are incorrect. As for *The Marriage of Figaro*, it is full of "slander and satire" against the Spanish. Garcia de la Huerta maintains that Beaumarchais has left decency, truth and verisimilitude behind in writing this play. [3] It would have been quite interesting to read Hugh Thomas's comments on these criticisms of Beaumarchais's now classic plays.

NOTES

[1] Unpublished letter from Beaumarchais to Marsollier, 18 April 1799, in the British Library, Egerton Manuscripts 16, ff. 62-3.

[2] Brian N. Morton, ed., Beaumarchais, *Correspondance*, vol. II (Paris: Nizet, 1969), p. 55.

[3] Vicente García de la Huerta, *Theatro Hespañol*, parte segunda, tomo I, (Madrid: En la Imprenta Real, 1785), pp. ix-xix; parte tercera, tomo I, pp. xxi-xxii.

Donald C. Spinelli Wayne State University aa1690@wayne.edu

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