The Marriage of Figaro Study Guide

The Marriage of Figaro by Pierre Beaumarchais

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Introduction

Like its author, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro* had a long, illustrious history. Completed in 1780, the play would not be acted on the French stage until 1784. Beaumarchais faced many obstacles in producing his comedy. The official French censors, as well as King Louis XVI, opposed the play. The comedy was scandalous in its depiction of a pleasure-seeking, incompetent nobleman who is upstaged by his crafty, quick-witted servant in their quest for the same woman. In its questioning of France's longstanding social class system, which stood as the very basis of France's governing body, it was also revolutionary. The aristocracy who made up the play's appreciative audience understood its subversive nature, yet continued to attend showings in record numbers.

The Marriage of Figaro deserves praise for its important social messages, its subtle wit, comic mastery, and vivacious dialogue; many scholars believe that this play is Beaumarchais's masterpiece. However, the play also holds an important place in the development of French theatre. It is a play in which the aristocracy face their impending decline. The triumph of Figaro, valet to a nobleman, signifies the victory of ability over birthright. As such, Beaumarchais presages the tumultuous events of 1789, the year that brought the French Revolution and the downfall of France's established class system.

Author Biography

Beaumarchais was born in Paris, France, on January 24, 1732. In 1753, working as an apprentice to his watchmaker father, Beaumarchais devised a mechanism that was recognized by the Academy of Sciences. Two years later, he was appointed watchmaker to the royal court of Louis XV. Upon marrying a widow, he became Clerk Controller and also inherited the property of Beaumarchais, from where he took his name. He became wealthy through business associations and purchased the title of Secretary of the King, which made him a member of the French nobility.

Beaumarchais traveled to Spain in 1764, after his sister's fiancé refused to marry her, where he revealed the fiancé's treachery. This trip gave him the opportunity to observe Spanish life and culture, including the wastefulness of the nobility and the abuses of the government. He returned to Paris in 1767 to present his play *Eugénie,* which made use of these experiences. His next play, *Les Deux Amies,* appeared three years later, in 1770. That same year, Beaumarchais became involved in a lawsuit. Although he eventually won his case, he was stripped of the civil rights belonging to French citizens, and these rights were not reinstated until 1776.

During this period, King Louis XV hired Beaumarchais as a secret agent. On frequent trips to England, he became interested in the cause for American independence. With the support of the French government, he helped provide unofficial money and arms to the American colonists.

He continued to work on his writings. The Barber of *Seville*, which first introduced Figaro, was produced in 1775. He completed *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1780, but it was not produced until four years later. The liberetto *Tarare* came out in 1787, and again in 1790 with a new ending adapted to the political changes that had taken place because of the French Revolution. *La Mere Coupable* was presented in 1792. Between 1783 and 1790, Beaumarchais published a complete edition of the works of Voltaire. In 1777 he also founded the Society of Dramatic Authors, one of the first organizations that protected an author's rights.

Beaumarchais continued to pursue his business interests, undertaking arms negotiations in 1792 on behalf of the French revolutionary government. Accused by the government of hiding the guns, he was imprisoned but freed from jail in time to escape the September massacres that took place that year. Beaumarchais fled to England and then to Hamburg, Germany. The French government declared him an émigré, which barred his return to France, before imprisoning his family and seizing his property. He remained in exile in Germany until 1796, when the new government allowed him to return. He died of a stroke in Paris on May 18, 1799.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Act 1 *The Marriage of Figaro* opens on the day of Figaro and Suzanne's marriage. Suzanne informs her fiancé that the Count has offered her a dowry if she spends the first night with him. Figaro realizes that he must take quick action to thwart the Count's desires. He vows to mislead the Count by moving ahead the time the wedding will take place. At the same time, he must ward off Marceline, who wants to marry him. Marceline has involved Bartholo in her plans to win Figaro, which include encouraging the Count to oppose the marriage between Suzanne and Figaro.

Alone in her room, Suzanne is visited by Cherubino, whom the Count has dismissed upon catching him in Fanchette's room. Cherubino wants Suzanne to persuade the Count to reinstate him. The Count's arrival forces Cherubino to hide behind the chair and thus overhear the Count asking Suzanne to meet him later to discuss spending the night together. Basil's entry into the room, however, forces the Count to hide behind the chair and Cherubino to hide atop the chair. Basil counsels Suzanne to give in to the Count. He also reveals Cherubino's love for the Countess, which forces the Count to announce himself. He orders the page dismissed for good. Under pressure from the household, however, he declares that he will give Cherubino a commission in the army instead of merely casting him out. Figaro needs Cherubino for his scheme to thwart the Count, so he tells the page to return to the castle right away. The Count, meanwhile, hopes that Marceline will help him prevent the marriage.

Act 2

The Countess, Suzanne, and Figaro agree upon a two-fold plan to thwart the Count and return his affections to his wife: Figaro provokes the Count's jealousy by giving him an anonymous note warning that the Countess has a lover; Figaro also proposes that they send Cherubino, disguised as Suzanne, to meet the Count that evening. Cherubino arrives, but when the Count knocks on the door, he hides in the closet. The Count is upset by the note he has just received, and his suspicions are raised further when Cherubino makes a noise in the closet. Although the Countess says it is only Suzanne in the closet, the Count does not believe her. He leaves the room, accompanied by the Countess, to get tools to break down the door. While they are gone, Suzanne takes Cherubino's place in the closet, and he jumps out the window. When the Count opens the door, he finds only Suzanne.

Figaro comes in and is forced to cover himself when the Count finds out that he was behind the note. Marceline arrives on Figaro's heels, proclaiming that she has a note that says that Figaro must either repay a debt or marry her. The Count declares that the matter will be heard by the court.

Alone, the Countess and Suzanne reject Figaro's plan. They decide that the Countess will dress up as Suzanne and go meet the Count. The Countess forbids Suzanne to tell Figaro of the new plot.

Act 3

At the beginning of act 3, the Count wavers back and forth over whether he will rule in Marceline's favor or in Figaro's. Although Suzanne agrees to meet him that night, the Count does not trust her motivation because he realizes that she has told Figaro of his seduction plan. He decides instead to champion Marceline's cause.

At the trial, a blot over a crucial word renders unclear the exact meaning of the contract between Marceline and Figaro. After numerous readings, the Count decides that Figaro must, within the day, repay Marceline or marry her. Figaro tries to escape the verdict by arguing that he cannot marry without his parents' permission. However, he was stolen by gypsies at birth, so he does not know their identity. He reveals a mark on his arm, leading Marceline to realize that he is her and Bartholo's illegitimate son. Marceline embraces her long-lost son, but Bartholo is disgusted because he dislikes Figaro. Suzanne rushes in with money the Countess gave her to enable Figaro to repay the loan, but Marceline returns it to Figaro as his dowry. The Countess, Suzanne, and Figaro then urge Bartholo to marry Marceline.

Act 4

Figaro asks Suzanne not to meet the Count, and she agrees. However, when she tells the Countess of her intention, the Countess points out that she needs Suzanne's help so she can have the opportunity to win back her husband's love. The two women write a note to the Count, asking for a meeting under the elm trees. During the double wedding ceremony, Suzanne passes her note to the Count. Figaro observes the Count reading it but does not yet know it is from Suzanne. However, a chance comment alerts him to this fact and the location of the meeting. Figaro grows jealous and angry but, at Marceline's advice, decides to attend the rendezvous secretly.

Act 5

The Countess, disguised as Suzanne, meets the Count, Cherubino, and Fanchette, who had arranged their own meeting. They hide in the pavilion on the left, where Marceline has also ensconced herself. The Count attempts to seduce "Suzanne," and her complicity angers Figaro, who is observing the pair from afar. He steps forward to stop the Count, the Count flees, and the Countess enters the pavilion on the right. Figaro then meets Suzanne, disguised as the Countess, but he quickly recognizes his bride's voice. To get back at Suzanne, he proposes a sexual liaison to the Countess. When Suzanne realizes that Figaro has recognized her, she explains why she made the rendezvous with the Count. When the Count returns to find "Suzanne," he becomes irate upon seeing his "wife" with Figaro. Suzanne flees into the pavilion on the left, while

the Count seizes Figaro and places him under arrest. Figaro pretends that he was about to have an affair with the Countess. The Count goes into the pavilion to drag his wife out and force her to admit her infidelity in front of the household. However, Cherubino, Fanchette, and Marceline are dragged out instead. Then Suzanne herself comes out, but she hides her face so the Count will still think she is the Countess. The company all fall on their knees in front of the Count, begging him to forgive his wife. While he steadfastly declares that he will never do so, the disguised Countess emerges from the other pavilion and joins the others. Seeing both Suzanne and his wife, the Count realizes that he has been tricked. The play ends with Figaro and Suzanne married and rich with a triple dowry.

Act 1 Part 1

Act 1 Part 1 Summary

In the bedroom Figaro and Suzanne are to share as husband and wife, Figaro measures the floor to determine the best place for the bed while Suzanne, the Countess's maid and Figaro's bride to be, tries on the wreath of flowers she's to wear at their wedding later that day. When Suzanne realizes this is to be their bedroom, she says she wants another room. Figaro explains that because it's close to the rooms of their masters, the Count and Countess, it's perfect. Suzanne explains that the Count wants to re-enact an old law that allowed a master to sleep with the wives of his servants, and that's why she doesn't want the room. Figaro reminds her that the Count rescinded that law when he got married, but according to Suzanne, Bazile says he wants to bring it back. Figaro says he now understands why the Count wants him to come on a diplomatic mission to London, so that he will bring Suzanne and the Count can have some fun. He begins plotting how to turn the situation to his benefit, and Suzanne teasingly tells him he's in his element, planning and scheming. As Figaro suggests that Suzanne pretend to go along with the Count in order to get more dowry money out of him, a bell rings summoning Suzanne to the Countess. She and Figaro kiss for luck, and Suzanne goes out.

Bartholo and Marceline come in. After teasing Bartholo about how he lost Rosine and Marceline about her plans to sue him for breach of promise of marriage, Figaro goes out. The conversation between Marceline and Bartholo reveals that Bartholo has been sent for because the Countess is ill, pining away because the Count is neglecting her, and that Bazile has plans to marry Marceline. They also talk about an affair they had years ago that resulted in the birth of a child who was adopted and hasn't been seen since. They plot to stop the marriage of Figaro and Suzanne so that Marceline can marry Figaro. Suzanne comes in carrying one of the Countess's dresses, which she places on a large chair. She and Marceline, who loathe each other, speak greetings of extreme politeness that mask increasing venom until finally Marceline, completely insulted by a reference to her being an old maid, rushes out, followed by Bartholo. Suzanne says to herself that she's become so angry she forgot what she came in for.

A young page, Cherubin, comes in and says he's been waiting to catch Suzanne alone. After some teasing conversation about how Cherubin is always running after the girls and the Count is always catching him at it, Cherubin confesses that he's in love with the Countess. He steals a ribbon that Suzanne has told him the Countess wears to bed at night. Suzanne grabs the ribbon back, at the same time accidentally grabbing a paper that has the words to a song that Cherubin has written for the Countess. Cherubin explains that in the last little while, he's been overcome again and again by passion, not just for the Countess but also for all women, even Marceline. He grabs the ribbon back from Suzanne, and they chase each other around the room.

The Count appears, and Cherubin hides behind the chair in terror. Suzanne worries about what the court will say if she and the Count are discovered alone together, but the Count sits and calmly reveals his plans for having Figaro and Suzanne accompany him to London. He invites Suzanne to meet him in the garden that evening and discuss it further, but before she can respond they hear Bazile outside the door. The Count panics and hides behind the chair just as Cherubin comes around in front of it and jumps in. Suzanne covers him with the dress just as Bazile comes in.

Act 1 Part 1 Analysis

This play is a sequel to a play by the same author, *The Barber of Seville*, in which the clever servant Figaro plots with Count Almaviva to free the beautiful Rosine from the control of her guardian, Dr. Bartholo, who also wants to marry her. Despite interference from the music teacher Bazile and the housekeeper Marceline, who lust after Figaro, the Count and Rosine are united and go off to be married. *The Marriage of Figaro* begins some time after the events of *The Barber of Seville*.

As is the case with *The Barber of Seville*, this play contains elements inspired by *commedia dell'arte*, a type of comedy developed in Italy late in the 1600s that spread throughout Europe and that was the dominant form of theater in that part of the world for several years. Storylines in *commedia dell'arte* are based on stock character types played by actors who specialize in playing those types and who develop equally specialized routines known as *lazzi*, or patterns of physical or verbal comedy repeated from scenario to scenario. In the cases of both *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, *commedia* elements include clever servant characters like Suzanne and Figaro and *lazzi* like the action in and around the chair. A key distinction, however, is that the *commedia* and *lazzi* components are used in different ways in each play. *The Barber of Seville* is more of a satire, concerned with making pointed observations about the behavior of people and society. *The Marriage of Figaro* is more of a farce, focused on relationships and, more significantly, plot.

In general, the action of farce is built on characters taking increasingly desperate actions either to ensure that a troublesome truth remains a secret or that that same truth is revealed. Conflict is therefore natural in this situation simply because characters want opposite things. The first section of *The Marriage of Figaro* establishes exactly this kind of conflict immediately and clearly. The Count tries to accomplish something he desperately wants to keep secret, and Figaro plots to make sure it doesn't happen. The action of the play follows the increasingly desperate and more extreme actions of both characters and the characters around them, as they struggle to achieve their goals.

Two subplots that add layers of complication to the central plot are also introduced in this scene, the Cherubin subplot and the Marceline subplot. Cherubin's situation makes the situations of both the Count and Figaro more difficult and also parallels that of the Count. Cherubin's similar pursuit of women will get him into a similar sort of trouble as the Count's pursuit of Suzanne. At the same time, the lawsuit subplot set in motion by Marceline and Bartholo simultaneously increases the pressure on Figaro and gives the

Count a means of gaining control over him. Meanwhile, their plans and their comments about their lost child foreshadow a surprising revelation at the climax of the Marceline subplot later in the play that turns the action in the main plot in a different direction, which is exactly what a good subplot should do.

Suzanne's flowers are the only real symbol of the play. They illustrate the thematic point that love, which her wreath represents, is more powerful and more important than desire.

Act 1 Part 2

Act 1 Part 2 Summary

The Count is still behind the chair, and Cherubin is still *in* the chair, as Bazile tells Suzanne that Figaro is looking for the Count. His true purpose for coming to the room is soon revealed, however, as he tries to talk Suzanne into giving in to the Count's demands, saying she wouldn't be giving the Count anything she's not already giving Figaro. Suzanne repeatedly refuses, but Bazile tells her that because the court has seen Cherubin lingering outside her door, they're saying that she has loose morals. Suzanne reacts with outrage, but Bazile says he's only repeating what everybody else is saying.

The Count angrily jumps out from behind the chair and orders Bazile to drive Cherubin from the court. Bazile says he was only joking, but the Count says that yesterday he caught Cherubin with the gardener's daughter Fanchette in her bedroom. Suzanne comments sarcastically that he must have had important business there as well, but the Count says he was looking for the gardener, who is also Suzanne's uncle. He explains that he discovered Cherubin by lifting a curtain over a closet, and he shows how he did it by lifting the dress on the chair. This reveals Cherubin, and the Count angrily tells Suzanne that her behavior in receiving his page is disgraceful. Suzanne pointedly tells him Cherubin was in the room the entire time the Count was there. The Count realizes he heard everything, banishes Cherubin from court and tells Suzanne there is no way she'll marry Figaro now.

The Countess, Figaro, Fanchette and other servants come in. Figaro says that he and the servants want to publicly express thanks to the Count for abolishing the law about sleeping with servants' wives. He suggests that the Count formally present Suzanne with the wreath of flowers she was trying on earlier as a symbol of his commitment to the ending of the law. The Countess asks the Count to perform the ceremony out of respect for the love he once had for her. The Count says that love still exists, agrees to the ceremony but asks to postpone it and tells Bazile to find Marceline.

As Bazile goes out, Figaro asks why Cherubin is so upset. Suzanne says the Count has banished him. The Countess pleads with the Count to change his mind. Cherubin admits that his actions were unwise, but he pointedly says to the Count that he can be discreet. The Count realizes that Cherubin means that if he's not banished he'll be quiet about what he heard and announces that Cherubin is to be given the command of a prestigious regiment in the army, adding that he has to leave the next day. This dampens the excitement somewhat, but the Countess gives Cherubin her blessing. Figaro tries to cheer him up by talking about all the excitement he'll find.

Bazile comes back in without Marceline. The Count asks where she is, and Fanchette says she went back into town with Bartholo, angrily and loudly complaining about Figaro. The Count says to himself that Marceline will get what she wants one way or

another and then leads everyone from the room. In a whisper, Figaro asks whether Suzanne has made the Count believe she's interested, and Suzanne hints that it didn't take much work. She then goes out, leaving Figaro with Bazile and Cherubin. Their conversation reveals that Bazile is plotting with Figaro to win Marceline for himself. Cherubin and Figaro are also plotting to have Cherubin stay, and Fanchette is in on the whole thing. As they go out, Bazile comments that Cherubin will have to be careful around Fanchette, making what he thinks is a wise observation. Figaro hints, though, that his observation is actually silly.

Act 1 Part 2 Analysis

Events of the plot move quickly in this scene, as the Count finds himself cornered and his plans foiled at just about every turn. This scene is only the beginning, however, with the rest of the play dramatizing how increasingly desperate he and the other characters become as others continue to foil the Count's plans. This mutual and simultaneous increasing desperation is a key element of farce, with the desperation of the Count and Figaro in particular foreshadowing choices and challenges to come. The Count's postponing the presentation of the wreath, which as we've seen represents the power of true love, suggests that at this point he's still controlled by his desire. This idea is supported by his actions as the action of the play continues to unfold.

Act 2 Part 1

Act 2 Part 1 Summary

This scene is set in the Countess' bedchamber. The Countess and Suzanne come in. Suzanne explains what happened with the Count and Cherubin. The Countess speaks fondly of Cherubin, saying the Count is jealous because of his desire to control her rather than out of love for her. The Countess promises that Suzanne will still marry Figaro.

Figaro comes in and comments that the Count's plans are really nothing to be concerned about, saying that wanting to possess another man's wife is merely human nature. He then says it's also human nature for a man to defend his beloved, and he explains his plan to defend Suzanne. He says that he's arranged for a letter to be delivered to the Count hinting that the Countess is seeing another man. The Countess protests that she has her own reputation to think about, but Figaro explains that there's no other woman virtuous enough for him to even consider such a plan. He explains that the Count will be too busy trying to find the Countess's lover to consider taking one of his own. He also says that Suzanne should send word to the Count to meet her in the garden, explaining that he'll send someone else in Suzanne's place in order to humiliate him. When Suzanne asks who, Figaro says he's worked it out for Cherubin to evade the Count's orders, return and pose as Suzanne. He adds that he'll send Cherubin up to be dressed and coached on how to be a woman. He quickly leaves, and the Countess quickly tries to fix her hair and makeup before Cherubin arrives.

Before the Countess can get too far, Cherubin comes in, upset about having to leave her. Suzanne urges him to sing his song for her. At first Cherubin refuses, but after being coaxed by the Countess and Suzanne, he agrees. Suzanne accompanies him on guitar as he sings, and the song's lyrics indicate how sad he is. The Countess finds the song moving, but Suzanne says it's too sentimental. She then starts to take off Cherubin's clothes prior to dressing him up. She explains that if Cherubin is discovered, they'll say that the Count forgot to give him his commission papers. Cherubin says he's already got them, but when she looks at them, Suzanne notices they haven't got the Count's official seal. She hands them back and then goes out to fetch a dress.

As the Countess is arranging Cherubin's hair, the Count is heard outside asking why the bedroom door is locked. Cherubin runs into the dressing room and hides. The Countess then opens the door, explaining as the Count comes in that she and Suzanne needed some privacy while trying on some new clothes. The Count shows her a letter suggesting that she'll be meeting a lover at the grand ball that evening, but she says she won't be leaving her room at all that day because she's unwell. Just as the Count comments that it's a good thing Dr. Bartholo is near, a noise is heard from the dressing room. The Countess says it's Suzanne, tidying up. The Count knocks on the door, demanding that "Suzanne" answer. Suzanne comes in with the dress, unnoticed by either the Count or Countess. She listens as the Count repeatedly shouts through the

door and then quietly hides as the Countess angrily protests that the Count is behaving outrageously. The Count says he's going out to get tools to break the door open and insists that the Countess go with him. He locks the other door into the room and goes out with the now anxious Countess.

Suzanne hurriedly unlocks the dressing room door. Cherubin runs out, completely panicked. Suzanne urges him to run and tell Figaro what's happened. Cherubin jumps out the window, and Suzanne runs into the dressing room, locking the door behind her. A moment later the Count and Countess come back in. The Count is carrying tools. He gives the Countess one more chance to open the door. The Countess tries to prepare him for the discovery of Cherubin, saying that she was just planning a little joke to be played on him. The Count tells her she's behaved disgracefully and insists that she open the door. She pleads with him, in the name of their love, to be merciful. He says that she's made a mockery of their love and holds out his hand. The Countess gives him the key, and he opens the door. Suzanne comes out, mocking him for being so angry.

Act 2 Part 1 Analysis

Between Figaro's comments in this scene on how a man has the right to defend his beloved, and the Countess's repeated urgings, in this scene and others, that the Count remember their love, the play's theme of love conquering desire is beginning to emerge more fully. The ways the characters are representatives of that theme also emerge. The Count and Marceline, and to a lesser degree Cherubin, represent desire, while Figaro, Suzanne and the Countess represent love. The conflict of the play, which is centered around the Count's desire for Suzanne, represents and dramatizes the difference between the two perspectives and how they essentially contradict each other. This is a clear example of the way plot and character can function together in order to illuminate theme.

Act 2 Part 2

Act 2 Part 2 Summary

The Count goes into the dressing room looking for Cherubin, while Suzanne quickly explains to the Countess that he got away by jumping out the window. As the Countess catches her breath, the Count comes back in, conceding that he is the victim of a joke and demanding to know what the point of it is. The Countess says that she shouldn't have to be the victim of suspicion and anger just because the Count is obsessed with his honor, and she says that she's decided to go into a convent. The Count comments that the letter started it all. The Countess tells him the letter was Figaro's idea and that he implemented the plan with Bazile's help. The Count vows to take revenge, but the Countess tells him that if he wants forgiveness from her, he has to give it to them. He apologizes and asks for forgiveness. The Countess comments to Suzanne on how susceptible to men's charms women are and then forgives the Count.

Figaro rushes in, saying that everyone has gathered to witness the wedding. The Count confronts him about the letter, and Figaro tries to talk his way out of it. Suzanne and the Countess tell him that the Count knows everything, though. Figaro says that the women can believe what they want, but the Count shouldn't believe a word of it. As the Countess and Suzanne laughingly comment on the way that Figaro simply can't stop his manipulations, the Count wonders to himself where Marceline is. He then tries to stall the others by telling them he has to get changed.

Antonio the gardener, and Suzanne's over-protective uncle, comes in carrying a broken flowerpot and complaining about men falling from the sky and ruining his flowerbeds. Suzanne whispers to Figaro that he should change the subject. Figaro accuses Antonio of drinking too much, but the Count insists upon knowing what Antonio is talking about. Antonio explains that he saw a man jump out of the Countess's window into the garden and run off. Figaro says that he jumped out the window, but Antonio says the man he saw looked more like Cherubin. Figaro tells him that's ridiculous, saying the Count has just sent Cherubin away. He goes on to explain that he was visiting Suzanne when the Count knocked, and he was afraid because of the letter. He jumped out the window to avoid a fight. Antonio pulls out a piece of paper that he says fell from the jumper's pocket, but before Figaro can grab it, the Count takes it. He asks Figaro if he can imagine what it might be. As Figaro goes through his pockets, chattering about how many pieces of paper he has, Suzanne discovers that the paper is Cherubin's commission. She tells Figaro, who immediately tells the Count that the paper is the commission. When Suzanne whispers to him that the seal is missing, he explains that Cherubin gave him the paper to return to the Count to get the seal. Frustrated, the Count crumples the paper and starts to leave.

Marceline, Bartholo and Bazile appear. Marceline presents a document which she says binds Figaro to her, and she says that as an officer of the highest court in the land the Count has to make a ruling. Bazile then says he wishes to advance his claim for the

hand of Marceline, but the Count says he has no business pressing a claim for anything and that he should stick to making music. He tells Marceline he'll hear her claim, arranges for a second judge to be brought to the castle, dismisses Bazile and leaves. Figaro tells Bazile to do what the Count says and make some music. Bazile picks up Suzanne's guitar and plays, as everyone except Suzanne and the Countess leaves.

The Countess proposes that she go to the garden that evening and meet the Count instead of either Suzanne or Cherubin. She insists that Suzanne not even tell Figaro of this change of plans, and Suzanne agrees, gratefully acknowledging that this will make her marriage take place for sure. The Countess picks up Cherubin's song, which got left behind when he jumped, and goes out with Suzanne.

Act 2 Part 2 Analysis

A traditional *commedia dell'arte lazzi* appears in this scene. The plot device of a piece of paper, dropped where it shouldn't have been, discovered by someone who shouldn't see it and read by someone who shouldn't know about it, is common in several traditional *commedia* pieces, including *The Barber of Seville.* This device is incorporated here to great comic and dramatic effect. Comically it works simply because it's funny, while it works dramatically because it raises the stakes for all the characters. It challenges them to act and react in ways they hadn't been able to predict and moves the story forward. The *lazzi* is repeated in the appearance of the second letter, the contract held by Marceline that she claims proves that she and Figaro have a contracted marriage. This second letter plays a central role in the development of the story in the next scene.

While the entire scene dramatizes the play's theme of love versus desire, the theme is the particular focus of conversations between the Countess and Suzanne at the beginning and the end of this section. In the first section, the Countess again insists that the Count act out of love for her. She sees that in spite of his apology he still plans to disrupt the marriage, indicated by his willingness to hear Marceline's case. The Countess understands that she has to do something drastic to get him to realize that it's love and *not* desire that has to rule his relationships. This is the reason she plots with Suzanne in the second section to take her place in the garden, a change in plan that plays a key role in the action of the play's final scene and the ultimate manifestation of the play's theme.

Act 3 Part 1

Act 3 Part 1 Summary

This scene is set in the castle's throne room, now set up as a courtroom. The Count muses to himself about the situation, wondering if everything is as everybody says it is. Figaro appears in time to hear him wondering why he isn't able to stop desiring Suzanne even after trying many times to forget her. Figaro steps forward, and the Count asks what's taken him so long to arrive. Figaro explains that he had to change after dirtying himself in the flowerbeds. The Count comments that he's been thinking about not taking Figaro with him to London, one reason being that Figaro doesn't know English.

Figaro gives a long comic speech in which he shows that the phrase "god-damn" is the only English he needs to know. In an aside, the Count says that this means that Figaro doesn't know about his plans for Suzanne. In an aside of his own, Figaro reveals that he thinks he's fooled the Count into thinking exactly that. They debate whether Figaro should be helping the Countess, whether Figaro should have been a businessman instead of a servant and whether Figaro would be a good diplomat. All this leads to another pair of asides in which the Count reveals that he believes Figaro does know the truth after all, and Figaro says he believes the Count still thinks that Figaro knows nothing.

A servant announces that the judge sent for by the Count, Brid-Oisin, has arrived. The Count tells the servant to tell the judge to wait. Then, he tells Figaro to get the room ready for the hearing. Figaro and the servant go out as Suzanne comes in. She says she's come looking for some smelling salts to give to the Countess, but then she flirts with the Count. At first he's suspicious, asking her why she rejected him earlier. She explains that she didn't want to be overheard by either Cherubin or Bazile and agrees to meet him in the garden as planned. The Count tries to kiss her, but she says someone is coming. The Count goes out, looking forward to "this evening.." Figaro comes in and wonders what the Count meant. Suzanne tells him he's just won his case and goes out with Figaro following her and asking what she means. The Count comes back in, having heard what Suzanne said about Figaro having won the case and also wondering what she means.

Brid-Oisin, Marceline and Bartholo come in. Marceline and Bartholo struggle to make Brid-Oisin understand the case. Figaro comes in and is pointed out as the person Marceline is suing. Brid-Oisin and Figaro discuss where they've met before and banter about what a rogue Figaro is and whether Brid-Oisin has any integrity. The Count comes in and orders that the public, which includes Antonio and Fanchette, be allowed in.

Act 3 Part 1 Analysis

This section of the play contains several asides, a device commonly used in *commedia* and in other plays as well. An aside reveals the interior thoughts, feelings or reactions of a character and is spoken directly to the audience. The difference between an aside and a soliloquy, which is also spoken to the audience, is that the aside is spoken while another character is on the stage. An aside, since it delivers the character's internal thoughts, cannot be heard by the second character. The asides in this scene are employed to reveal what the Count and Figaro each believe the other knows and understands, suggesting that they're both out to fool the other and gain control of the situation. Conversely, a soliloquy is spoken by a character alone on the stage. Examples of soliloquies in this play are the first part of the Count's speech in this scene and Figaro's speech about women in Act 5.

When Suzanne tells Figaro he's just won his case, she means that because she's convinced the Count that the marriage should go ahead, he'll decide in Figaro's favor. She doesn't know, however, that the Count has realized that that's her plan. He is planning to double-cross both her and Figaro.

Act 3 Part 2

Act 3 Part 2 Summary

After the court and spectators are seated, the Bailiff presents the case, the plaintiff (Marceline) and the defendant (Figaro). Bartholo reads the letter signed by Figaro. In it, Figaro promises to pay back money leant to him by Marceline and marry her. Figaro protests that the document says *or* marry her. The judges can't make out whether the word is "and" or "or,," and Bartholo concedes that it's "or.." The judges agree that the debt must be paid, or Figaro and Marceline must marry. Just as Figaro is rejoicing, the Count announces that Figaro must pay the money back that day or marry Marceline. As the spectators leave, Antonio goes out to tell Suzanne what he says is good news.

Figaro tells the Count that as a gentleman he can't be married until he's gained permission from his parents, whom he's been seeking for years. Bartholo scoffs at the idea of Figaro being a gentleman, but then Figaro shows a birthmark which he says proves it. Marceline recognizes the mark and reveals that she is Figaro's mother and Bartholo is his father! As everyone reacts with shock, Figaro asks his mother to kiss him. As Marceline does, Suzanne comes in followed by Antonio.

Suzanne says she has money from the Countess to pay Figaro's debt. The Count goes out, angrily saying that everyone is conspiring against him. Suzanne starts to go out as well, jealous of Marceline and Figaro, who explain that they're mother and son. Marceline adds that it was love calling her to Figaro and that she misinterpreted the call as that of desire. She then hands Figaro the letter of agreement, implying that he doesn't need to repay the debt. Suzanne hands him the money from the Countess, saying they can use that as a dowry.

As Figaro embraces his mother and his fiancy, Antonio (Suzanne's uncle) says that no one can be allowed to marry into his family if they have unmarried parents like Figaro does. At first, Bartholo refuses to even think about marrying Marceline, but Suzanne, Figaro and Marceline convince him. They all go out in search of the Count to get him to perform the ceremony, leaving a bewildered Brid-Oisin alone.

Act 3 Part 2 Analysis

The courtroom scene contains much verbal comedy as the arguments between Figaro and Bartholo become more and more personal and sarcastic. This is another example of traditional *commedia dell'arte* humor, as is the sudden revelation of Figaro's parenthood, the climax of the Marceline marriage subplot. The revelation is less of an unexpected surprise than it might otherwise have been, since it is foreshadowed in Marceline and Bartholo's conversation in Act 1 about their affair and having a lost child. The revelation also illuminates the play's theme relating to the conflict between love and desire, through Marceline's comment that she felt drawn to Figaro but mistook

instinctive love for desire. The revelation dramatizes, albeit in a far-fetched and comic way, how the power of genuine love is truer than the power of desire. Also, the agreement and the way that it's proven null and void foreshadows both the appearance of a similar agreement brought in by Bazile later in the play and the way that agreement is also dismissed.

The term dowry is used to describe an amount of money settled on a bride that she brings with her to her marriage. It is traditional in situations in which servants are to be married for their masters to provide the dowry, whereas in wealthier and more upper-class families, the parents provide it. Finally, the Count's ruling that Figaro is to marry Marceline is the result of his desire for revenge on Figaro for marrying Suzanne and insisting that the law about sleeping with servants' wives be rescinded.

Act 4

Act 4 Summary

Alone for a moment in the room where Figaro and Suzanne are to be married, the two lovers talk happily about the events of the last little while, about how much they love each other and about how mutual love is the only truth they can count on. Suzanne reminds him about their plan for her to meet the Count in the garden that night and humiliate him, but Figaro tells her the plan is off. The Count can go down and freeze in the cold. Suzanne tells him she's glad, adding that it would have been difficult to pretend to love the Count when she loves only him.

The Countess comes in and tells Figaro people are waiting for him. As he goes, he tries to take Suzanne, but the Countess asks her to stay. When Figaro is gone, Suzanne tells the Countess that he's decided the meeting with the Count is off. The Countess, however, says the meeting is still on and that she'll take the responsibility for what happens. She tells Suzanne to write a letter to the Count with the arrangements and dictates what she wants the letter to say. Before they can get too far, Fanchette brings a group of peasant girls in to present Suzanne with flowers in honor of her wedding. The group includes Cherubin, disguised as a girl. The Countess kisses her/him, and Cherubin comments in an aside on how long he's waited for that kiss.

Antonio rushes in with the Count, saying he knows that Cherubin is there in disguise. He grabs off Cherubin's hat, revealing his identity, and the Count demands to know what's going on and why Cherubin hasn't left. As the Countess tries to explain, Fanchette steps forward and asks the Count to be merciful. She says innocently that every time he's visited her room, he said he'd give her anything she wants if only she'll be nice to him. She says that if the Count lets Cherubin go free, she'll marry him. Then, the Count can visit her as much as he wants.

Just as the Countess is angrily confronting the Count and Antonio is angrily talking about how little girls like Fanchette need to be taught respect, Figaro comes in and asks that the wedding begin. The Count and Antonio confront him with Cherubin, saying that they know that it was Cherubin jumping out of the Countess's window that morning and not Figaro. Figaro merely says that they both jumped, and as the Count reacts with utter disbelief, wedding music is heard. Figaro, Suzanne, the girls and Antonio go out. The Count tells Cherubin to go away and not be seen for the rest of the evening. Cherubin, happy with the kiss he received from the Countess, runs out.

The Count and Countess sit and watch Figaro and Suzanne's wedding procession, which includes Brid-Oisin (who performs the ceremony), Marceline and Bartholo. As Figaro and Suzanne are being formally presented to the Count and Countess, Suzanne slips the Count the letter she wrote for the Countess. As the ceremony continues, the Count withdraws and reads the note. Figaro sees him reading but hasn't seen who gave him the note. He comments to Marceline that even at a wedding the Count can't resist

his affairs. Meanwhile, Suzanne signals to the Countess that the note has been delivered. The Countess says she's ill and needs to leave, and she asks Suzanne to accompany her.

Bazile comes in, announcing his determination to marry Marceline according to the terms of a contract they signed several years ago. It's revealed that the conditions of the contract were that if Marceline didn't find her son, she'd marry Bazile. When Figaro announces that he is Marceline's son, Bazile renounces his claim and leaves. The Count tells Brid-Oisin to bring the contracts for him to sign and goes out. Brid-Oisin follows.

Alone with Figaro, Marceline apologizes for believing the worst about Suzanne. Figaro says he knew the truth all along, adding that if Suzanne did cheat on him he forgives her in advance. Fanchette comes in with a message for Suzanne. When Figaro asks what it is, Fanchette tells him that it's a pin from the Count signifying that their meeting in the garden that night is still on. Figaro tells her to go and deliver her message, but when she's gone, he quickly becomes angry about what he thinks Suzanne is doing. Marceline teases him about what forgiving her in advance, and Figaro tells her many things are said on the spur of the moment. Marceline tells him it's silly and dangerous to jump to conclusions, and Figaro agrees. He says he'll be waiting at the meeting place to see what happens. When he goes out, Marceline comments to herself that she'll also be there.

Act 4 Analysis

In this section, the Count's desires, this time represented by Fanchette's innocent confession, once again get him into trouble. This clear illustration of the way he indulges his sensual cravings is juxtaposed with Figaro and Suzanne's wedding ceremony. In the ceremony, Suzanne is at last formally presented with the wreath of flowers, a moment that both represents and foreshadows the way that the true love between her and Figaro will ultimately win out. This makes the fact that Suzanne gives the Count the note at exactly the moment he gives their marriage his blessing quite ironic. We know that he is being set up. His downfall is foreshadowed by the plotting between the Countess and Suzanne, which we understand is going to lead to the Count's ultimate humiliation. The comedy of this is something we can easily find ourselves looking forward to, an anticipation heightened by Figaro's partial discovery of what Suzanne is up to.

All these complications function on two levels. First, they are classic elements of farce. Characters do things they shouldn't be doing, and other characters arrange for those characters to get caught. Still other characters misunderstand and make themselves look foolish. On another level, these events create suspense and tension leading up to the play's climax, the scene in the garden that follows.

Act 5

Act 5 Summary

In a forest on the castle grounds, Fanchette waits near a small pavilion. Figaro arrives and sees her, but before he can say anything else Fanchette runs into the pavilion and hides. Bartholo, Brid-Oisin, Bazile and Antonio come in and meet Figaro, who explains that he's called them all there to witness the humiliation of the Count. Bazile says he knows what Figaro and Suzanne are planning and tells the others that he'll explain while they're in hiding. They go out and hide amongst the trees. Figaro speaks in soliloquy about how he feels betrayed. He is jealous of the Count's advantages of money, wealth and position, and he is upset with Suzanne for betraying him. He hears someone coming and hides in a different part of the forest.

The Countess and Suzanne appear, dressed in each other's clothes. Marceline is with them. Their conversation reveals that Marceline has told Suzanne that Figaro will be watching what happens. Marceline goes into the pavilion, and Suzanne pretends to go off. Actually, she hides behind another tree where she can watch Figaro. The Countess, pretending to be Suzanne, waits for the Count.

Cherubin comes in, looking for Fanchette. He mistakes the Countess for Suzanne and begins to court her just as the Count comes in. The Countess tries to get rid of Cherubin, but he insists on talking to her. Figaro and Suzanne comment in asides on what they're seeing and hearing. The Count sticks his head between Cherubin and the Countess just as Cherubin is kissing her. Figaro hears the kiss and thinks that Cherubin is kissing Suzanne, but Cherubin realizes he's just kissed the Count. He runs into the pavilion. Just as Figaro is running out to confront Cherubin, the Count strikes out to hit Cherubin. Instead, he connects with Figaro. Figaro goes back to his hiding place, and Suzanne conceals her laughter. The Count settles down to court the woman that he thinks is Suzanne but who is actually the Countess.

The Countess, Suzanne and Figaro all comment in asides as the Count woos "Suzanne,," telling her that he still loves the Countess but that a marriage needs variety to sustain it and that women have a responsibility to find that variety. He then offers a bag of gold and a diamond to seal their relationship. Figaro has had enough and comes out of hiding. The Count runs into the trees, and the Countess runs into the pavilion. Figaro comments in an aside that he's actually not upset by what he's just heard. Suzanne comes out of hiding, pretending to be the Countess. Figaro asks where the Count and Suzanne are and then says he's going into the pavilion to find them. Caught by surprise, Suzanne speaks in her own voice, which Figaro recognizes. Not realizing that he knows who she is, Suzanne continues to pretend to be the Countess, flirting with him and saying that women only know one way of taking revenge on their men. Figaro, planning to take revenge on Suzanne, goes along with the flirtation. This after a while makes Suzanne angry enough to slap him repeatedly, shouting in her own voice how angry she is.

Figaro manages to convince her that he knew all along that she wasn't the Countess, and she explains that he's fallen into the trap she and the Countess set for the Count. The Count returns, looking for Suzanne. Figaro pretends to be the man he told the Count would be meeting the Countess in the garden. He kisses Suzanne, whom the Count thinks is the Countess. Suzanne kisses Figaro and runs into the pavilion, saying they'll meet again in a moment. The Count confronts Figaro, shouting for help. Bazile, Bartholo, Brid-Oisin and Antonio run on, and the Count orders them to surround Figaro and guard the door to the pavilion. The Count asks Figaro who he was with, and Figaro says the woman who owns his affections, adding that the Count was once interested in her but has become interested in someone else. The Count thinks he's talking about the Countess and goes into the pavilion to drag her out.

The Count brings out the first person he grabs, who happens to be Cherubin. When he sees how much the others are laughing, he sends in Antonio. Antonio also grabs the first person he finds and brings out Fanchette. Bartholo goes in and brings out Marceline, and Figaro is embarrassed to learn that his mother is in on the joke played on him by Suzanne.

Suzanne comes out, masking her face with a fan. Still thinking she's the Countess, the Count tries to decide what will be done with her. Suzanne, Figaro and all the others fall to their knees, pleading for the Count's mercy. The Count refuses, but then the Countess comes out and falls to her knees as well. The Count realizes that she was pretending to be Suzanne and also that he's been caught trying to have an affair. Still, the Countess forgives him. The Count apologizes, and the Countess turns the money and diamond he gave her over to Suzanne and Figaro. Brid-Oisin confesses that he is completely confused, and Figaro says he has all that he's ever wanted.

Act 5 Analysis

The action of this scene builds in intensity until the climactic moment when the Count discovers just how much he's been made a fool of. He's not the only one. Figaro, and to a lesser degree Suzanne, are also made to appear foolish because of their suspicions. Only the Countess emerges with her image unchanged, and this raises an interesting thematic point. She is the only character of the four principals who not only believes in the value of love in general and the power of her own love in particular, but also trusts it. The Count neither believes in it nor trusts it, while Figaro and Suzanne believe it but as this scene reveals, don't completely trust it. This situation suggests a new aspect to the play's theme. Not only should love govern desire, but also trust is a profoundly important element of love and as such should be developed and rewarded.

Comic elements common to both farce and *commedia dell'arte* are developed extremely effectively in this scene. Mistaken identities, physical comedy such as the mistaken kisses and punches, asides and eavesdropping are all techniques common to both forms of theater, and they are used to illustrate how silly and extreme people become when they're trying to avoid being honest and facing a simple truth. In this case, that

truth is the play's theme, that love and not desire, or suspicion of desire, should govern relationships between men and women.

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Characters

Count Almaviva

Almaviva The Count's main interest in the play is fulfilling his amorous desires, and intrigue surrounds his efforts to seduce Suzanne. To this end, he promises her money if she will spend her first night as a married woman with him. Although he places a monetary figure on the situation and also holds the power to prevent Suzanne and Figaro's marriage, the Count views his designs as merry and lighthearted; as Beaumarchais describes the character of the Count in the playscript, "In keeping with the morals *of those days,* the great regarded the conquest of women as a frolic." While he actively pursues women, the Count becomes extremely angry when he suspects his wife of infidelity, thus demonstrating the double standards of his day.

The Count holds the ultimate authority on his estate, even deciding the outcome of Figaro and Marceline's court case. He demands the respect of those who surround him but does not realize that his own actions, at times bordering on the ridiculous or petty, make this difficult. At the end of the play, however, he laughingly accepts that he has been outwitted.

Countess Almaviva

The Countess is the Count's wife. She is torn between two conflicting feelings for her husband: anger and love. She seeks to regain his affections and, to this end, secretly hatches a plan with Suzanne. Unlike her husband, the Countess is a very human, likable figure. She is clever enough to devise the plot that ends in success for her, Suzanne, and Figaro. She is a good friend to Suzanne, despite the vast difference in their classes, doing what she can to bring about the maid's marriage. Also, as further demonstration of her humanity, she cannot help but be drawn to Cherubino who shows her affection at the very time her husband has withdrawn his.

Antonio

Antonio is the castle's tipsy gardener. He is also Suzanne's uncle and guardian as well as Fanchette's father. Antonio is prepared to oppose Suzanne's marriage to Figaro. Antonio is the one who reports on the man who jumped into the flowerbed, causing Figaro to devise a story about what happened so the Count will not learn of Cherubino's presence.

Dr. Bartholo

Bartholo is a doctor from Seville. He helps Marceline, his former mistress, attempt to win Figaro for her husband. After they discover that Figaro is their son, he marries Marceline.

Basil

Basil is the Count's music master. He loses the Count's favor when he delivers the note from Figaro that falsely accuses the Countess of infidelity. Basil dislikes Figaro greatly. Although he wanted to marry Marceline, he loses all interest in her once he discovers she is Figaro's mother.

Don Guzman Bridlegoose

Don Guzman Bridlegoose Bridlegoose is the judge of the district. However, in this role he is generally ineffective, failing to understand the cases that are put before him as well as the events that have taken place during the day.

Cherubino

Cherubino is a page in the Count's household. A prepubescent youth, he is beginning to feel sexual stirrings, and he is infatuated with many of the females on the estate, including the Countess, Suzanne, Fanchette, and even Marceline. Dismissed from the household after the Count finds him in Fanchette's bedroom, he becomes a part of Figaro's plan; he is the one initially chosen to meet the Count, dressed as Suzanne.

Fanchette

Fanchette is the twelve-year-old daughter of Antonio. As befits her youth and inexperience, she is naíve, not understanding the Count's true desires toward her. She is also important to the plot, being the person who reveals to Figaro the rendezvous between the Count and "Suzanne."

Figaro

Figaro is the Count's faithful servant as well as his competition. The Count's pursuit of Suzanne requires that Figaro conspire against his master. He must rely upon his wits to carry out a plan for keeping Suzanne out of the Count's hands that still allows the couple to marry. Because the plot that he devises is complex and even backfires in key instances, the Count's suspicions are raised, and Figaro is unable to make it work. Figaro further jeopardizes the situation by deliberately playing with the Count. In this

respect, his belief that he is more resourceful and smarter than the Count, though borne out by the play, fails to serve him well, for he increases the Count's wrath.

Suzanne and the Countess come up with their own plan for thwarting the Count but do not inform Figaro about it. His isolation contributes to a jealous rage that overtakes him when he believes Suzanne is unfaithful. His monologue in act 5 asserts his rights, despite a lack of parentage, fortune, or social rank.

Marceline

Marceline is the housekeeper of the castle. She has strong feelings for Figaro. Not realizing that it is maternal love, she conspires to marry him, even if it means forcing him to do so against his will. Upon finding out the truth, however, she embraces her long-lost son and helps him to find happiness with Suzanne. At the end of the play, she marries Bartholo.

Rosine

See Countess Almaviva

Suzanne

Suzanne is the maid to the Countess. "In her role . . . there is not a word that is not inspired by goodness and devotion to her duty," writes Beaumarchais of her in his character descriptions. She is also intelligent, honorable, and full of wit. She has the good sense to tell the people she trusts the most—Figaro and the Countess—of the Count's intentions toward her. As the object of the Count's lust, Suzanne must be careful to protect herself without alienating the Count to such an extent that he will forbid her marriage. Suzanne and the Countess, her friend and confidante, conspire secretly against the Count. It is their plan that ends in success, bringing Suzanne her happy marriage.

Themes

Social Classes

From its earliest readings in France, *The Marriage of Figaro* raised concerns over Beaumarchais's criticism of the social class system. This system, in place since the Middle Ages, put members of the aristocracy in positions of governmental and military power even if they did not merit it. It also allowed for little upward mobility. Figaro's plotting against his master is a usurpation of aristocratic authority. His actions literally demonstrate several bold assertions: that such authority is designated merely by virtue of birth and not by worth, and that his own desire is paramount to the Count's. He and the Count then compete for Suzanne, and Figaro—the worthier man—wins. Figaro also continuously expresses his disdain for the aristocracy, letting no opportunity pass for criticizing the upper class. Among other things, he points out their lack of intelligence and their lax morality.

Figaro's monologue contains the most biting criticism of the aristocratic class. In this speech, he specifically points out the randomness that places some people in power over others. "What have you done to earn so many advantages?" he wonders. He provides the only accurate answer: "You took the trouble to be born, nothing more. Apart from that, you're a rather common type." Figaro then asserts that members of the servant class, such as himself, must use their wits, strategy, and skill merely to get by; therefore, they clearly have more natural abilities.

Fidelity and Adultery

The play's intrigue centers around the Count's adulterous desire for Suzanne. Bored with his wife, the Count has set his sights on Figaro's betrothed. That she is the fiancée of his loyal servant does not divert him in the slightest, which clearly depicts how noblemen such as himself regarded affairs with their underlings. Indeed, this experienced philanderer pursues other young, attractive women on his estate in addition to Suzanne.

Despite his own lapse of fidelity, the Count becomes furious when he believes that his wife is, or may be in the future, unfaithful. He banishes Cherubino from the estate because the page reveals his love for the Countess. He assumes that the reason his wife won't open the closet door is that a man is in the room. When he views Suzanne dressed in his wife's clothing, having apparently succumbed to Figaro's seduction, he rushes out to attack the servant. He refuses to forgive his "wife," and fails to see the hypocrisy within himself, even though his wife forgives him.

Figaro also questions his beloved's fidelity. Although he told Marceline that he would forgive Suzanne anything, even unfaithfulness, he becomes furious when he believes she is accepting the Count's favors. His jealously leads him to the elm grove so he can

see what happens. In this instance, he comes to resemble the Count in his quick acceptance of his lover's infidelity.

Women and Gender Roles

The way the men in the play treat the women demonstrates how society in Beaumarchais's time regarded gender roles. Women faced great inequality. They were often subject to the whims of their husbands or guardians. For example, Suzanne cannot marry Figaro unless her uncle Antonio allows it, and the Count threatens to banish the Countess to her room "for a long time!" as punishment.

Most significantly, although the Count happily and casually engages in extramarital affairs, his wife can "never" be forgiven for doing the same thing. The Count's attitude toward his wife—and Figaro's attitude toward Suzanne when he believes she is about to have an affair—shows that women were perceived as objects that belonged to their lovers. In this view, women lose "value" when they commit an infidelity. On the basis of circumstantial evidence, Figaro even considers "dropping one wife and wedding another." Such threats show that a woman's value—derived exclusively from her faithfulness and virtue—reflects on the man who possesses her.

The plot hatched by the Countess and Suzanne, however, show women attempting to subvert this narrow gender role, and the Countess specifically forbids Suzanne from telling Figaro about the plan. Indeed, all the key players in the plan are female. Significantly, Figaro's plan to outsmart the Count does not work, but the Countess's does; she and Suzanne alone devise and execute a plan to save the maid's virtue and return the affections of the Count to the Countess.

Style

Monologue

Figaro's lengthy monologue in act 5 breaks up the quick pace of the comedy. In the first part of the monologue, Figaro reflects upon Suzanne's faithlessness and deceit as well as the arbitrary nature of the aristocracy's power. In the second part, he recounts the numerous jobs he has held as a means of exploring his future. In the third and final part, Figaro reflects upon the course his life has taken.

While Figaro's monologue slows down the pace of the play at a crucial juncture, it serves to demonstrate that he possesses greater depth than his previous comic antics, as well as his irrational jealousy, might otherwise suggest. On a larger thematic level, the monologue challenges French society's tradition of honoring wealth and rank above merit. Some critics have interpreted Figaro's commentary on the social abuses of the aristocracy as a forecast of the impending French Revolution and the end of the class system.

Satire

A satirical play is one that uses hurnor and wit to criticize human nature, society, and institutions. Beaumarchais's play, though comic, never shies away from pressing social issues. However, he uses indirect satire, relying upon the ridiculous behavior of his characters to make his point. An example of indirect satire is when the Count is forced to hide behind the chair in Suzanne's room.

Beaumarchais's main objects of satire are the members of the aristocracy. Embodied in the person of the Count Almaviva, the aristocracy is seen as vain, foolish, self-centered, dissolute, and dishonest. The character of the judge, Bridlegoose, provides another good example of how Beaumarchais uses satire, in this case, to attack the judicial system. The stuttering Bridlegoose is completely ineffective and stupid. He has great difficulty understanding the facts of Figaro's case as put before him. The only thing that is clear to him is that Marceline, Figaro's mother, will not marry her son. Though his position as a judge—a position that he purchased—would seem to require that he render opinions, he constantly refuses to do so. In fact, his opinion is not needed at all, for the Count is the final authority in the court; he delivers its decision, thus devaluing Bridlegoose by taking away what should be his primary function.

Trilogy

Trilogy Beaumarchais's plays *The Barber of Seville, The Marriage of Figaro, and A Mother's Guilt* comprise his trilogy about Count Almaviva. *The Barber of Seville,* the first play of the trilogy, focuses on Figaro's successful plan to win Rosine (the Countess

Almaviva) for the Count. *A Mother's Guilt* finds the Count and Countess, and their loyal servants Figaro and Suzanne, living in France.

Beaumarchais makes use of the first play in his second. For instance, he neglected to write new descriptions for some characters in the playscript of *The Marriage of Figaro;* instead, he describes them as "the same as in *The Barber of Seville.*" However, Beaumarchais also breaks away from the earlier play in significant ways. Most notably, he reverses the character of the Count from a gallant romantic to a deceitful lech. The Count abolished the "rights of the nobleman"—the right dating from feudal times that allowed the lord of the manor to deflower his vassal's wife on her wedding night—upon his marriage to Rosine in the first play, but he attempts to take advantage of this outmoded right in *The Marriage of Figaro.*

Historical Context

France on the Brink of Revolution

Throughout the 1700s, France was the largest and most powerful nation in Europe. French society was divided into three estates. The First Estate consisted of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church and made up less than one percent of the population. The Second Estate, the nobility, made up less than two percent of the population. People were born into the Second Estate, but they could also purchase titles. Neither the First nor the Second Estate paid any significant taxes. The Third Estate consisted of everyone else in France, from the peasants to the bourgeoisie, and constituted about ninety-seven percent of the French population.

Around the mid-1700s, discontent in France began to grow among the members of the Third Estate. Peasants were charged higher rents, and laborers' wages did not match the rising cost of food. The bourgeoisie, the urban middle class, wanted political power equal to their economic strength, less governmental interference in business dealings, and their sons to have important positions in the church, government, and army. The Third Estate also resented being the only group to pay taxes.

France was also undergoing a serious financial crisis. Left with huge debts after fighting the Seven Years' War, Louis XV, who ruled France from 1715 to 1774, raised taxes, borrowed more money from bankers, and refused to economize. His successor, Louis XVI, saw France's debts rise as the country aided the colonists in the American Revolution. Louis's financial advisers advocated taxing the First and Second Estates. When such taxes were proposed, the nobles protested and refused to cooperate; some even took part in riots. By 1787, the country stood on the brink of financial ruin.

Having little choice, Louis called representatives of all three estates to the Estates General at the Palace of Versailles in May 1780. He hoped that the group would approve his new plan of imposing taxes upon the wealthy. However, the Third Estate refused to follow the old custom that called for each of the three representative bodies to cast one vote. When the king did not take action, the Third Estate, on July 17, 1789, declared itself the National Assembly. This action began the French Revolution, which brought an end to the French monarchy.

The American Revolution

The American Revolution started in 1776 with the American Declaration of Independence. For several years, colonists were angry over the fact that they were forced to pay increasingly higher taxes without having representation in the British Parliament. France, Britain's longtime enemy, was pleased to see the Revolution start. France formed an alliance with the patriots, signing a treaty in 1778, and French emissaries such as Beaumarchais supplied the American forces with weapons.

Individual French citizens also contributed to the patriot cause. The Marquis de Lafayette arrived in America in 1777 to fight alongside the patriots. He also gave large sums of money to aid the American forces. The fighting lasted until 1781, when the British surrendered. A new democracy was born. The success of the American Revolution was an inspiration for the leaders of the French Revolution.

The French Theatre

French drama developed greatly in the 1600s and 1700s. The seventeenth century was France's neoclassical period. Pierre Corneille wrote more than thirty plays, most of which followed Aristotle's precept of unity of time, place, and action. Jean Racine introduced a simpler style and more realistic characters and plot structures. The comic genius of Molière explored social, psychological, and metaphysical questions. The works of these playwrights remain mainstays of the French theatre. Other playwrights who contributed to the development of French drama during his period include Scarron, whose comedies were based on absurdity, and Marivaux, who focused on love instead of social realism. The 1700s witnessed fewer landmark developments in the theatre. Although French comedy reached its height in Molière's day, Beaumarchais offered many bold and exciting changes for the stage. He introduced social discourse into French comedy, along with rapid action, lively dialogue, and complex plots. His plays used comedy to highlight social abuses and subtly protest them.

Critical Overview

Beaumarchais first completed *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1780. Although the Comédie Française accepted it for production in September 1781, the play took several years to gain the approval of the official censors because of its theme of rebellion. During this period, however, it was played in salons and at court, where it brought out conflicting opinions among the audience. Madame Campan reported in her *Mémoires* that King Louis XVI denounced the play, proclaiming: "It is hateful, it will never be played . . . . That man mocks everything that is to be respected in government." After a private performance of the play was given in honor of his brother, the king relented. Beaumarchais also had made several edits to the play, including changing the location of the play from contemporary France to old Spain, which made the comedy less objectionable.

The premiere of *The Marriage of Figaro finally* took place in April 1784 at the Comédie Française, though the struggle to get the play produced was not quite over. Suard, one of the censors who refused to give his approval, continued to attack Beaumarchais. When Beaumarchais made it known that he planned to ignore Suard, having had to fight "lions and tigers" in order to win the play's approval, the king, believing that Beaumarchais included him in this characterization, sent him to prison. However, Beaumarchais was freed on the fifth day with the king's apologies.

The Marriage of Figaro was an immediate, resounding success among its aristocratic audience. In *French Comic Drama from the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century,* Geoffrey Brereton sums up the play upon its opening as having "quite enough dynamite . . . to make this appear a dangerously, or excitingly, revolutionary play." Despite its criticism of the class order, the play enjoyed a record run at the theatre. However, as Joseph Sungolowsky writes in *Beaumarchais,* "Eighteenth-century audiences did not fail to see the far-reaching social and political implications of the *Mariage* amid its joyfulness." Baronne d'Oberkirch was one aristocrat who went to see the play and was angry at herself for laughing at it. Cynthia Cox quotes the Baronne in *The Real Figaro* as writing that the "nobility showed a great want of tact in applauding it, which was nothing less than giving themselves a slap in the face. They laughed at their own expense . . . They will repent it yet . . . . "

Despite its popularity, the play and its author still drew criticism based on the astonishing themes that ran through this long play. After it had been running for a year, Beaumarchais wrote a lengthy preface to the work in which he defended its morality. Among other declarations, Beaumarchais asserted that he never intended to criticize the French aristocracy, justices, or military.

One of the most shocking ideas that the play raised was that a nobleman and a commoner could come into a conflict that was eventually won by the member of the lower class. Critics over the years have considered the play's illustration of class struggle. Annie Ubersfeld notes in her introduction to *Le Mariage de Figaro* Napoleon Bonaparte's opinion of the play: it portrayed "the Revolution in action." However,

Sungolowsky notes that while "[C]ritics have carefully weighed the theory of Beaumarchais as a revolutionary . . . most of them discard it."

While Beaumarchais has consistently enjoyed a high critical stature in France, where he is seen as instrumental in transforming the comedic play, his work is far less known in the English-speaking world. Although Thomas Holcroft first translated *Le Mariage de Figaro* into English at the time the play appeared in France, no modern English edition appeared until 1961, when Jacques Barzun published a new translation. Since then, several other editions have been published, but there is still little English criticism of Beaumarchais's work. Those critics who do exist, however, praise *The Marriage of Figaro* robustly. Sungolowsky calls it a "sublime masterpiece" whose message about the rights of the individual "remains eternally universal."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Korb Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she explores how Beaumarchais uses comedy to raise social issues.

The subtitle of *The Marriage of Figaro,* "A Single Mad Day," indicates the complexity of the intrigue that faces Figaro and the other characters on the day of his proposed marriage. What neither the title nor the subtitle indicate, however, are the more serious issues that Beaumarchais raises in his play. One of the most significant messages, and the one that led to the play's initial censorship, is that the lower classes should be given the opportunity to resist and even compete with the upper classes. Writes Joseph Sungolowsky in Beaumarchais, "Insofar as it [the play] claims the rights of the illegitimate child, of women, and of the individual to enjoy his freedom and to obtain a fair trial, it remains eternally universal."

On one level, despite the ever-changing plot machinations, the intrigue is very simple: Figaro, servant to the Count, wants to marry the woman he loves, Suzanne, who is the Countess's maid. The Count, however, is determined to seduce Suzanne. These two men come into conflict as each strives to thwart the other and achieve his desire. The Countess, upon learning of her husband's faithlessness, decides to teach him a lesson and plans with Suzanne to trap him. Meanwhile, Suzanne, who knows that Figaro is busy trying to foil the Count, does not alert him to the Countess's plans. Thus, deception is crucial to the plot. The ways the characters deceive each other, and the extents to which they go, render the play comic. Despite the frivolity, the play does not lose sight of the crucial social issues it raises. Most shocking to the eighteenth-century audience, writes Brereton in *French Comic Drama from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century, was the*

struggle between two males for a desirable woman . . . [and] however it . . . is surrounded with gaiety, spectacle and song, there is no question that it is won by the better man, who is a commoner.

The physical act of hiding is most pronounced in act 1 as Suzanne receives many unwanted male visitors in her room. Not wanting to be seen by the Count, Cherubino hides behind the armchair. When the Count fears discovery by Basil, he throws himself behind the armchair, and Cherubino throws himself atop the armchair while Suzanne hides him under a dress. This series of movements is carried out gracefully yet is still largely comic because the Count is completely unaware of the page's presence. Additionally, the Count is ridiculed as he is forced to hide, crouching, in his own domain. In a further bit of comic irony, his ignominious position comes at the heels of his using his social position as leverage to demand that Suzanne sleep with him. The comic tension in the scene is further heightened when the Count, having revealed himself, reenacts how he earlier discovered Cherubino hiding in Fanchette's room.

I grow suspicious while I talk to her and as I do so I case an eye about. Behind the door there was a curtain of sorts, a wardrobe, something for old clothes. Without seeming to I gently, slowly lift the curtain . . .

He *illustrates by lifting the dress off the armchair.*

And I see . . .

He catches sight of Cherubino

. . . . I say!

In this scene, the literal act of hiding provides comic release for the audience along with the opportunity to learn about the dynamics of the castle's inhabitants. At the same time, however, the scene alludes to the social relationship between the upper and lower classes. Suzanne, as a servant in the Count's household, is subject to his desires. The Count touches Suzanne and pressures her to meet him that evening. She also sees her wedding plans grind to a halt at the Count's whim. Thus, she, as well as Figaro, is hardly able to assert individual will. Any amount of liberty they can attain must come through trickery, even when their own behavior is deserving of such liberty.

Act 2 mixes physical deception with an idea that is key to the success of both Figaro's and the Countess's plans to unmask the Count: taking another's place. The Count surprises the Countess, who has been visited by both Suzanne and Cherubino. With nowhere to go, the page ducks into the closet, but when the Count is away from the room, Cherubino slips away and jumps out the window. Suzanne takes his place in the closet, but the Countess is unaware of the exchange. She is forced to admit that the page is hiding, however, when the Count opens the door, for the stage directions indicate that Suzanne comes out laughing. Suzanne's laughter shows that she has the upper hand in this situation, if only for a brief moment. Of the three people now in the room, she alone knew the truth about what the Count would find when he opened the closet door. Here Beaumarchais underscores the idea of rebellion against the upper classes. Suzanne, a mere maid, holds power—in the form of knowledge—over her superiors. Later in this act, the Countess and Suzanne conspire to outsmart the Count. The Countess forbids Suzanne from telling Figaro about the plan, which Suzanne believes to be "delightful," one that will ensure that her marriage will take place. This interlude upends the subjugation of women in Beaumarchais's society. It pits the women against the men, even Figaro, who is certainly sympathetic to the cause. The women have taken control of their own destinies, and as the play bears out, it is their plan that results in happiness and triumph for both of them.

Another type of deception that is used throughout the play is the tactic of speaking in asides. The characters are continuously having conversations in which they try to determine how much knowledge the other person has and what his or her intentions are. As well, they attempt to mislead the other person about their own knowledge and intentions. A prime example of this occurs in the conversation between Figaro and the Count in act 3. The Count wants to know if Suzanne has told Figaro about his designs

on her, while Figaro deliberately leads him to believe first one thing and then its exact opposite. In a series of asides, both the Count and Figaro announce their perceptions to the audience. The Count first believes that Figaro "wants to go to London; she hasn't told him." Shortly thereafter, he notes, "I can see she's told him everything; he's got to marry the duenna [Marceline]." These asides are comic because the characters remain oblivious to the irony of their words and actions, yet these scenes serve the important function of alerting the audience to plot developments. The importance of speaking secretly is emphasized at the end of this exchange. Suzanne, believing the Count has already exited, speaks aloud to Figaro: "You can go to court now, you've just won your suit," meaning that the Count will allow the marriage between Figaro and Suzanne to take place because he thinks that Suzanne will give in to his demands for sex. However, the Count overhears, which leads to the next major plot twist—the court hearing that ends in Figaro being ordered to either pay Marceline back or marry her before the day is through.

On another level, this dialogue between the two men reveals the class conflict that was an integral part of Beaumarchais's society. Figaro acts insubordinately by refusing to be honest with his master. Additionally, he deliberately tries to needle the Count. As he reveals in an aside, "Let us see his game and match him trick for trick." In truth, there is no logical reason for Figaro to let the Count know that Suzanne has revealed the seduction plan, and it is when the Count thinks thusly that he decides Figaro must marry Marceline. One plausible explanation for Figaro's actions, however, is his desire to place himself on the same level as the Count. He can tussle with the Count as the man's equal, not as a subordinate. This dialogue shows that members of the lower classes have the same abilities as members of the upper classes.

Act 5 culminates in these two types of deception—physically hiding and speaking falsely—as the Countess, dressed as Suzanne, meets the Count. This rendezvous has attracted a large audience; Marceline, Fanchette, and Cherubino all are hidden in one of the pavilions. They observe the Count's attempts to seduce "Suzanne." His efforts are comical partly because they show him to be a practiced seducer who relies on clichés, like how her "little arm [is] firm and round" and her "pretty little fingers full of grace and mischief!" The comedy also derives from his comparison of "Suzanne" to the Countess; "Your hand is more lovely than the Countess's," he avows. Figaro and Suzanne are right in laughing at the Count, for all the trouble he takes to seduce his own wife.

In Act 5, Figaro and Suzanne also act out their own drama for the Count, pretending that the "Countess," really Suzanne, is allowing Figaro to seduce her. The Count then chastises his wife, elevating the comedy to an even higher pitch. Condemning his wife as "an odious woman," the Count proclaims that he can never forgive her, even though what he castigates her for is exactly what he wanted to do with Suzanne and has suggested to Fanchette. The Countess appreciates the ridiculous position in which her husband has placed himself in front of a large audience of his underlings—which now includes Basil, Antonio, Bartholo, and Bridlegoose—as she grants him forgiveness, she is laughing.

As with the rest of the play, however, the comedy masks serious issues. The Count's behavior demonstrates that women are merely the chattel of their husbands or the men who hold power over them. The Countess's words make this clear: "In my place, you would say 'Never, never!' whereas I, for the third time today, forgive you unconditionally." This idea that women may be regarded as nothing more than property is further supported by Figaro's rampant jealousy when he believes that Suzanne will actually have an affair with the Count. It is only after heeding Marceline's advice that they go witness the rendezvous that reins in his emotions and anger.

The play closes with a series of ten short verses. Though this segment is dubbed as "entertainment," thus implying that its purpose is merely to amuse the audience, Beaumarchais has imbued the short songs with important messages. Suzanne sings the second verse, decrying the society that allows a husband to betray his wife but mandates that, if she similarly "indulge her whim," she will be punished. Suzanne concludes that this double standard exists only because men, who are the dominant sex, have brought it about. The Countess's verse puts down false virtue and recommends that women should be judged by their honesty. The two final verses remind the audience to pay attention to the moral issues raised in the play. Suzanne acknowledges that, though this play is "mad yet cheerful," the audience should "accept it as a whole"; that is, enjoy the "gaiety" of the play, yet recognize the truths it speaks. Bridlegoose, upon whom the play closes, reminds the audience that the "c-comic art / . . . Apes the life of all of you." Thus does Beaumarchais beseech the audience to pay attention to their own moral behavior.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on *The Marriage of Figaro,* in Drama for Students, The Gale Group, 2002.

Elizabeth J. MacArthur In the following essay, MacArthur discusses how the body and its desires contribute to the public sphere in the Marriage of Figaro.

On 27 April 1784, the most successful play of eighteenth-century France opened at the Comédie-Française: Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro.* Although the play had been accepted for performance by the theater's actors nearly three years earlier (September 1781), only after reports by six official censors, interdiction, a vigorous campaign of letters and readings by Beaumarchais, and finally approval by Louis XVI, could it at last be staged publicly. Friedrich Melchior Grimm's celebrated description of opening night, in the *Correspondance littéraire,* captures the public's enthusiasm for this controversial play:

Never has a play attracted such crowds to the Théâtre-Français; all Paris wanted to see this famous *Wedding,* and the theater was filled almost at the moment when the doors were opened to the public; barely half of those who had been waiting since eight in the morning were able to find seats; most entered by force, throwing their money to the porters . . . more than one duchess considered herself too lucky, on that day, to find in the balconies, where proper women rarely sit, a wretched little stool.

Finally the public itself was allowed to judge Beaumarchais's play for themselves rather than accept the king's judgment that it must be suppressed. Finally their desire to watch this infamous entertainment could be satisfied.

Of course all playwrights want their works to be staged successfully. But for Beaumarchais, this opening night was the culmination of a campaign to have his play performed during which he appealed to the public, and to the abstract notion of a public, in a struggle to overturn the king's prohibition. What makes this appeal to the public in a struggle against the king particularly fascinating is that it is also the subject of the *Mariage de Figaro* itself. Within the play, too, characters appeal to public opinion and public pressure to force an authority figure to modify his behavior. Thus both as a text and as an event, the *Mariage de Figaro* is about the relationships between the individual, the State, and a new kind of public that is invoked to challenge the authority of the State.

Le mariage de Figaro is the second play in a trilogy, preceded by *Le barbier de Séville* (1775) and followed by *La mère coupable* (1792). In the *Barbier de Séville* Beaumarchais shows how his heroine, Rosine, becomes a self-determining subject by "freely" choosing a husband, the Count Almaviva, thereby subverting the commands of a despotic parental figure, Bartholo. Rosine's preference for Almaviva takes her outside the bounds of Bartholo's authority, which he has abused by trying to force her to marry him. Rosine repeatedly makes it clear that she loves the Count simply because he will liberate her from her prison in Bartholo's house ("I will give my heart and my hand to whoever can rescue me from this horrible prison"); the very act of choosing her own marriage partner symbolizes her accession to the status of self-willed individual.

In the second play of the trilogy, *Le mariage de Figaro,* Beaumarchais situates several desiring subjects within a larger social context and shows how they create what Jürgen Habermas might term an authentic public sphere in order to critique and control an abusive state authority. Rosine and the Count are now three years into their marriage, but the Count has become promiscuous and neglects his wife. Most seriously, he hopes to obtain sexual favors from Suzanne, the fiancée of Figaro, who had been the Barber of Seville and is now the Count's concierge. In his official capacity as corregidor, or first magistrate, of Andalusia, the Count wants to reinstate a former seigneurial right, the *droit de cuissage* or the right to sleep with any woman in his domain on her wedding night. The Count's status as state authority and representative of the king is most apparent in act 3, when he serves as judge for his domain in a "throne room" with a portrait of the king above the judge's seat. Although the Count had renounced the *droit de cuissage* on marrying Rosine, he now hopes to buy it back secretly through a generous wedding gift to Suzanne (note the transition from a system based on noble privilege toward a monetary economy). Figaro and Suzanne are acutely sensitive to the injustice of this intrusion of the Count's authority into their private lives, so during the course of the play they mobilize what could be called public opinion. By the play's final scene, the Count has been humiliated and forced to renounce publicly and officially both his seigneurial rights and his attempt to buy Suzanne (though Figaro and Suzanne still pocket the money). As Jean Goldzink writes, "The central conflict of the *Mariage* concerns the status of private space under a seigneurial regime . . . . In order to defend

this private space, that is, his right . . . Figaro has double recourse to the public order . . . . Thu s the play mobilizes two authoritative bodies for appeals against the abuses of power: the law . . . [and] opinion." Or, to use Habermas's terminology, Figaro appeals to the law and to the public sphere to attack and modify the will-based state authority of the Count. (It is worth noting, however, that Almaviva remains in power; there is no Revolution.)

The play opens with a spatial emblem of the intimate sphere: the room in the château that is to be Suzanne and Figaro's bedroom following their marriage. Figaro is happily measuring the dimensions of his property, his private sphere, until Suzanne warns him that the Count intends to penetrate regularly into that private domain and into the body of Suzanne. Part of what Figaro and Suzanne are seeking, then, is what we now call the right to privacy: their sexuality should be their own affair and not the province of state authority and intrusion. But Figaro and Suzanne have larger aims too, for they also want to force the Count to rein in his own wayward desires and return to his devoted wife (whose bedroom is the setting for act 2). The Count learns that he must exercise his mastery not over his subjects' sexuality, but over his own. As Figaro comments to the enraged Count in act 5, "You are in command of everything here, except yourself" Le *mariage de Figaro* suggests that society functions best when individuals not only have the right to use their own reason and desire to make sexual choices but also assume the responsibility for doing so. In addition, the play suggests that the rights and *responsibilities* of sexuality are best negotiated through ongoing public exchange, involving both sexes and all classes, from the noble Countess, through bourgeois Figaro, to the gardener Antonio and his daughter Fanchette. After the bedrooms of acts 1 and 2 and the public spaces of judgment and ceremony of acts 3 and 4, the final scenes of the play take place in a third kind of spatial setting: in act 5, the characters circulate in the darkened garden of the château, from a "room of chestnut trees" to two bedroom-like pavilions to a wood in the back. Since we never see the interior of the pavilions, it is as if the characters have succeeded in creating a private space protected from public view, whether that of the State or that of the theater audience. By contrast, the Count's attempted rendezvous with Suzanne takes place center stage, where it is submitted to the scrutiny and judgment of all the other characters.

Because one of the central problems of the play is the Count's uncontrolled desire, critics have often read *Le mariage de Figaro* as a parable about the need to regulate sexuality with laws; as Jean-Pierre de Beaumarchais—not to be confused with Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais!—writes, "But this freedom, the freedom to take pleasure undisturbed both from and in one's own domain, presupposes that everyone recognize henceforth the power of the law as regulating principle of individual appetites." This interpretation seems to me to miss one of the play's most important and original insights, that individual appetite should not be regulated only by law, but by the individual him-or herself, who must learn to recognize and shape his or her own desires. In fact, the one point in the play where the State tries to legislate desire skirts disaster, for the trial on Figaro's contractual agreement to marry Marceline if he can't reimburse the money she has lent him ends in the Count's decision that they should indeed marry; yet the characters then discover that Marceline is Figaro's mother, so that the law's intervention would have resulted, inadvertently of course, in incest; as Figaro exclaims,

"It was going to make me do a splendid stupidity, justice was!". Just as in *Le barbier de Séville* Rosine becomes a public-sphere-ready individual by choosing her own love object, so in *Le mariage de Figaro* all of the characters' identities depend on their recognizing their own desires and regulating those desires themselves.

This link between desire and identity becomes most apparent in Figaro's famous monologue of act 5, when he reflects on his whole past in an effort to understand who he is. Figaro's fear of Suzanne's infidelity, his failure to control events as he had in the previous play, and his newly discovered parentage have destabilized his sense of who he is. His confusion reaches a kind of paroxysm at the end of the speech, when he exclaims,

One struggles, it's you, it's him, it's me, it's you, no, it's not us; ah! but who then? . . . . Oh bizarre series of events! How did this happen to me? . . . and still I say my gaiety without knowing if it is mine more than the rest, nor even what is this "me" with which I'm concerned: an unformed assemblage of unknown parts . . . a young man ardent in pursuit of pleasure . . . master here, valet there . . . I have seen everything, done everything, used up everything . . . . This is the moment of crisis.

Uncertain of Suzanne's love, Figaro cannot make his beliefs and experiences add up to a coherent identity, a "me." It is of course not an accident that this speech is followed by a series of scenes of confused identity: Suzanne and the Countess disguised as one another, Figaro receiving a blow meant for Chérubin, the Count receiving a kiss meant for the Countess, who is dressed as Suzanne, and several moments when the characters' feelings overlap to such an extent that they repeat each other's words (as the Count observes, "There is an echo here, let's speak more quietly". Only when all the characters' desires have been sorted out can they also recognize their own identities and the identities of the others.

If the play as a whole stages a crisis in identity linked to a crisis of desire, Chérubin, the Count's page, is the very emblem of these interrelated crises. For Chérubin, aged thirteen, is poised between childhood and adulthood and just learning to recognize both his desires and his identity. As he explains to Suzanne:

I no longer know what I am; but for some time my chest has been agitated; my heart palpitates at the very appearance of a woman . . . . Finally the need to say to someone "I love you," has become so pressing to me, that I say it all alone, as I run in the park, to your mistress, to you, to the trees, to the clouds, to the wind that blows them away with my lost words.

He is not sure *who he is* because he is not sure who he desires, but expressing his desire in language, saying "I love you," is crucial to the process of self-discovery. At this stage in the construction of his identity, Chérubin is both female and male, or perhaps more accurately, he is not fully either, since he is an adolescent: he desires the female characters (or nature!) rather than the males; he is ostensibly of the male sex, but Beaumarchais insisted that the part be played by a woman; twice during the play Chérubin dresses in women's clothes, once even passing himself off as a peasant girl;

and the women make much of his beauty (soft white skin, long eyelashes, and so forth). This transitional identity is expressed spatially by Chérubin's suspension between two places, the château and the army; in the first act the Count sends him away, but although throughout the remainder of the play he is always supposed to have left, he never has. In a sense he is nowhere, or in a space between spaces. His status in the social hierarchy is equally suspended, since he is young enough to be called "tu" by Figaro, but of a rank to merit "vous" when he grows up. One can explain the ambiguity of his character by asserting that he represents adolescence, the age when a person creates or recognizes his or her identity, notably in the process of orienting (or recognizing the orientation of) his or her sexual desires. As Beaumarchais writes in his description of the character, "He is rushing into puberty". Chérubin's combination of masculine and feminine traits and his spatial suspension between château and army can thus be explained as a phase, part of the passage from childhood to adulthood that enables people to become individual subjects and enter into the public sphere. At the end of the play he will leave for the army and become an adult, and central to becoming adult will be becoming definitively male.

However, the Chérubin of the *Mariage* never completes this transition to adulthood; the play shows him in perpetual transition. Thus Beaumarchais stages a subject in the process of becoming a subject. And Chérubin bears out Judith Butler's argument, in *Bodies That Matter,* that subjects become subjects by assuming a sex; as she explains, "'Sex' is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility." According to Butler, then, "The subject, the speaking 'I,' is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex" ("the process by which a bodily norm is assumed, appropriated, taken on,"). Chérubin, in the *Mariage de Figaro,* is in the process of assuming the bodily norm of (male) heterosexuality and becoming a subject. But because Beaumarchais focuses his gaze, and ours, on the process rather than its presumed outcome, on the phase when Chérubin is "appropriating" and identifying with both female and male norms, rather than the time when he has fully assumed his male sex, he draws our attention to what is destabilizing about the construction of identity. Chérubin fascinates and repels the characters within the play as well as the audience outside it because he reveals the threat to heterosexual norms, and more broadly to the social order, in the very process by which subjects are constituted. The male characters in the play, especially the Count, want nothing better than to eliminate the danger Chérubin represents to their social world by inserting him securely into a masculine role as soldier; the female characters, conversely, find his freely circulating, cross-dressing desire fascinating. Apparently the audience repeated this differential reaction, men objecting to Chérubin as immoral, and women falling in love with him (even though the part was played by a woman). Beaumarchais captures the ambiguous erotics of the audience's reaction to Chérubin when he writes in his preface, which was published with the first edition (1785): "He's a child, nothing more. Didn't I see our ladies, in the boxes, love my page madly? What did they want with him? Alas! nothing: it was interest, too; but, like that of the Countess, a pure, naive interest . . . an interest . . . without interest." Conversely, Chérubin may fascinate and repel some of us in the 1990s because he (she?) also exposes the power of the "regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality" working to suppress the threat he

represents. Those who know the third play in Beaumarchais's trilogy, *La mère coupable*, know that this liberty cannot last, that Chérubin will get a name, a baby by the Countess, and death in battle, thus acceding to a norm of masculinity.

In both *Le barbier de Séville and Le mariage de Figaro,* the characters' explorations of the connections between desire and identity are conjoined by explicit discussion of the value of freedom of expression. In each case the protagonists struggle for the right not only to regulate their own desire but also to choose their own readings; they are as against the intrusion of state authority into what they can write and read as into whom they can love and marry. Beaumarchais suggests that the fight against censorship and the fight against Bartholo's despotic control over Rosine's sexuality, or against the Count's despotic intervention into Figaro and Suzanne's sexuality, are the same, a fight for freedom of expression in the broadest sense. For in *Le barbier de Séville*, it is the same character, Bartholo, who both attempts to control Rosine's desire and speaks out against freedom of the press; his efforts to block Rosine's love for the Count are predominantly efforts to block the circulation of letters between them. And in *Le mariage de Figaro,* Figaro's monologue about his desire and identity also becomes the occasion for overt attacks on abusive acts of state authority, especially censorship. "How I would like to get hold of one of these men who are powerful for four days," exclaims Figaro, "I would tell him . . . that printed stupidities are only important in places where their circulation is blocked; that, without the freedom to blame, there can be no flattering praise; and that only small men are afraid of small writings." These attacks were supposedly what most aroused the king's wrath and led him to ban the play. According to Mme Campan's (probably apocryphal) account in her 1822 *Mémoires*, Louis XVI leapt up during the reading of this scene and exclaimed, "It would be necessary to destroy the Bastille for the performance of this play not to be a dangerous contradiction."

Beaumarchais communicated this conception of individual freedom of expression as much through the relationship he created between the play and its readers or viewers as through the play's plot and themes. For Beaumarchais wanted to incite in his audience both a desire to see his play and a sense that they had a right to judge it for themselves. This dual purpose shaped his campaign to get the play performed. He had to struggle for three years for the king's permission to have the play staged publicly; one of his principal claims to all the court and government officials to whom he pleaded his case is that the public should be allowed to judge the play for themselves, rather than submit to the authority of the king's or the censor's interpretation. As Beaumarchais explains to the Lieutenant de Police, "This trifle only became important to me because of the tenacity with which it was treated as a public wrong of mine, without the public being allowed to judge it for themselves". Similarly, to the Baron de Breteuil (minister of the Maison du roi) he writes, "I persisted in asking that the public be judge of that which I had destined for the public's entertainment." Beaumarchais even urges the king to judge for himself rather than be swayed by others' opinions. In the prefatory material accompanying the publication of both the *Barbier* and the *Mariage,* Beaumarchais stresses the public's role of judging his work. "You must be my judge absolutely, whether you want to or not, for you are my reader" he warns in the *Lettre modérée;* "You cannot avoid judging me except by becoming null, negative, annihilated, by ceasing to

exist in your capacity as my reader". And in the epistle dedicated "to the people mistaken about my play [*Mariage de Figaro*] and who have refused to see it", he reminds readers "that one knows men and works poorly when one has faith in other people's judgments", and that the only pure basis for judgments is "the advice . . . of their own enlightenment".

In order to counteract the king's state authority and give people the right to judge his play for themselves, Beaumarchais mobilized public opinion by giving many private readings of the play in salon and court circles. Beaumarchais tried to use even the royal censors to help garner support for his play. Before he would allow a private, court performance at Gennevilliers, for example, he writes that first he "wished absolutely to fix public opinion with this new examination [by another censor]", and later he explains to the king that he had hoped to justify his play by forming a kind of public tribunal that would include the royal censors but also people of letters, men of the world, and court personages:

Wishing more and more to justify a work so unjustly attacked, the author begged M. the Baron of Breteuil to agree to form a kind of tribunal composed of members of the French Academy, censors, people of letters, men of the world, and persons of the Court, both just and enlightened, who would discuss in the presence of this minister the basis, the content, the form and the diction of this play.

Apparently such a meeting did take place, following the favorable report of the sixth censor, but this passage could also be taken as a broader characterization of Beaumarchais's way of manipulating court and salon social circles as well as various administrative authorities. And challenged by this "public sphere," Louis XVI's prerogative authority succumbed.

In order to mobilize the public in favor of his play, Beaumarchais needed to arouse their desire to see the play performed. Gifted publicist that he was, Beaumarchais succeeded in seducing large sectors of the court and salon public, and evidently, given the ultimate success of the play, the lower sectors of society as well. He gave many private readings, but never so many as to satiate his audience; as Félix Gaiffe remarks, "He wasn't slow to give in, though with some coquetry, to the numerous demands for private readings which came to him from all sides; there was general curiosity about this work that had had the gift of exciting the actors and scandalizing the king." The sexual component in this coquettish seduction of the public is blatant in the statement with which Beaumarchais prefaced his salon readings of the play:

A young author supping in a house was asked to read one of his works . . . he resisted. Someone became angry and said to him: You resemble, Monsieur, the clever coquette, refusing to each that which underneath you are burning to grant to all.

—Coquette aside, replied the author, your comparison is apter than you think, beauties and authors often having the same fate of being forgotten after sacrificing ourselves. The lively and pressing curiosity a heralded work inspires resembles in a way the ardent

desires of love. Once you have obtained the desired object, you force us to blush for having had too few charms to make you settle down.

. . . but (added the young author), in order that nothing be lacking in the parallelism, having foreseen the result of my action, inconsistent and weak as beauties are, I give in to your entreaties and will read you my work.

He read it, people criticized it; I am going to do the same, and so are you.

In this prefatory image, Beaumarchais and his text become a blushing young woman, wildly desired by the public but perhaps insufficiently attractive to hold their interest once sexual favors have been granted. Thus Beaumarchais had to manage his public, to awaken and sustain their lust. He was so successful that when the first scheduled private performance, at the *Salle des menus plaisirs* at court, was canceled by the king literally at the last minute, the desiring spectators were outraged; as Mme Campan describes it in her *Mémoires,* "The King's interdiction seemed an attack on public liberty. All the disappointed hopes excited so much discontent that the words oppression and tyranny were never spoken, in the days preceding the fall of the throne, with more passion and vehemence." Surely Campan, writing after the Revolution, exaggerates, but her description shows how powerfully Beaumarchais had inflamed his public. Finally the king gave in to the desires of court and city, and on the night of the premiere, as I have already described, the play's success was spectacular.

But Beaumarchais's publicity campaign continued even after his play had reached the stage. On the night of the fifth performance, printed epigrams were thrown from the fourth loges; the verses criticized the immorality of the characters and attributed all of their vices to the author. From the start, it was suspected that Beaumarchais himself had written the verses to attract further publicity for his play. In celebration of the play's success, and to bolster lagging attendance, Beaumarchais also arranged that the proceeds of the fiftieth performance would be donated to nursing mothers. As the playwright explained to the actors of the Comédie-Française, "If no advantageous marriage is made without opposition, so too none lasts happily without a celebration of its fiftieth: this is what I am proposing today." This charitable scheme was announced in the Journal de Paris and on the night of the performance several couplets alluding to it were added to the play's final vaudeville. By the following day more epigrams were circulating, of which the following is a malicious example: "Nothing good comes from the evil, / Their good deeds are imaginary; / Thus Beaumarchais at our expense / Performs murderous charity: / He buys milk for babies / And gives poison to the mothers." The play might help feed babies, but their mothers, in the audience, are being corrupted by it. All of Beaumarchais's advertising paid off; in the year following the opening, the play was performed an unprecedented sixty-seven times.

Beaumarchais never forgets the role of desire in the relationship of reader to text or performance. Readers and viewers must feel an almost sexual lust for his work if they are to be willing and able to judge it for themselves. Two of the most fascinating images Beaumarchais uses to characterize the performance of his play reveal his awareness of the centrality of the body in literary reception. In a letter to M. de La Porte,

Beaumarchais characterizes the process of producing the play as childbirth, with the actors as midwives and the public as onlookers:

When the time has come to give birth to a play before the public, one must, in faith, classify this operation as a serious matter . . . . So are the actors, my midwives, all ready? A censor who felt my stomach in Paris said that my pregnancy was going well. Several practitioners from Versailles have since claimed that the baby was coming out wrong: it has been turned around.

The play, like a baby, is conceived in physical desire: "It's a matter of life and death for the child conceived in pleasure." And several times in his correspondence and in the preface to the play Beaumarchais refers to the process of getting the play performed as a marriage; as he writes to Breteuil early in 1784, "And if it is true that no *marriage* takes place in this country without great opposition, in reading this description you will admit that if one judges the quality of a *marriage* by its obstacles, none has experienced so many of them as *the Marriage of Figaro.*" In a letter inviting the abbé de Calonne (brother of the minister) to dinner on opening night, Beaumarchais combines the images of marriage and childbirth into one:

attend, attend, my andalusian barber does not want to celebrate his marriage without your official support. Like a sovereign, he will use placards to invite one hundred and twenty thousand people to his wedding. Will it be gay? That I don't know, I conceived this child in joy, may it please the gods that I give birth to it without suffering; I already feel some pains, and my pregnancy has not been happy.

If a play is a marriage between audience and actors or actors and text, as well as a child conceived in pleasure, it would be wrong to describe the audience's role as one of abstract, purely rational judgment. The public is expected to judge, but that judgment is inextricably intertwined with pleasure and desire. Beaumarchais's theatrical exploration of individual desire in its relation to the public sphere and the State, and his three-year struggle to ensure the performance and success of his work, reveal his recognition that the individual reader or spectator is constituted precisely by the interdependent abilities to *judge* and to *desire* for him-or herself.

In Beaumarchais's play the construction of the public sphere depends on the bodies as well as the minds of its participants (if any such rigorous distinction were even possible). Yet the notion of the public sphere has come under considerable attack recently, and the attacks tend to share the assumption that the public sphere requires subjects to become abstracted or disembodied. Because the public sphere does not grant a place to the body, it favors one particular social group: white males. This radical perspective is perhaps most intelligently argued by Michael Warner in his brilliant book on the public sphere in eighteenth-century America, *The Letters of the Republic.* Warner sees the public sphere as an outgrowth of "print capitalism," in which public discourse and the market are mutually articulated. For Warner, the private subject "finds his relation to both the public and the market only by negating the given reality of himself, thereby considering himself the abstract subject of the universal (political or economic) discourse". And not only must the subject negate his particularity, especially his body, in

order to participate in this abstract, universal discourse but also some subjects have a privileged relation to what is supposedly universal. Educated white males may experience print culture as universal, but women, blacks, or illiterate men do not, and even those elite white males experience print differently if they are communicating with someone more powerful than themselves. As Warner explains, "No one had a relation to linguistic technologies—speaking, reading, writing, and printing—unmediated by such forms of domination as race, gender, and status." To reduce Warner's subtle and elegant argument to its bare outlines, then, one could say that he attacks the public sphere because, in his view, it requires people to become disembodied minds, and some people are in a better position than others to carry out this self-disembodiment.

It is indisputable that originally the public sphere did privilege educated white males, and that there will always be individuals with more cultural capital to facilitate their own participation. But even some of Warner's own examples belie his claim that people had to negate their bodies in order to communicate publicly about public issues. This claim rests on a belief that all language is alien to the body, that written language is further from the body than spoken language, and that printed language is further still than written. It is as if Warner were yearning for a time before we became alienated from ourselves through technologies of language—a yearning that in light of recent scholarship seems a nostalgic attempt to separate language from the body and get back to the "given reality" of ourselves. Our bodily experiences cannot be disentangled from the language through which we have access to them and which helps make us sexed and raced human beings; language can never be purged of the body and transformed into an abstract, rational instrument. Warner also risks essentialism by suggesting that women and blacks are closer to their bodies and more alienated from language than men. Education, family background, and societal pressures certainly made and continue to make it more difficult for some social groups to have their writings published, or even master standard grammar, and thus to gain access to the public sphere, but these problems of access are contingent rather than constitutive.

It is not only critics of liberalism, however, who associate the public sphere with disembodiment; most twentieth-century liberals make the same association. The liberal position might be epitomized by Ronald Dworkin in his review of Catharine MacKinnon's 1993 book on pornography, *Only Words.* Although Dworkin argues that pornographic expression should be protected by the First Amendment, he wants to make his own abhorrence of pornography absolutely indubitable. In his critique of MacKinnon's antipornography position, he explains that we must grant everyone, even Nazis and pornographers, an equal right to attempt to influence the nation's policies and "moral environment." But Dworkin takes pains to distance himself from pornography ("almost all men, I think, are as disgusted by it as almost all women", and above all he asserts that pornography can never actually contribute to public debate:

The conventional explanation of why freedom of speech is important is Mill's theory that truth is most likely to emerge from a "marketplace" of ideas freely exchanged and debated. But most pornography makes no contribution at all to political or intellectual debate: it is preposterous to think that we are more likely to reach truth about anything at all because pornographic videos are available.

Thus Dworkin implies that the body and its desires cannot possibly have a role in the public sphere.

My analysis of Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro* suggests that, contrary to the claims of both today's liberals and their critics, people become public-sphere subjects through a process of assuming their corporality, especially their sexuality. Habermas's theory in fact implies a crucial role for the body because of the importance it grants to the conjugal family as site for the formation of individuals ready to enter into public sphere discussion. For, as the example of Beaumarchais suggests, the public sphere can only come into being at times and places when people believe they are individuals, and the construction of individual subjects is inextricably bound up with sexuality. Free speech and liberalism were made possible in part, then, by the changes in marriage practices during the eighteenth century, whereby people increasingly chose their own love objects rather than obey parental authority. Choosing a marriage partner symbolizes the larger process of becoming aware of one's position in various networks of heterosexual and homosexual interaction and ultimately in the social order as a whole. Paradoxically, this apparent freedom to choose one's identity is also linked to an emptying out of identity. As J. G. A. Pocock has noted, "The citizen of the modern commercial republic enjoys unrivalled opportunities to diversify, to emancipate, to criticize, to transform his-and-her-self, but pays the price of not knowing what that self is or whether one has a self at all."

At the same time that sexuality began to be a domain of individualizing choices, analogous changes occurred in reading practices: increasingly, people decided for themselves what and how to read and questioned the authority of books. Roger Chartier, Rolf Engelsing, and others have argued that in Europe during the eighteenth century reading became more mobile and individualistic, less communal and obedient, as increasing numbers of less durable texts were produced. According to Roger Chartier, "A communitarian and respectful relation to the book, made up of reverence and obedience, gave way to a freer, more casual, and more critical way of reading . . . a new relationship between reader and text was forged; it was disrespectful of authorities, in turn seduced and disillusioned by novelty, and, above all, little inclined to belief and adherence." Once readers had many books to choose from, books, like lovers, needed to seduce readers, to arouse their readerly desire. Thus reading (or watching a play) contributed to the formation of individual subjects in several ways, as people chose what to read, made reading a pleasurable and solitary activity, fell in love with fictional characters, or identified with fictional feelings and situations. Although Chartier does not mention Beaumarchais, the relationship Beaumarchais encourages with readers and viewers, as I have described it above, exemplifies the new position of books and plays in late-eighteenth-century culture.

Beaumarchais's mobilization of public opinion reveals not only the resemblance between literary and sexual desire but also a disturbing connection between the public sphere and publicity or advertising. Readers and viewers desired Beaumarchais's play and demanded that it be performed partly because Beaumarchais had seduced and manipulated them into desiring it. One of the inevitable consequences of the new relationship in the eighteenth century between books and readers—as well as between lovers—was this need to mobilize desire: in short, to advertise. Nevertheless, although

this hint of a similarity between Beaumarchais's publicity campaign and twentieth-century advertising may threaten any attempt to idealize the Enlightenment, it need not invalidate Beaumarchais's contribution to the public sphere. Whatever Beaumarchais's ideological or financial motives, his play still incited the desires and judgments of viewers and thereby helped engender public sphere subjects.

Paradoxically, while radical critics of today such as Michael Warner attack the public sphere for its alleged disembodiment, some eighteenth-century radical critics of Beaumarchais accused him of granting too large a role to the body. From what might be termed a republican perspective, the linguistic playfulness and eroticism in Beaumarchais's plays and other writings rendered him politically suspect. Such criticism might be seen to confirm the connection between liberalism and the body even while it complicates our understanding of Beaumarchais's political position. In his wonderful book *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris,* Thomas Crow accepts the judgment of the eighteenth-century critics whom he studies, when he characterizes Beaumarchais as hopelessly mired in obsolete aristocratic values, such as sensuality, ambiguity, and stylishness. Again like the critics he cites, Crow admires the painter Jacques-Louis David, who becomes the book's hero and telos, for expressing the new values that were to produce the Revolution, such as virtue, truth, and severe rejection of the erotic. Crow criticizes Beaumarchais for favoring Mme Kornmann's liaison with an aristocrat rather than supporting the claims of her bourgeois husband and for writing a play that celebrated sexual immorality and linguistic playfulness, thereby losing touch with what the public wanted. As Crow explains,

Play with meaning, the nuanced terrain of humor and sexuality, "les tons variés," no longer appealed to a public which had arrived at a precarious political consciousness attending to the dour single note sounded by Kornmann's defenders. The politically-aware element of the Parisian populace now indeed believed that [to cite Jean-Louis Carra] "the language of virtue cannot allow, in the direct construction of its sentences, any vague and uncertain nuance."

David's paintings, exemplified by the *Oath of the Horatii,* appeal to that "largely bourgeois" public by rejecting "sensual appeal and emotional nuance", so that "everything is abstracted; no form calls on the complex, learned routines stored in our bodily memories", and "the effect of the [*Oath of the*] Horatii is to deny freedom to the play of the imagination, a play which . . . always has an erotic component." During the Revolution David's paintings become even more explicitly representative of the will of his audience, now the nation as a whole; he is commissioned to paint the *Oath of the Tennis Court,* and later his *Death of Marat* becomes a cult object. For Crow, then, Beaumarchais represents the corrupt aristocrat unable to bring about any political change, the villain playing opposite the heroic and revolutionary David.

But surely the playwright of the *Mariage de Figaro,* who pleaded for the rights of authors, provided arms to the American revolutionaries, and schemed to make money from every situation, is not best understood as an aristocrat. The values expressed in both his life and his most celebrated play are surely those of the exchange economy that was becoming increasingly pervasive in Europe by the 1780s. As Suzanne Pucci

argues in a fascinating recent article, "The Currency of Exchange in Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro,*" the play portrays a monetary, exchange economy in which values are arbitrary and fluctuating. This fluctuation disrupts "the symbolic and representational system coextensive with the ancien regime." For Pucci, Beaumarchais's play is "innovative and subversive" precisely to the extent that it shows how individual identity is emptied out and rendered unstable by this exchange economy. As she concludes, "To signify promiscuously is not solely a trait of a decadent aristocratic culture but can be, as I believe it is in this case, a function of a different system at work that empties older structures of their value in favor of a new economy of signification."

If Beaumarchais's values were subversive of aristocratic culture, why then were Antoine-Joseph Gorsas, Jean-Louis Carra, and Jacques-Pierre Brissot so eager to label him as tainted by the aristocracy? In order to grasp Beaumarchais's position, both subversive of the Old Regime and threatening to radicals, it is useful to bracket the labels "bourgeois" and "aristocrat." The two sets of values represented by David and Beaumarchais might better be termed classical republican and liberal. Neither of these categories aligns simply with the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy. In *Virtue, Commerce, and History,* J. G. A. Pocock argues that classical republicans, or civic humanists, privilege virtue, land as guarantor of personal liberty, and each citizen's participation in government (think of Jean-Jacques Rousseau as well as David); liberals, on the other hand, privilege exchange, property that is mobile or even purely speculative, people's rights, and manners. While Beaumarchais eludes the distinction between bourgeois and aristocratic, he can be quite fairly described by the term liberal. Pocock's terms in fact help explain what is otherwise obscure in Beaumarchais: the combination of claims to political rights with linguistic ambiguity and erotic sensuality. As Pocock writes,

Economic man as masculine conquering hero is a fantasy of nineteenth-century industrialisation . . . . His eighteenth-century predecessor was seen as on the whole a feminised, even an effeminate being, still wrestling with his own passions and hysterias and with interior and exterior forces let loose by his fantasies and appetites, and symbolised by such archetypically female goddesses of disorder as Fortune, Luxury, and most recently Credit herself. Pandora came before Prometheus: first, because to pursue passions and be victimised by them was traditionally seen as a female role, or as one which subjected masculine virtù to feminine *fortuna;* and second, because the new speculative image of economic man was opposed to the essentially paternal and Roman figure of the citizen patriot. Therefore, in the eighteenth-century debate over the new relations of polity to economy, production and exchange are regularly equated with the ascendancy of the passions and the female principle. They are given a new role in history, which is to refine the passions; but there is a danger that they may render societies effeminate.

Republican values are seen as male and ascetic: masculine *virtù,* the paternal citizen patriot; the new liberal values, in contrast, are seen as female and sexualized: passion, luck, imagination. Although David's revolutionary republic requires disembodiment, liberal democracy was from its beginnings associated with sexuality and the body. Yet, as becomes clear during the French Revolution, both liberalism and republicanism were to have their part in challenging the Old Regime. Perhaps one could say that while

David comes closer than Beaumarchais to expressing the national will in its most revolutionary phase, between 1792 and 1794, Beaumarchais may be closer to expressing the sexualized, pluralistic liberal ideology that came to dominate in France once the revolutions were over. Beaumarchais's appeal to individual rights, which disturbed the king, and his staging of sexuality, which disturbed the Left, should not be detached from each other. It is their perhaps surprising conjunction that enables us to see the centrality of embodiment to the liberal public sphere. If the *Marriage of Figaro* was censored by the king, considered revolutionary by its author and by Napoleon, and disdained by radicals, it was as much because of the relationship Beaumarchais developed with his audience as because of the content of the play; and within the play, as much because of the valorization of individual desire as because of the critiques of political authority.

It is my contention, then, not just that the body and its desires should contribute to the public sphere, but that in fact they always have. To return to my quotation from Ronald Dworkin, it may very well be the case that individuals in the twentieth-century United States are better able to constitute themselves as individuals and thus participate in public sphere debate because pornographic videos are available. Think, notably, of how gay and lesbian pornography might help individuals recognize and validate their own desires and thus take new political positions in the public sphere. In response to radical-left critiques of the public sphere, I have argued that the public sphere subject was never disembodied, and that it is precisely the presence of the body that made almost inevitable the historical changes we have been witnessing, whereby people of color, women, and now gays and lesbians fight for and obtain a place in the public sphere dialogue. The example of Chérubin reveals with particular explicitness the potential for change built into the way public sphere subjects are constructed. Chérubin ends up conforming to the sexual norms of his society once the play is over, but for the space of the play he threatens those norms and thus disturbs both characters and audience. Beaumarchais's prolonged gaze at the process by which subjects are constituted shows us the likelihood that the process will destabilize the norms even as subjects are assuming them. The arrival of every Chérubin and every Figaro in the public sphere means a potential disruption and modification of the public sphere, as their bodies and words enter the dialogue.

But Beaumarchais's play does not just portray the subject's entry into the public sphere, it also incites desire and language in viewers, and thus helps construct public sphere subjects in the external world. His text deliberately solicits an erotic reading. If David's paintings, as described by Crow, block all bodily and imaginative response through rigorous abstraction and univocality, Beaumarchais's play encourages such response through ambiguity and sensuality. His very language speaks to our bodies as well as our minds. The play itself and all the documents surrounding it, from the dedication and preface to letters written to actors and government officials, make clear that Beaumarchais worked hard to ensure this dual address. *Thus Le mariage de Figaro* demonstrates how body and language are mutually imbricated in the process of the desiring subject's entry into the public sphere and at the same time encourages practices of reading and viewing that embody that mutual imbrication. For the space of

the play, every reader or spectator becomes Chérubin, choosing what to desire and who to be, suspended in the moment of assuming social norms.

Source: Elizabeth J. MacArthur, "Embodying the Public Sphere: Censorship and the Reading Subject in Beaumarchais's *Mariage de Figaro*," in *Representations,* Vol. 61, Winter 1998, pp. 57-72.

Critical Essay #2

Walter E. Rex In the following excerpt, Rex discusses the idea of games and the convention of the monologue in The Marriage of Figaro.

Critical Essay #3

Games Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro* is a mixture of ingredients so perfectly combined, it would be almost perverse to strain out any single element and call it the essence. The play is everything at once: situation comedy, farce, comic opera, *parade,* comedy of manners, erotic comedy, social satire, *drame bourgeois, comédie larmoyante,* revolutionary indictment of the system, plea for unwed mothers and women's liberation, and so on. The action shifts focus constantly, and each time a new strand comes by the audience must catch on as best it can. If we look behind the play to its literary "sources" we find likewise a pleasantly heterogeneous jumble of overlapping fragments. Behind the character of Figaro stands a virtually endless line of impudent theatrical valets stretching from the plays of Marivaux, Dancourt, Regnard, and Molière all the way back to the comedies of Terence and Plautus. Count Almaviva, that jealous thwarter of young lovers, also falls heir to an abundant theatrical ancestry, going back at least to those hindering and slightly ridiculous fathers of ancient Roman times. Jacques Scherer reminds us that in the character of Suzanne we find something of the innumerable Dorines and Lisettes of Molière, Marivaux, and how many others in the eighteenth century. Plays by Vadé and Rochon de Chabannes may have suggested, in germ, the scenes between Chérubin and the Countess; the trial scene may look back to the Wasps of Aristophanes, or to Rabelais, or to Les Plaideurs of Racine, among other possibilities. When Chérubin hides in the Countess' *cabinet,* is he not reenacting the same situation we find in Scarron's *La Précaution inutile* and in Sedaine's La Gageure imprévue? The scene in which the Count makes love to his own wife, believing her to be someone else, may be borrowed from Dufresny's *Le Double veuvage* (1702) or Vadé's *Trompeur trompé.* As for the main plot of *Figaro,* W. D. Howarth has found records of no fewer than five plays antedating Figaro, all bearing the title "Le Droit du seigneur." One of them is by Voltaire.

Certainly it is helpful to know about literary antecedents such as these. Yet, when one gets through reviewing the "sources" of *Figaro,* perhaps the most striking conclusion one reaches is how far short they fall of Beaumarchais. Voltaire's *Droit du seigneur* resembles the plot of Figaro only in the most general and mechanical way, with innumerable differences of detail There may be other plays in which a young page or *écuyer* makes love to an older woman during the absence of her husband; yet, in their cheapness, they only make us appreciate still more the gracious subtlety and discretion we find in Beaumarchais. Put all the valets of theatrical tradition together, even adding the Picaro progeny into the bargain, and how close are we to Figaro in his great monologue? Perhaps such a chasm between the "sources" and the emergent work is to be expected when one is dealing with a truly original author. Certainly the gap exists with Molière, as many scholars have observed.

We note, too, that for other plays by Beaumarchais literary sources are strikingly more important than they are for Figaro. *La Mère coupable* (1792), the last play of the Figaro trilogy, is literally dominated by Molière's *Tartuffe,* and Beaumarchais reminds us of this in the play's subtitle, *L'Autre Tartuffe. Le Barbier de Séville* (1775), the earliest of the Figaro trilogy, clearly looks back to the long line of comedies typified in Molière's *Ecole*

des femmes. It is a conventional play in the best sense, bringing to a new perfection *données* that are quite traditional. In short, whereas the two other plays of the Figaro cycle fall rather neatly into recognizable literary traditions, Figaro would appear rather as an exception.

We reach curiously similar conclusions if we compare *Figaro* and *Le Barbier* from the standpoint of the unities: whereas in *Le Barbier* the traditional unities of time, place and action are observed to perfection, forming an integral part of the play's structure and actually intensifying the comedy, in *Figaro* they really are not. Even though the play conforms to the letter of the rules, aesthetically *Figaro* never achieves unity, at least not in the way *Le Barbier* does. The locus of the play actually shifts, from the bedroom at the beginning, to increasingly larger rooms in the château, and finally into the *parc,* impelled as it were by the gathering energy and excitement of a plot that simply will not be contained within four walls. In a sense, the play is breaking out of the unity of place. The same is true of the action: though the theme of Figaro's marriage may provide a pivot around which most of the incidents revolve, aesthetically one is hardly aware of any unity. The plot unfolds as an endless series of surprises, adventures, novelties, and incredible happenings, worlds apart from the centered harmony one experiences in a play by Molière. And then, the character of Chérubin—unless one goes to desperate lengths to allegorize him as Eros—does not really belong anywhere in the main plot, though he is probably the author's most inspired creation and a frequent object of our concern and delight. The unity of time is also stretched beyond the point of credibility on this frantically crowded day. In short, whereas knowledge of both literary sources and structural conventions is quite helpful in enabling us to enjoy some of the finer and more original qualities of the two other plays in the trilogy, with Figaro, on the other hand, such knowledge really has little to do with the play's unique qualities, and sometimes it may actually hinder us from enjoying them: if one embarked on a determined search for the unities in Figaro, in the same way one finds them in a play by Dancourt, one might be forced to conclude—quite wrongly—that Beaumarchais was a less successful author.

The truth is, rather, that we have not been looking in the right direction. For, despite Beaumarchais' worship of Diderot and Molière, *literary* traditions are not the key to this particular play. The unique comic spirit of *Figaro* is not literary; it is something far less learned and more spontaneous. What actually gives the play its special qualities, while at the same time underpinning much of its structure and provoking most of its laughter, is a whole series of children's games. Of course, *Le Mariage de Figaro* observes the unity of place: it just moves from playroom at the beginning, to playground at the end. It observes the unity of action also, largely because, throughout the plot, the Count is "it."

The "game element" in *Figaro* makes it virtually unique not only in Beaumarchais' trilogy but in the tradition of the French theatre before him. In this connection, it is useful to observe as a point of contrast that in an author such as Molière laughter is usually associated with some insight the audience has into character: the blind infatuation we see in Orgon, for example, gives a sense of rightness, almost of inevitability, to the absurd line "Le pauvre homme!" Dorine's earthy directness, as against the vulnerable sensibilities of Mariane, is what makes "Vous serez, ma foi! tartuffiée" such a choice

moment in the play. This is to say that Molière, in his great comedies, usually engages our maturity and our understanding while making us laugh: we are mirthful—in part at least—because we are wise about human character.

But let us now consider the first act of *Le Mariage de Figaro,* with Chérubin rushing to hide behind the chair as the Count comes in, and then the Count hiding behind the chair while Chérubin crouches on the seat underneath Suzanne's dress, and then the Count getting "caught" when he forgets to hide, and finally Chérubin getting "caught" too in the most droll and surprising way. Such terms as "comédie d'intrigue," or even "lazzi," are really quite inadequate to describe this situation, because the tension and laughter of this scene are the tension and laughter peculiar to a game of hideand-seek: the suddenness of the movements, the daring and completely unexpected improvisations of hiding places, the complete seriousness of the players' efforts to escape the person who is "it," the near-discoveries, even the ironic feeling of inevitability connected with the catch at the end-all these things belong specifically to children's games. In contrast to Molière, the identity of the players, or the individual qualities they may possess, are of relatively minor importance. Indeed, the same person can completely change character during the game, as the Count does when, having been the "seeker," he turns suddenly into a "hider" and crouches in a rather undignified manner behind the chair, just as Chérubin had done, and for once actually gains a measure of sympathy from the audience. Nor are we here in the traditions of the farce: the *coups de bâton,* in fact all the punishments that bring on laughter when performed by clowns, have little to do with the universe of hide-and-seek. What causes the laughter in this scene of Figaro is simply the suspense connected with being caught, and when, finally, Chérubin is caught, the tension is broken and a new round can begin. *Coups de baton* are not really the point of the game.

For Chérubin the game of hide-and-seek goes on throughout the entire play; he seems to be endlessly turning up in new and unpredictable hiding places: fleeing into the Countess' *cabinet,* disappearing into the *pavillon,* disguising himself as a girl, or even jumping out the window when all else fails. Occasionally, he becomes a chaser himself, running after Suzanne to snatch the Countess' ribbon, or to make her give him a kiss. No one else is a game player to this literal degree in the play, but then, no one else, except his partner Fanchette, is so young.

The games Figaro plays with the Count are more sophisticated and slightly more adult. They are mainly verbal, whereas Chérubin's are not. For example, in act II, scene XXI, the Count backs Figaro into a corner with question after question concerning the incriminating officer's brevet that Chérubin had dropped while falling from the window. Figaro runs out of inventions and seems to be on the verge of revealing the truth, when, in the nick of time, whispered help is relayed from the other members of the team; Figaro learns the magic phrase "le cachet manque" and is made safe. Or again, in act III, scene V, the Count attempts to find out whether Figaro knows of his designs on Suzanne. This time, not only do his thrusts fail to hit home, but, in a series of "turnabouts," they leave him wide open to half-disguised insults from Figaro . . .

Whenever the situation is reduced to a sort of verbal guessing game, the symmetry of the game tends to make the players equal, and, just so long as Figaro is able to invent responses that literally satisfy convention, the Count has no choice but to accept them. In fact, merely by asking the question the Count has tacitly agreed to let Figaro go free if he can come up with an answer to his *devinette.* In the world of children's games both the hiders and the seekers obey the rules as law.

This is the reason the trial scene fits so perfectly into the general ambience of the play, although to critics looking for the conventional unities or for *vraisemblance* this part of the action has proved something of an embarrassment. It is true that the scene fits awkwardly into the main plot; moreover, it is entirely legitimate to wonder, as critics have done, why a person as familiar with real courts as Beaumarchais should deliberately create a "tribunal de fantaisie" quite unrelated to actual judicial procedure. The answer may be that, from the start, the audience never takes the trial seriously as a trial. Realistic details would only impede our enjoyment of such marvels as the legal wrangle over the copulative conjunction "et." It is a mock trial, of course, the merest *game* of "courts of law," with a pasteboard Brid'oison as judge, and everyone enjoying Figaro's inventiveness as he talks his way around the absurd evidence. There are occasional political overtones of a very serious nature in this scene, as there are in many other parts of the play; yet, precisely because they are held in suspension, diffused, so to speak, in the atmosphere of the games being played, they may deepen the tone, but they never become obtrusive. Johan Huizinga has pointed out that even real court procedures involve many "play elements," and in the trial scene of *Figaro,* play simply becomes the essence.

Reading the book on children's games by Iona and Peter Opie, one is tempted to conclude that the tension between the seeker and the hiders, between the one who is "it" and the others who are not, has a good deal of the tension between the old and the young about it: what is being played out by children in these games may be the fundamental contest between the parent and the child. In hide-and-seek the game's playful tone and the deliberately limited scope of the action imply that there can be no true heroes, or villains, among the players—even though the hiders have all our sympathies, since they are the ones who are vulnerable to being caught, while there is something almost inherently distasteful about the role of "it." Likewise, in *Figaro* there is no truly heroic character, nor does the Count qualify as a truly unpardonable villain, even though he is certainly unpopular enough: feared by Chérubin, taunted and jeered at by Figaro, mocked by Suzanne, and deceived even by the Countess. The audience enjoys all this because it disapproves of both the Count's determination to press an unfair advantage and the promiscuity of his marital infidelities. Yet this is surely not the whole explanation, for in his own way Chérubin is quite promiscuous also, and when we learn in *La Mère coupable* that eventually the Countess is supposed to have a child by Chérubin, we may revise our feelings somewhat about the Count's suspicions of him in the earlier play. Pomeau remarks that Figaro is not really so innocent either, and, given the ambiguous character traits he inherits from Beaumarchais himself, we may conjecture that were he in the Count's place he would not behave any better than the Count does. However, we are willing to forgive Chérubin and Figaro for practically anything they do, partly because they are so young, partly because they have so little

while the Count, the establishment personified, has so much, and—perhaps most of all—because as hiders they are vulnerable to being caught, and the Count is after them.

But then isn't the play in many ways a celebration of childhood—with gay songs to sing, a march to walk in step to, a "tableau vivant" to pose in, costumes to dress up in and disguises to wear, and even a kind of seesaw as Marceline and Suzanne curtsey back and forth to one another? At the end, during almost the whole of act V, there is a grand game of blindman's buff, held just as it is getting dark—the time when the best hiding games are always played—with several players exchanging clothes to deceive the "blindman," the way real children do.

Actually, this last game is the most elaborate, and the entire cast takes part; even Marceline and Brid'oison get into the act somehow. There are three main rounds, with darkness serving as a blindfold: first Chérubin plays with the Countess, thinking he has caught Suzanne; then Figaro plays with Suzanne, thinking he has caught the Countess; finally, the Count plays with his own wife, thinking her to be a mistress. Thus, in rapid succession each of the three principal masculine characters has been "it," and has managed in a very short time to flirt with the wrong lady. Once there is even an extra layer of confusion as Figaro discovers that the person he took for the Countess is really Suzanne, and then turns the tables on her by feigning to have designs on the lady whose costume she wears. In the world of children's hiding games such "turnabouts" may occur with almost magical speed, and in *Figaro* swift surprises such as these account for a good deal of the hilarity of the play's dizzy pace which gets faster and faster as it approaches the end. But with blindman's buff, to watch the person who is "it" mixing everyone up is only half the fun; almost the best part comes when at last the light of torches brightens the stage and, one by one, the characters emerge from the dark *pavillons.* Then the Count learns how blindfolded he really has been, while we, the audience, just like the other players, have the pleasure of watching his dumbfounded amazement when he learns the true identity of those he has been trying to catch. Virtually everywhere in *Le Mariage de Figaro* we find the unifying spirit of child's play.

Even in the play's eroticism childhood, or adolescence—and Beaumarchais does not clearly distinguish between them—seems especially important: the Countess' feelings for Chérubin are aroused precisely because he is a child as well as a man. On a more comical level, we find a mixture, too, in Marceline as her desire for Figaro gives way to feelings that are mostly maternal, and she embraces him in as motherly a fashion as she can. If Figaro sheds his first tears, it is because, though a grown man, he finds himself like a lost child brought home to his mother. How often the characters in the play fall momentarily into a kind of reverie: the Count and the Countess both experience this, the former for reasons of jealousy, the latter for reasons of love. Figaro's monologue is the most striking example, as we will see.

And yet, all this changes at the end, when the numerous pieces of the topsy-turvy plot return once and for all to their right places; the Count is beaten, the game is won, and the marriage really will take place. Meanwhile Chérubin, that timid little boy with his girlish complexion, has, almost miraculously, grown up and become a man. His game is ended too, and instead of running to hide, he now stands and faces the Count, even

starting to draw his sword when he feels threatened by him. Seeing this gesture, one is tempted to infer that in the case of Chérubin, the beginning of manhood is symbolically a moment of revolution. One might say something similar about the character of Figaro and about the general spirit of this play, that in many senses ushers in a new age.

Cervantes, writing with poignant irony of the great analogy between the theater and life, has observed that the end of a play, too, has its counterpart in our existences—in death itself. Perhaps this explains the tinge of sadness one feels during the final vaudeville of *Figaro:* the falling curtain is bringing to an end the part of life, and the time in history, when one knew the joys of hide-and-seek. There are other reasons, too, as the second part of this chapter will suggest.

Critical Essay #4

Though the character of Figaro may be seen as deriving from a variety of stock theatrical types, the single one he relates to most obviously is the "impudent valet" in the classic "guardian and ward" plot—which is always the same: a beautiful girl is being held under lock and key by a ridiculous old man, a dragon, bent on matrimony. Enter a handsome young hero, who is smitten with love at the mere sight of her, and who then uses the devices of his ingenious valet to out-fox the old guardian, and get the girl for himself. This kind of play, as ancient as the Greeks and Romans, had crystalized into a sort of perfection in the modern Classical period, in Molière's hilarious farce, Les *Fourberies de Scapin.* When we first meet Figaro, in Beaumarchais' *Barbier de Séville,* he, too, is behaving rather like the wonderfully brash valet of Molière's comedy. Indeed, Beaumarchais' valet in the early play is so winningly clever he almost steals the first act of *Le Barbier* for himself. From then on, however, the Count comes more and more to dominate the action, and Figaro's function is reduced to the traditional one, that of conjuring away by his clever inventions the numerous impediments that keep the lovers apart. When Rosine's elderly guardian has been outsmarted, the play ends, naturally, in matrimony—an indispensable ingredient of the traditional plot. For in essence this play always celebrates the permanent triumph of love over the external hostilities that threatened it, even as youth wins out over old age. In one version of this ancient play, the impudent valet was actually a god in disguise.

If the valet's dominant trait was, typically, inventiveness, the lovers, by contrast, were at best characterized by near helplessness, and at worst by mental deficiency. The first pair of lovers in Molière's *Scapin* are a good example: their passion has apparently paralyzed their intellectual capacities, and their breeding has rendered them so exquisitely sensitive, so utterly lofty, that they can no longer cope with real life. This is why, in the classic situation, only a servant could help them, for by definition a servant is disengaged from true passion (a great help to his mental powers), and, theoretically at least, he has never done anything else in life but untangle its baser realities. The disparity between the elevation of the lovers and the dubious morality of the valet was translated also in the width of the social gap separating the two. Thus in Scapin the lowliness of the valet was counterbalanced by the wealthy bourgeois origins of his masters. In Beaumarchais' schema, such as we find it in *Le Barbier de Séville,* the gap was wider still, since the master was so pointedly a nobleman. And indeed, perhaps this plot, though it can exist in any period, was most at home in an aristocratic environment where the separation of functions, with feeling and nobility on one hand, and practicality and intelligence on the other, can be imagined most easily as reflecting the structure of society. No doubt this was why, having achieved such a lively perfection in the theatre of Molière and Beaumarchais, it became one of the temporary casualties of the French Revolution.

Le Mariage de Figaro is a far more complexly conceived play than *Le Barbier de Séville;* nevertheless it still features part of the classic plot: Figaro is still behaving very much like a traditional clever valet as he devises stratagems to bring off a marriage. Moreover, one of the results of his inventions is that, at the very end, the Count will be

reunited in love with the Countess—no doubt a vestige of the classic situation. But of course the fact that the main matrimony Figaro is so busily improvising is his own completely upsets the original balance, leaving the traditional plot dangling in incompletion, in fact lacking the essential half that had always given it, morally, a sense of fulfilment: in the classic situation the audience gladly tolerated any amount of impudence, wiles and deceits on the part of Scapin, not merely because we all secretly envy someone who can so charmingly disregard the restrictive laws of society, but because his dubious activities at the same time are fully counterbalanced in the plot, indeed they actually help preserve the finer and more noble qualities we enjoy in the hero and heroine. Because he is so clever, they can remain pure. So it was absolutely inevitable that, despite all his *fourberies,* Scapin would finally be invited to join in the banquet at the end of Molière's play: everyone knew that it was only thanks to him and his dubious stratagems that virtue had won the day.

What we find in the first four acts of *Le Mariage de Figaro,* on the other hand, is a great deal of impudence and devious devices by the valet, tricks and games of all sorts, but morally there is no counterpoise: instead of a noble hero we are given a corrupt Count, almost a villain. And the *valet de chamber* we are left with in these early acts clearly does not yet fill the bill as hero. Though he is constantly measuring himself against the Count, and sometimes besting him in their verbal fencing matches, he is still, in essence, behaving according to type, as the impudent valet. Moreover, these skirmishes are minor affairs, the main one, over the Count's attempts to seduce Suzanne, still remaining unresolved. Even the revolutionary implications of these contests may not, so far as we can tell, go beyond those we find in the first act of *Le Barbier de Séville:* for all we know, they may eventually fizzle out, submerged in some larger dramatic situation, just as they had done in the earlier play. Meanwhile, as we watch the progress of the action, our interest wanders almost at random from the romance between Figaro and Suzanne, to Chérubin's getting caught, to the Countess' unhappiness over her husband's negligence, to Figaro's lawsuit and the Marceline subplot, and so on. The play doesn't have a dramatic centre, and in a sense the many scholars who have criticized it for not being unified were quite right. But then, one could hardly expect the action to have much focus so long as the play lacked such a key piece as its hero.

Le Mariage de Figaro gets a hero and finds its centre only in act v, during garo's great monologue—a unique moment in eighteenth-century theatre, if only for its extraordinary length. No other monologue in a "regular" comedy even approaches its size. To find monologues so gargantuan in proportions, monologues that contained such astonishingly diverse elements they are virtually whole plays in themselves, as this one is, one has to look back to the *pièces en monologue* of Piron's time, and these, to be sure, since they were the direct result of a rather peculiar sort of theatrical oppression, were devised to serve other purposes and had a very different cast to them.

Figaro's monologue is outlandish in a way all its own. In this connection, it may be useful to report that in actual Parisian performances, the monologue sometimes becomes not merely an incidental mishap, but a general catastrophe that does in once and for all the entire production. The play is already so long—again breaking all

eighteenth-century records for comedy in France—that to bring the action to a dead halt so near to (although it actually turns out to be so far from) the end, just so that this valet can indulge himself in streams of consciousness, rambling thoughts about one thing and another, broken by all those pauses, musings and vague ideas that finally decide not to go anywhere after all, leaving us with *trois points de suspension* . . . this is a strategy fit to strain the patience of even the mildest gods of retribution. It may be an act of selfpreservation to grope for the exit without waiting for the end.

Obviously the monologue demands the kind of superlatively great actor that Dazincourt might have been, someone whose skill can make an audience oblivious to the midnight hour and charm them into finding him alone to be just as enthralling as a whole stageful of characters, someone worth breaking the momentum of the action for. And since there is, dramatically, so much at stake in Figaro's monologue, one can easily understand why it can lead to total *déroute,* as well as—I presume—to exhilarating success. For in this enormous scene the play either creates, or fails to create, its hero. That is the possibility—or the problem. There don't seem to be any other Classical *comedies* constructed in quite this way, although certain tragedies, notably the famous ones by Corneille, also have monologues, moments of deep reflection like this one, in which the budding hero determines whether he will, or will not, achieve his essence. In these plays by Corneille he always does; and, in retrospect, the right decision was inevitable, because, even though he did indeed have free choice, it was a question of remaining true to a nobility that was a birthright, and hence an inherent part of his character. With Figaro, in contrast, it is a question of turning a servant—someone often associated with clowns in theatrical tradition as we have seen, almost a sort of puppet in the eyes of his master—into a hero, even a man.

Sagacious Diderot once remarked that, in effect, the notion of identity in an individual depends totally on knowledge of the past (or memory): if we had no idea of who we had been, we wouldn't have any idea of the kind of person we are. Perhaps Beaumarchais was thinking along these lines as he composed his monologue, for, as he reinvents Figaro, refashioning him to be a three-dimensional human being, he endows him with a long and diverting past, full of drama and incident, and this serves first of all to deepen our sense of his identity. He also gives him a many-faceted personality, displaying him as someone capable of expressing a wide range of emotions, from impudence and good-humored defiance to deepest melancholy; someone whose picaresque life—in and out of jails, knocking about from pillar to post—takes on new seriousness as we realize Figaro's keen sense of social injustice.

Now, Figaro is recreated here, not merely as some vague reflection of the author's own personality, as so many critics have maintained, but according to strict principle, and one that illustrates the attraction of the contrary to a kind of perfection. It is as if the intensity of this historic moment on the eve of the Revolution had imbued the familiar phenomenon of contrariness with all the potential force it had been accumulating in so many authors during the century. In this play the dynamism of opposition generates, momentarily, something like an explosion.

We have already been aware of the long theatrical tradition that represented noblemen and their valets as opposites—sometimes even to the advantage of the latter—but now Beaumarchais pushes this classic opposition to its extreme limits, so that it becomes a true antithesis. Figaro is triumphantly reconstructed to be an anti-nobleman: quite precisely everything that, according to the traditional stereotype, noblemen never are. Since noblemen by definition have noble lineage, Figaro has no family background at all—his wit replaces his genealogy; since they—as their noble particles imply—always come from a given place and are geographically fixed, Figaro comes from nowhere, constantly changes location, and is all the freer and more effective for not being tied down; they were never gainfully employed, therefore Figaro masters a dozen skills and occupations—clear proof of his superiority; they were pillars of the Church, therefore Figaro devotes himself to attacking religious abuses; they were hostile to freedom of the press and economic reform, therefore Figaro champions both, and becomes everyone's hero; they were soft and decadent, therefore Figaro is strong—vitality and youth personified.

This is no minor matter, for Figaro's energetic negations of nobility amount to a liberation: simply by coming into being as an antithesis he has denied the old order, deliberately cancelled out the ancien *régime,* and, in the freshness of his strength and intelligence, he embodies all that is most joyous in the Enlightenment's idea of life's possibilities. Since this emergent hero in his monologue has succeeded in imposing the values he represents, now in his triumph he threatens to take on all the aristocratic prerogatives of the character he has supplanted. The tables are turning decisively, the *renversement,* the Revolution is on its way to completion. In short, Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro* doesn't have a hero, it acquires one, and with him the play gains not only the shape and dramatic focus, but the revolutionary significance it lacked before.

Hopefully this interpretation will seem plausible and consistent, for it certainly is part of the message the author is seeking to convey. And yet, staggering thought, it is by no means the whole story. For in addition to all the taunting defiance and impudent self-assertiveness, this monologue also contains one moment of self-doubt so problematic as to bring all the rest, everything that has been asserted, into question. The fact is that just a few lines before the end of the monologue, we see our newly formed hero, his plumes barely dry, on the verge of losing confidence completely. The famous anti-aristocratic principle that, even a moment before, had given such zest to the recounting of his life, now wears so thin it just spins in the air, barely able to sputter, while the tale of his adventures, as it reaches the present, ends in something very much like meaninglessness. Coming down in his narration to the here and now, he discovers that his existence has no more illusions, that everything is worn out. Instead of achieving a new identity through his negative outbursts, he realizes he does not even know who he is . . .

The scandalous circumstances under which the play was originally put on, the incredible drama of Beaumarchais' efforts to get his comedy publicly performed in spite of, or because of, the King's interdiction, the mere fact that the great Revolution was only six years away, all this rightly politicizes our view of this work, for Beaumarchais was quite aware of how combustible the situation was in which he was so heedlessly

striking sparks. Yet at the same time the exhilarating, giddy timeliness of *Le Mariage de Figaro* should not blind us to the strength of its ties to the past. This was the last great pre-Revolutionary, the last great Classical, comedy anyone would produce in France. And in the beautiful costumes so carefully indicated by the author, in the flirtations in the Countess' apartment, in the clever impudence of the valet, in all the things making up the lovely idleness that is the very stuff of Beaumarchais' play, we are enjoying the aristocratic pleasures of the social structure the author himself was helping to bring down.

Source: Walter E. Rex, "The Marriage of Figaro," in *The Attraction of the Contrary,* Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 184-96.

Adaptations

Mozart wrote a four-act opera, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, based on *The Marriage of Figaro*. It was first performed in 1786. Numerous recordings of it are available.

Topics for Further Study

Beaumarchais originally set *The Marriage of Figaro* in France in the 1780s. Do you think changing the setting to Spain lessens any of the issues he raises about social classes and rebellion against it? Write a paper comparing the social and political environments of these two countries.

Critics disagree as to whether Figaro's monologue in act 5, in which he chronicles the abuses of the nobility against the lower classes, forecasts the French Revolution and the end of the French aristocracy. Write a persuasive essay supporting this belief or attacking it.

Read *The Barber of Seville*. Compare Beaumarchais's characterizations of the Count, the Countess (Rosine), and Figaro in the two works.

Conduct research to find out more about the social abuses of the aristocracy in the years prior to the French Revolution. Does Beaumarchais do a good job of presenting these issues? Explain your answer.

Learn more about Beaumarchais's life. In what ways do you think his own experiences affected his creation of *The Marriage of Figaro?*

Conduct research about the development of either the comedic play or the French theatre. Comment on the importance of Beaumarchais's contribution.

Compare and Contrast

1780s: In the mid-1780s, France is a monarchy ruled by King Louis XVI. The king holds absolute power.

Today: France is a republic headed by a president who is elected by popular vote for a seven-year term.

1780s: French women lack the same rights as men. For instance, the father is the absolute authority of the family and males usually supersede females in inheritance rights.

Today: Although laws guarantee women political, economic, and social rights equal to men, French women still are discriminated against. For example, they earn on average twenty percent less than men and make up less than five percent of senior managers in France's two hundred largest companies. An unequal division of labor still exists at home, where women complete eighty percent of domestic tasks and working women spend two hours more each day on such tasks than working men do.

1780s: The nobility, who make up less than two percent of the population, enjoy special privileges such as the right to collect feudal dues from peasants. The nobility holds the highest positions in the army and government. Members of the Third Estate, however, may purchase titles and thus enter the aristocratic class.

Today: A French aristocratic class still exists, but many members of this class work for a living. Class distinctions are generally accepted in France, and many class divisions remain rigid. Children of all classes attend state schools together, but there is little sense of a classless meritocracy.

Further Study

Hayes, Julie C., "Rewriting Bourgeois Drama: Beaumarchais's Double Plan," in *The Age of Theatre in France,* edited by David Trott and Nicole Boursier, Academic Printing & Publishing, 1988, pp. 41-51.

This volume collects essays about the French theatre in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Howarth, William D., *Beaumarchais and the Theatre,* Routledge, 1995.

Howarth analyzes Beaumarchais's plays and their critical reception in the context of the political and theatrical events of the period.

Lally, Carolyn Gascoigne, "Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro*," in The Explicator, Vol. 58, Winter 2000, p. 75. This short piece discusses how Beaumarchais uses comedy to attack the civil justice system.

Le Maître, Georges, *Beaumarchais,* Knopf, 1949. Le Maître presents a basic account of Beaumarchais's life.

McDonald, Christie, "The Anxiety of Change: Reconfiguring Family Relations in Beaumarchais's Trilogy," in *Modern Language Quarterly,* Vol. 55, No. 1, March 1994, p. 47.

McDonald discusses the depiction of familial relations in *The Barber of Seville, The Marriage of Figaro, and A Mother's Guilt.*

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Brereton, Geoffrey, *French Comic Drama from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century,* Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1977, pp. 237-55.

Campan, Mme., *Mémoires,* quoted in Joseph Sungolowsky, *Beaumarchais,* Twayne Publishers, 1974.

Cox, Cynthia, *The Real Figaro: The Extraordinary Career of Caron de Beaumarchais,* Longmans, 1962, quoted in Joseph Sungolowsky, *Beaumarchais*, Twayne Publishers, 1974.

Sungolowsky, Joseph, *Beaumarchais,* Twayne Publishers, 1974.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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