
Hugh Thomas. *Beaumarchais in Seville*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 177p.

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Beaumarchais in Seville is a very lively account of Beaumarchais' visit to Madrid from 18 May 1764 to 22 March 1765. In this book Hugh Thomas explains that even though Beaumarchais never went to Seville, he re-created after his trip to Madrid a society that excited his imagination. There, he met numerous persons who inspired him greatly in his writing of *The Barber of Seville* (1775), *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784), and the less popular *The Guilty Mother* (1790).

Before briefly setting the historical and intellectual atmosphere in Europe at the time of Beaumarchais' travel, Thomas gives the reader a two-page explanation of the main persons or "characters" that Beaumarchais will meet while in Madrid. These two pages titled "Dramatis Personae" also give the reader the impression that he is going to read a play.

Why did Beaumarchais set his two very successful plays in Seville without even having gone there? And what did he do while in Madrid? These are the two main questions that Thomas answers in a very enjoyable way. Thomas believes that Beaumarchais chose to set his plays in Seville because this city was the capital of Spain's vast empire in the Americas, and also because it seemed to Beaumarchais to be one of the main cultural centers where such beautiful dances, such as the Fandango, originated. The question of what Beaumarchais did in Madrid is the more important of the two and is answered throughout the book.

The first reason for Beaumarchais to leave Paris was to go help one of his sisters, Lisette, who had suffered a painful disappointment when her fiancé José Clavijo broke off their engagement at the last moment. Thomas' research led him to the belief that Clavijo was a very witty and enlightened man who, in other circumstances, might have enjoyed a close relationship with Beaumarchais. While in Madrid, however, Beaumarchais also had to be a French agent for his friend the successful and wealthy Pâris-Duverney. His tasks were to secure for France a monopoly on the slave trade to the Spanish empire, and to be the primary supplier of provisions to the Spanish army. Beaumarchais also sought on behalf of Pâris-Duverney the approval of the Spanish government for the colonization of the Sierra Morena, and the control of trade in Louisiana. Finally, on his own initiative he attempted to put his own mistress, Madame de Croix, also a French agent, in the bed of the King Charles III. All these schemes finally failed, mostly because at that time in Spain there existed a prevailing sentiment of hatred toward France and French people.

Thomas' main proposal in this study is that while in Madrid, Beaumarchais was very interested in *sainetes*, comical one-act plays which were performed during the interval of other plays and which reflected one aspect of the reality of Spanish society with witty characters usually from the working class. According to Thomas, Beaumarchais was especially influenced by the playlets of one Ramón de la Cruz so much so that the tone of de la Cruz' *sainetes* can be found in his own plays. The last chapter of this book is dedicated to the study of the characters of *The Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *The Guilty Mother*. In this particular chapter, Thomas tries very successfully to discover the origins of the Count of Almaviva, Rosine, and Figaro, among others. Even though these characters are probably based on real people whom Beaumarchais met in Madrid, they are also based on the ones he saw in the *sainetes*. Figaro, for example, derives from one of de la Cruz' *sainete*, *El Barbero*, but Figaro's radical views and revolutionary ideas are those of Beaumarchais.

Finally, drawing on Beaumarchais' letters to his family and friends, translated in English for the first time, Thomas give us a very thorough and vivacious description of the eighteen months that Beaumarchais spent in Madrid, telling us where he lived, which monuments he visited, who were his friends and enemies. By taking excerpts from the letters of Beaumarchais and his friends and putting them in his text, Thomas tries to recreate a dialogue that could have taken place between Beaumarchais and his interlocutors. Even though the main sources for this book were the writings of Beaumarchais, especially his plays and memoirs, Thomas offers an insightful study of the history of mid-18th-century Spain. Although Thomas uses a historical approach, this study is a useful tool for the scholars studying Beaumarchais or the Enlightenment from a literary perspective. This book could be used as a secondary source for literature courses on Beaumarchais. ✱